

No Greater Love

Psalm 98

John 15:9-17

Love is perhaps the most abused word in the English language. Love has been given many definitions. Burns said: "My love is like a red, red rose." Another has said: "Love is a many splendored thing." The Beatles said: "All you need is love." We say that we love a lot of things. We might love what we ate at a restaurant. We might love a sports team. Even theologians have their take on love.

Duke Ellington composed a mass which included a text which says: "God is a three-letter word for love, and love is a four-letter word for God."

The Bible says "God is love" in 1 John, but is love, God? What does the bible say about love? Much can be learned by the study of today's passage from John 15:9-17.

To set the context of this passage, Jesus is talking with his disciples in the upper room on the night before His crucifixion. The actions of the Last Supper which John only notes in passing, washing the disciples' feet, and the farewell speech of verses 14-17, serve as a Last Will and Testament. The disciples were about to be faced with absolute devastation when Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified, and Jesus prepares them as well as He can.

They would of course fail the test miserably, - but this would not be the end of the story.

Love is first defined in this passage by Jesus stating that the Father loves the Son. We can only vaguely understand how rich and intimate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are between themselves. Even the most functional of families is but a poor reflection of this love. But Jesus now makes a radical application by saying that His love for the disciples is on par with the Father's love for the Son. The Son is perfect, but we are far from perfection. Why should the Son love us to the same degree as His Father loved Him? This is truly mind-blowing when we consider that we are loved to the nth degree in spite of our failures.

Jesus knows that Peter is about to deny Him, and the other ten disciples forsake Him.

The world has some problems with the idea that love makes demands of the beloved. The world says that we should not let anyone tell us what to do or who we are, so long as we agree with their worldview.

Parents are encouraged to let their children explore life for themselves and make their own choices. To them, this is love.

However, the love that the world offers is certainly not the love that Jesus offers. In fact, the love of the world is not love at all, as it leads to utter destruction. Jesus' love makes claims on the beloved. Love is reciprocal. Jesus expects love in return.

As the supreme parent, the parent's love is demonstrated in care for children.

But for children, love is demonstrated by willing obedience. Jesus sets the example by His willing obedience to the will of the Father. He is not asking anything that He Himself does not practice in relationship with the Father.

He says that the Father is greater in authority to Himself. It is to the Father to whom He submits to His love. He demonstrates what obedient joyful, and free love really is. So, He tells the disciples to do as He Himself does. Jesus has kept the commandments of His Father, and He expects the disciples to be obedient to His commands. Obedience is proof of the disciple's love.

Jesus goes on to say that the end result of this obedience is abundant joy.

This is the opposite of what the world says. Obedience to the world is grudging servanthood at best. It is done out of duty or for the expectation that obedience will be awarded by something one wants.

But the Christian reward is more joyful obedience and service to the Lord.

In verse 12, Jesus begins to elaborate what the command is. The command is to love one another. The disciples are to put aside their differences and instead unite in love.

Remember that Luke mentioned that a squabble had broken out among them at the supper table over who was the greatest, to which Jesus tells them that they are to be servants and not lord it over others like the Gentiles do.

After all, He had just washed the disciple's feet as an example of how service is to be rendered.

If Jesus who is the greatest, washed the feet of the least, then we are to follow in this example. As easy as it sounds, learning to submit to one another in true and humble service is much easier said than done. It might even be harder to do than outwardly keeping the Ten Commandments.

Jesus goes on to explain what true love is. The greatest love is to lay down one's life for one's brothers and sisters. Again, Jesus is about to become the supreme example by dying on the cross to save those who believe in Him. This type of sacrificial self-giving love is expected of Jesus' disciples as well, though very few are called to do this.

In many parts of the world even today, Christians are suffering for their faith, while in the western world, we think we deserve peace and piles of material blessings. We think we should lord it over others, yet Jesus warns us that the opposite should be expected of the true believer. Think about Christians in China? Iraq? Iran? North Korea? Are these and others who are suffering not entitled to Christian blessings?

Why do we think we are exempt? We are freed from the wrath of God, but Jesus says we will be subject to the wrath of man. If we are living for Jesus, we shall suffer persecution. This is not just a possibility. Scripture says that it is a fact.

Here's a challenging thought. If we are not suffering ostracism and persecution for the faith, are we really living it?

Jesus now relates to the disciples a change of status and tells them they have been raised from slaves to friends. A slave serves out of cringing fear, but a friend does not fear. They are friends because Jesus has revealed all that the Father had sent Him to reveal. They now know the truth, and this truth sets the believer free. Part of willing and loving obedience depends upon knowing why one does what he or she does rather than slavish obedience to commands. But there is still demand expected of friendship. Jesus' calling them friends expects the disciples to remain in this friendship. To be a friend of God is a great privilege.

Folks, just remember, we did not choose Him. Rather He chose us and are expected to produce fruit. This is a call to put down all our own pride and to give ourselves to the grace of God. Self-love has no place in the kingdom of God. Even in the song “they shall know that we are Christians by our love” has the statement that we are to restore human dignity and pride.

As far as human pride is concerned, the bible says: “let Him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” When we have our own pride, it acts as a wedge that divides us from other believers. We start comparing ourselves, one to another, and this leads to tension.

This also can lead to division in the church as one feels unworthy to be part of the church.

Comparisons to their perceived miserable situation with Christians who seem to have it all together. Perhaps this is why all the Bible heroes are shown to have feet of clay. Even Mary expressed doubts when she came with Jesus’ half-brothers to take Him away because they thought him to be insane. John the Baptist, of whom Jesus says that none of the others before him was greater, comes to doubt in prison. Only God is the hero in Scripture. The proper thing to do is always to remember that we stand by grace and we shouldn’t boast in ourselves or despise ourselves. Every single one of us is loved equally by God.

Finally, Jesus tells the disciples that because of their relationship to Jesus, that they can make requests of Him with the assurance of an answer. This is for us too!

As long as we remain in Jesus. So, we are to enjoy this relationship and obey His command, which is to love one another. This is a testimony to the truth of God. He later commands to go out and preach the good news. But people need to see the good news working in the church as well. They will know we are Christians by our love.

Amen.