

September 12, 2021

This is what really matters

John 13:1-35

In John 13, Jesus is sharing the Passover meal with His disciples. It will be His last meal with His friends before His arrest, trial(s), and crucifixion.

Passover celebrates how God miraculously delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Moses had pleaded with Pharaoh to let God's people go. Pharaoh refused. The Egyptians endured plague after plague. Pharaoh still resisted God. Finally, God brought the ultimate plague – the firstborn in Egypt would all die. However, the Jewish people were to slaughter a pure, unblemished lamb, and sprinkle its blood on the door posts of their homes. The angel of death would "pass over" their homes, sparing their children. Tragically, finally, Pharaoh let the Israelites go ... (remember the parting the Red Sea and all that?).

For Jewish people, Passover, celebrated every year for thousands of years, is a time of joy and celebration, worship and wonder, sombre reflection and thanksgiving. With reverence, thankfulness, and joy, they recall how they were literally saved by the blood of the lamb.

Now, as Jesus celebrates His last meal – a Passover meal – with His closest friends, it's a watershed moment as He tries to communicate that HE is the pure Lamb of God. His blood, shed for all people on the cross, will save us all. His blood, shed for us, not from slavery to a foreign power, but from the evil within each of us, from slavery to sin, from the evil forces in the universe, and even from the power of death itself.

As Jesus and His followers celebrate God's saving grace, just as faithful people had done for centuries, Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his robe, wraps a towel around his waist, and pours water into a basin. Then he begins to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he has around him. In a world of dusty roads and questionable hygiene, only a lowly slave would do this. Not a rabbi. Certainly not Someone who is the Messiah, God's Anointed One. For Jesus to do this, now, He's intentionally communicating something. What is it?

When Jesus comes to Peter, Peter blusters, "*Lord, are you going to wash my feet? ... No, you will never ever wash my feet!*" Jesus replies, "*Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me.*" Jesus is not really talking about dirty feet. He is referring again to the fact that He will give Himself completely – He will give His life – so we might be washed clean by His sacrifice on the cross for us. We are saved by the blood of the unblemished Lamb of God, Jesus Himself.

After washing their feet, Jesus asks, "*Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master ... Now you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.*"

Jesus modelled humble, self-giving service and love for His disciples. On the one hand, it

was a small thing – washing their dusty, smelly, calloused feet. On the other hand, it was a huge thing. It was symbolic of the fact that He would give everything for them. He loved them so much He would give His life for them. It's a profound moment. It encapsulates the good news: *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him"* (John 3:16-17).

"Do as I have done to you." How do I feel about caring for others? Giving up my own rights for others? Sacrificially loving others? This is a challenge. A BIG challenge.

If Jesus says anything further, we can expect it's very important, too. Does He? Yes, He does. Jesus goes on to say, *"Now I am giving you a new commandment ..."*

Let's pause a second. A NEW commandment. There are, of course, the good old Ten Commandments: *"I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind ... You must not misuse the name of the Lord your God ... Remember to observe the Sabbath day ... Honor your father and mother ... You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely against your neighbor. You must not covet ..."* (Exodus 20:2-17).

When Jesus is asked, *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* He replies, *"The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these"* (Mark 12:29-31). We have noted before that the Ten Commandments are actually elaborations of these two great commands (Commandments 1-4 relate to loving God; 5-10 relate to loving our neighbour).

Now Jesus is saying, *"I am giving you a new commandment ..."* This is a BIG deal.

What's it going to be? If I were to guess, based on the social media posts by some of my Christians friends about what is most important to them, I would expect Jesus to say, *"I am giving you a new commandment: Defend your personal rights and liberties. Debunk critical race theory. Nitpick points of (non-essential) theology. Support/attack a certain politician."*

Does Jesus say any of those? No. What He actually says, is *"I am giving you a new commandment: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."*

Does that surprise you? Do we **love one another** in the same way as Jesus loved us? Does our **love for one another** prove to the world that we are His disciples? When the world looks at us, the church, is it our **love for one another** that we are known for?

At the time, Jesus' disciples needed to hear this message. They were a rag tag lot. James and John, Jesus had nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:12) – temper issues, perhaps?

Simon is described as a "zealot"; zealots were political radicals who wanted violent, revolutionary change. Peter fails Jesus, time and time again. His disciples argue over who is greatest. One of his followers draws a sword and hacks off the ear of a slave. Judas betrays Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. These are hardly "perfect people." The world certainly does NOT know them by their love for one another ... not yet anyway.

Yet these are the people through whom Jesus chooses to build His church (except for Judas). He does that as His Holy Spirit moves into their lives and transforms them, from the inside out. They start off as sharp-edged stones (Jesus' nickname for Simon – "Peter" – literally means "Rock" – Peter is the original "Rocky"!). But Jesus sees them as potential beautiful sculptures whose glory can be revealed as the Master Sculptor – God, Jesus, the Spirit – chisels away the rough edges. Through patient correction and direction, His Spirit carves and chips away until each of the disciples become far more than they imagined.

Peter, for instance, brags he will never deny Jesus. Then, cowering in fear, he does deny Jesus three times. However, if you go on to read his story in the Book of Acts and the letters he wrote (1 & 2 Peter), you see a very different person. A person who boldly shares the grace of God, courageously stands for Jesus, models love for others in the church and community, suffers for his faith, and will ultimately die for his Saviour, as a martyr.

Reading through Acts, we see a church community emerge that refuses to get bogged down in the politics and divisions of its day (which were just as contentious and bitter as now). Instead, the church focuses on Jesus and what is important to Jesus. What is important to Jesus? Remember His commands – the two great commands and His new command?

1. ***First, they love God, with all their heart, mind, soul and strength.*** God is the centre of their lives. They are always gathering to worship God. They pray continually. They study Scripture.
2. ***Second, they love their neighbour as themselves.*** They share the good news of God's love and grace. They invite people to meet Jesus. And they provide food for widows and orphans. They look after the poor. They care for the sick and suffering.
3. ***Third, they do love one another.*** Oh, they have their differences (Acts 15). But they don't badmouth people. They don't leave the church in a huff. They pray. They discuss (respectfully). They agree to focus on the absolute essentials of Christian faith – faith in Jesus and basic biblical morality. They let other things go. Their obedience to Jesus – their love for God, for their neighbour, and for one another – is more important than all those other things (like political differences of opinion).

One thing that's clear when you read the Book of Acts and various New Testament letters is that this "love for one another" is mentioned time and time again. Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and the author Hebrews all emphasize it. It's a refrain that is repeated over and over. Often it's mentioned in tandem with other "one another" phrases like serve one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, honour one another, live in harmony with one another, build one another up, teach one another, care for one another, share one another's burdens, do good to one another, pray for one another ... on and on.

Paul, who had his own amazing transformation thanks to Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Acts 9), writes to a divided, difficult church in Corinth: *"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.*

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:1-7, 13).

To the church in Rome (another troubled church), Paul says, *"Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other" (Romans 12:9-10).*

John writes, *"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us" (1 John 4:7-12).* (John says "love one another" 6 times in 2 short letters)

Good ol' Peter writes, *"All of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called ..." (1 Peter 3:8-9).*

"I am giving you a new commandment ..." says Jesus. "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

What is Jesus saying to me? How can I put this into practice? Today? Tomorrow?

How can I discipline myself to "love one another" so much that I prove to the world – by my love for other people – that I am His disciple?

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