

Sunday School Lesson for November 1, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and feel blessed.

Lesson for November 1, 2020, "Loving By Serving"

Background Scripture from John 13:1-35.

The Bible says we are to love one another. Sounds good, but can we do it? Whoever said, "I love mankind; it is people I can't stand," was probably right. People are irritating. I agree with the guy who said, "To live above with those we love, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story." Even people at church can be difficult to love. Sometimes we sing a chorus in church that says: "I'm so glad you're a part of the family of God," and then we look at the person beside us and sing, "I'm surprised you're part of the family of God." Sometimes it's hard to love our own family.

Indeed loving people is difficult. Yet this is what the Bible commands. "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another" (1 John 3:11). We spend time on what we deem important. For many of us these choices are valid: time with family and friends, work, prayer, serving the poor, fighting for rights, protesting wrongs. But as the Scripture reminds us, "And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3).

We have the freedom to set our own priorities, but Jesus made a point of defining certain ones of them for us: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39). Love, then, is not a gray area in the Scriptures. Jesus gave love priority over all other Christian virtues. Every thought, response, and act of goodwill must first pass through the fine filter of love, or it means nothing at all.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples regarding the first and second greatest commands, he explained that "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matthew 22:40).

To the people of Israel, as well as for many believers today, it would seem more logical for obedience to be the peg from which the Law hangs, since

the point of writing a law is adherence to it. And it is written, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). Yet Jesus also said, "I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another" (John 13:34). The apostle Paul goes on to tell us "Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

This may sound irrelevant to our generation that depends on police departments, guns, and force to uphold and fulfill the law. Yet Jesus' simple command requires greater strength than any of us naturally possess, more power than any man made weapon.

The logic of Paul's interpretation of Jesus' command that love fulfills the Law seems equally simple. For if one loves his neighbor, he will not commit adultery with his neighbor's spouse. If he loves his coworker, he will not lie to him. And if loves his enemy, he will not slander him. Love fulfills the law, because if we truly love every person because he is a person, we will not desire to hurt or violate him or her, thus never break the law. God established love as the impetus for obedience.

In this text, the public teaching of Jesus has been completed, and now for several chapters Jesus focuses exclusively on teaching "his own", his disciples, and trying to prepare them for what is to come. The statement that "he loved them to the end" is striking. The end (telos in Greek) could mean "end" in the sense of conclusion or termination, or "end" in the sense of goal, aim, or fulfillment. Jesus loved his disciples to the very end of his earthly life and ministry, and he loved them fully and completely, without condition or reservation, for this was the fulfillment of his mission.

From the text section, A Different Perspective: Jesus had at least two major concerns he wanted to address at the meal. To make certain he had their attention, he waited for the disciples to arrive, and then he changed his attire to appear as a slave. Jesus wanted his disciple to learn that just as Jesus, their Teacher and Lord, had become their servant, so too they, like him, were called to be servants, not to be served (John 13:12-17).

Jesus knows that his "hour" has come to depart from this world and return to the Father (13:1). He knows that the Father has given all things into his hands, and that he has come from God and is going to God (13:3). Knowing all this, he chooses to demonstrate his love for his disciples in a dramatic way by taking the role of a slave and washing their feet. Jesus' act of service recalls what Mary of Bethany had done for Jesus just a few days earlier, washing his feet with expensive perfume and drying them with her hair.

Jesus interprets her extravagant act of love and service as an anointing for his burial (12:1-7).

In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus simply used water and a towel, yet the extravagance is no less. This act points to the even greater scandal to come in the dark hours ahead, when Jesus will lay down his life, crucified on a Roman cross, the form of execution reserved for rebels and slaves.

Peter gives voice to the scandal of Jesus' actions. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" When Jesus says that Peter will understand later what he is doing, Peter objects even more strongly: "You will never wash my feet." We are reminded Peter's objections in Mark's Gospel when Jesus speaks of his impending suffering and death (Mark 8:32). Here, as in Mark, Jesus corrects Peter: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." To which Peter responds, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." (13:6-9).

Jesus' next response to Peter is a bit cryptic, and perhaps makes use of a traditional proverb. "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean" (13:10). His statement seems to suggest that one's relationship to Jesus has cleansing power that lasts. It will soon become clear how utterly dependent Peter and the others are on this gift of grace. Jesus adds, "And you are clean, though not all of you," and the narrator explains, "For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (13:11).

It is astonishing enough that Jesus takes the role of a slave and washes the dirty feet of his disciples, but even more astounding is the fact that he does so knowing full well that they will all fail him miserably in his hour of greatest need.

Jesus insists on washing the feet of Peter, knowing full well that Peter will deny him to save his own skin. What is more, Jesus stoops to wash the feet of Judas, knowing full well that Judas has already conspired to betray him to those seeking his life. John tells us in 13:2 that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus," and Jesus indicates several times in this chapter that he is fully aware of this reality (13:10-11, 18-19, 21-30). Even with Judas, cold, calculating, back-stabbing Judas, Jesus' love remains unwavering. Jesus washes Judas' dirty feet along with all the others.

Jesus then tells his disciples that they are to serve one another in same way that he has served them. "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (13:14-15). This specific example parallels the broader "new commandment" Jesus gives in verse 34: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus' example suggests that loving as he has loved means taking the role of a servant, caring for the needs of others without expecting anything in return. His example suggests that it is to do this not only for those who treat us well, but even for those who disappoint and hurt and betray us. Can Jesus really expect us to do this, to love and serve even those who fail us or stab us in the back? Are we not allowed even a few exceptions to the love commandment?

Jesus' commandment to love one another is not a commandment to feel affection, but a commandment to act in a loving way, even when we would rather do otherwise. Of course we always fall short of God's perfect love, but that cannot be an excuse to nurse grudges and wallow in unloving behavior. As we are washed by Jesus in God's deep and generous love, our hearts are stretched to love more completely, fully, unwaveringly.

The goal of the Christian life is love. The measure of our maturity is our love for God and our love for others. If we fail in our love, we have missed what it means to be a Christian. Can we love others in this way Christ loves us? No, we cannot love others like Christ, without Christ. The Lord, who forgave, even those who crucified Him, stands ready to forgive us of our lack of love. He wants to show His mercy toward us today, to cleanse our loveless heart and fill it with His loving Holy Spirit. We have to place our trust in Christ and let Him teach us how to love as He has loved us.

Dr. W.A. Criswell, former pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, officiated at a lot of weddings. The nervous groom would always say, "Dr. Criswell, how much do I owe you for this?" And he'd always smile and look at the groom and say, "Just pay me what she's worth." Dr. Criswell made a lot of money from weddings, because to each man his new bride was of extravagant value.

Everyone around us is of incredible value to God as a potential object of His mercy. His one and only Son died in their place. Because people matter so much to him, they ought to matter to us. We, therefore, need to love them as he loves them.

Love opens up its life to another person. It goes beyond sentimental feelings. It breaks down barriers. It exposes the heart. Think about Jesus. He left the glory of heaven to come to earth. He veiled His divinity and took on humanity. And what did it get him? "He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him" (John 1:11). As Jesus hung on the cross, dying for these people that he loved, they hurled abuses, scorn, and ridicule. His heart was broken. And yet, He forgave them.

Christian love is the most costly investment you will ever make. C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, describes the vulnerable nature of love. "To love is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken. Instead, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable."

God loved us not because we had something to offer him, but rather because He had something to offer us. "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God loved us so that He could demonstrate His mercy to us in the person of His Son.

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson November 8, 2020, "Abiding Love"

Background Scripture from John 15:4-17.

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, International Sunday School Lesson and Commentary, Dr. Craig Rikard, lesson on Loving by Serving, from South Georgia Advocate, Dr. Rick Ezell's Sermon on Love Divine, Halley's Bible Handbook and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.