

Love – First Church of the Unloving

John 13:34-35

Introduction

We will turn our attention today, to the word “love”. I will talk about two churches and we will allow the Spirit of God to tell us which one we are.

A Fresh Truth

Turn to John chapter 13, which is a familiar passage of scripture. In verse 34, the Lord Jesus begins by giving the disciples a fresh truth, saying,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another

Now any student of scripture knows that this is not a new commandment. It goes all the way back to Deuteronomy.

It is interesting that there are several different words that could be translated “new”. One is “neos,” which means “brand new; original”. The other is “kainos,” which means, “brushed off or cleaned up”. Let me illustrate the second meaning, which is used in this verse.

My family cooked dinner on the grill at our house recently. I did something afterwards that I hope one or two other husbands have done – I did not clean out the charcoal. Then, I guess it was over six months that it sat there and decomposed and got real dirty. I came home from work one day and, of course, my kids had discovered it. They considered it to be the most delightful toy to play with! My daughter looked as if she had been sitting in it – she was just blackened. One of my sons had one leg that was completely dark. I actually just hosed them off before bringing them in the house.

My wife cleaned their clothing and said, “I’d make a great commercial for Tide.” She showed me our daughter’s shorts that had been absolutely blackened by charcoal, but now were perfectly clean, showing a rainbow of colors and looking like a new pair of shorts. They were not new, but had been cleaned up; brushed off and seemed like new.

Jesus, in this verse, is not saying, “I’m giving you something brand new, original”. He is saying, “I’m giving you something that I am cleaning up. I am giving it color. I am bringing it to life. It is this,

. . . that you love one another . . .

This seems simple enough, does it not? However, it is really not.

Hazards to losing love

Let me give three hazards to losing the freshness of the love that we are commanded to have for each other.

1. The first hazard is a lifestyle that excuses sin.

Look at an interesting passage in Matthew 24:12. Jesus says,

Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.

This is a fascinating thought. It is saying that if we are lawless; if we violate God’s principles and scriptural commands, then we cannot love. We cannot love our spouses, our children, and others if we are living in rebellion to God.

I do not think this needs further explanation. One hazard to living a life of love is a lifestyle that excuses sin.

2. The second hazard is a lifestyle that evades compassion.

Revelation 2:4 is an interesting passage that deals with the church in Ephesus. Jesus tells this church, “You’ve got a lot of stuff together – you have great orthodoxy and doctrine, you test the apostles, the teachers, to see if they are true, yet,”

. . . you have left your first love.

When you read this, you might think, “What was their first love?”

We could probably debate the meaning all day, but turn to Acts chapter 20 and let us take a look at the church in Ephesus when it first got started.

Paul tells this baby church in Ephesus, as he bids farewell to the elders of the church, several things that I think they would take to an extreme. He says, in Acts 20:27-31a,

For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Therefore be on the alert . . .

Now what happened in Ephesus, I think, was that these people took it as their passion to test everyone and then, in the process, forgot how to love each other. They were so concerned with their doctrinal statement that, as they grew and became diverse in background, in lives, in personalities, they forgot how to love – they lost their first love. Perhaps the problem goes back to the time when Paul gave them a warning to test.

Let me give an example of their love. Look at Acts 20:37. Paul is leaving,

And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him

What an emotional scene this is on the dock as these elders, who had just come alive in Christ, and the members of this Ephesian church were embracing the apostle Paul.

3. The third hazard to losing love is a lifestyle that escapes action.

Let me reference I Corinthians 8:1. Paul says to this church in Corinth,

. . . Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

In other words, love is an action. Love is not necessarily in lip, but in life. So when we grow in love for the Lord and for each other, it will be evidenced by what we do, not necessarily in what we say.

It is interesting that Tertullian, the Christian historian who lived in the first century, wrote, “The heathen are want to understand the way that these love one another.”

In other words, the heathen could not figure it out, as they observed the love of believers.

Jesus Christ has given a fresh truth.

A Faithful Example

Let us turn back to John 13. Jesus Christ has given the disciples a fresh truth and then, gives them a faithful example. Look at John 13:34 again and note the last phrase.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

How Christ loved us

How did Christ love us? We could spend the day on this. Jesus loves us:

- eternally, as John 13:1 says,
. . . He [Jesus] loved them to the end.

- completely, as John 15:9 says,

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also love you . . .

- sacrificially, as John 15:13 tells us,

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

Eternal, complete, sacrificial love – this is Jesus’ faithful example.

A Fundamental Application

Jesus then gives a fundamental application. Look at John 13:35.

By this [lifestyle of love] all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

This is the mark of the believer and now everywhere will be the mark of love.

This is the germane truth that Jesus Christ gave His disciples. In the gospel of John alone, the word “love” appears over fifty, and perhaps as many as sixty, times. I did not count the word “beloved,” so it may appear even as many as a hundred times.

Now let me give a pop quiz. How many times would you think the word “love” appears in the very next book of the Bible, – the book that introduces us to the first church – the book of Acts? Throughout the gospels, we are told to love each other. How many times would you think that the word “love” appears in Acts? Would you think between ten and fifteen times? Would you think over twenty times? The word “love” never appears in the book of Acts! This is a fascinating thought for us as students of the word.

Now, wait a second! We just learned from John that the mark of the believer; the mark of the disciple, is love, and,

By this all men will know that you are My disciples . . .

In other words, “you are My disciples – you are the genuine item; you are the real church.”

We would think the book of Acts would be flooded with the word “love,” but it does not appear. I think, sometimes, the silence of scripture speaks as loud as the words of scripture. We know, in the book of Acts, the church is not interested in the way that it talks, but in the way that it lives. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the Spirit of God withheld the use of “agape” or “love” in any form because He will show us that they do not talk about it, they live it.

Romans: The Theology of Love!

Acts: The Operation of Love!

Now we will turn to the next book, the book of Romans, for the remainder of our time today. Let us draw some principles from Romans on love because it is the next book in which “love” begins to appear. We will then, take the principles back to the book of Acts to find out if they really were living it. I think, of course, that we already know the answer. We will look at four principles from Romans and then, discover how they are lived out in the church in Acts.

1. The first principle is that love is a work of the Holy Spirit.

Look at Romans 5:5.

and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

The challenge of diversity

Now one of the first challenge that we discover in the book of Acts, is the challenge of diversity. Acts chapter 6 gives us the problem of the church multiplying and growing. This church has perhaps, the best leadership any church has ever had; that is, the apostles themselves, and their teaching. Yet this church has an ethnic problem; they have, in a sense, bigotry in the church.

The church in Acts has two groups of people – the Hebrews and the Greeks. The Hebrew widows and the Greek widows were, of course, being taken care of

by the church. However, the Greek widows were waving their hands and saying, “You’re leaving us out. You’re not treating us fairly.”

Now, will the church evidence love and, if so, will it model the work of the Holy Spirit? Yes. Note, in fact, that in Acts 6:1-6, the apostles get together and say, “Let’s choose men, from among us,”

. . . full of the [Holy] Spirit . . . (Acts 6:3)

They did not choose men, necessarily, with the MBAs, who would know all of the accounting principles and the best way to give the money to the different widows. They chose men filled with the Holy Spirit – men who were able and capable of loving people.

I think this is the point because perhaps, some of the Jewish man in the congregation did not love the Greeks. So, the apostles said, “We want a man filled with the Holy Spirit because it is the Holy Spirit who sheds this love in our hearts and it is through His power that we are able to love each other.”

It is interesting that the phrase “and the church grew” reappears in the book of Acts. So far so good.

2. The second principle is that love is free from insincerity.

Look at Romans 12:9, which tells us something about love.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

That word “hypocrisy” has the meaning “without a mask”. So, in other words, the church is not to be a stage where we come and act. There are no Emmy awards given for good acting in church. This is, in effect, saying, “When you come to church, you should be able to be yourself, faults included.”

The challenge of insincerity

This is quite a principle of love. The question concerning the church in Acts is, “Will they overcome the challenge of insincerity as they grow?”

Acts chapter 5 tells us the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Do you remember that these people, who were the first insincere members of the church, decided they would pull the mask over everyone’s eyes? They could not fool God, however.

Ananias and Sapphira said, “We are giving all of the money away that we have made by selling a piece of land.”

Peter stood up to each one of them, the husband and the wife, and said,

. . . why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit . . . (Acts 5:3)

Now, there were two funerals being planned and all of the people in Jerusalem heard the story.

It is interesting that the phrase appears again, “and the church grew.” After this illustration, we would expect the church to empty, but it grew. Why? Because the community perceived that the church is a sincere place.

Do you know one of the problems that we have in the church today? The world views us as insincere. Every time some news story hits the newspaper or the magazines, the world says, “Yep, they don’t mean business. They are insincere.”

So one of the greatest challenges, I think, that faced the church of Acts, as it grew, was the problem of sincerity. The Holy Spirit made it very clear that love would be manifested, even if it meant discipline.

3. The third principle is that love fulfills every requirement of the law.

Look at Paul’s words in Romans 13:8-10. Note the only type of debt we should have.

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

We have discussed this previously in a study of the Ten Commandments, but love is the motivation for fulfilling the law. If I love you, I will not steal from you, I will not kill you, I will not lie to you, and so forth. If there is true love, then that becomes the motivating foundation for keeping the commandments; for keeping the law. The priority then, is a life of love.

The challenge of priority

Now there is a third challenge in the book of Acts, which we will call the challenge of priority. What comes first in this church – the law or love? Look at Acts 3:1-3.

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. And a man who had been lame from his mother’s womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms.

“Now Peter, don’t talk to this man; don’t spend any time with him. You’re on your way to prayer with John and you have an appointment with God almighty. Besides, we know from the law that this man perhaps, as the scribes would say, has committed error or sin. We know that lameness or blindness or deafness is a result of someone who has violated the command of God. So you, being an adherent to the commands of God, will not give this individual any more time than to flip a coin onto his cot.”

Continue to Acts 3:4-6.

But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, “Look at us!” And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk!”

The man did not start walking immediately. We read in Acts 3:7a,

And seizing him by the right hand . . .

Wait a second! Peter is now defiled, according to the law, because he has touched someone that has not been able to sacrifice; that has not been in the temple because of his lameness. Peter has gone a step further and defiled his own flesh by grasping the man by the right hand and raising him up. Note, however, in Acts 3:7b, that it was *then*,

. . . immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.

In other words, in the ministry of Peter, and, I think, mirrored in the ministry of the church, love and

compassion were the motivation for ministry. These did not violate the law.

People today perhaps, say that love should accept error. I am not suggesting that. Love became the foundation and the motivation for the ministry of the apostles and the ministry of the church.

4. The fourth principle is that love is devoted to edification.

Look at Romans 14:19.

. . . we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up [edification] of one another.

The challenge of infancy

Look again at the book of Acts and we could say there is the challenge of infancy; the challenge when this church is young and growing, to make sure they do not get their priorities set in the wrong place; their focus turned in the wrong direction. Acts chapter 2 makes it very clear that they were committed to edification. Look at Acts 2:41-42.

So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

These are all ingredients of edification. Continue to Acts 2:43-47.

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;

and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,

praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Now it does not say, in this text, that they *loved* each other. This word does not appear, but it was

obvious. Why? Because Paul tells us, in Romans, that love is committed to edification. And the church in Acts was committed to building up one another.

Application

Let me apply our study today with two warnings.

1. First, doctrinal purity does not automatically produce dynamic love.

Turn again to Revelation chapter 2. This addresses a church we do not want to be. We want to land in the book of Acts. In Revelation 2:2, look at all of the good things being said about the intellect, the doctrine, the standing, the position, the understanding of this church in Ephesus.

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

Now we, in our study of and adherence to the word, spend a lot of time exposing false prophets and false teachers and false doctrine. However, in the process, we need to be careful that we do not land in a position that we hate them; a position that isolates ourselves from them. We are to love them; we are to pursue them, though "them" is becoming more and more plentiful around us. While we put them to the test, because the church, according to Peter, is the pillar and ground of the truth, we are to expose the truth and, by that exposition, expose error. However, we are not to land in a position that eventually, brings hatred or irritation toward them. We want to make sure that we come across in a way that does not express hatred toward them, but hatred for their doctrine.

Continue to Revelation 2:3-4.

and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Skip to Revelation 2:6.

Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The Nicolaitans were exactly where the New Age movement is bringing our society today. The Nicolaitans said that physical acts or sexual expressions were an expression of divinity. It was a sacred act that went all the way back to the temple where there were sacred prostitutes. One of the errors

of the New Age movement is that it believes the very same thing. As this country and others follow the New Age movement, they will again begin practicing the deeds of the Nicolaitans; that is, considering these acts to be the greatest acts of spiritual devotion. Of course, they are not.

So doctrinal purity, as we learn from the church in Ephesus, does not automatically produce dynamic love.

2. Secondly, a lack in dynamic love leads to a loss in attractive effectiveness.

When we lack the dynamic of love for each other and for our world; for those around us, we will no longer be attractive to them.

How do we know this is true? Because Jesus said,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you . . . By this all men will know that you are My disciples . . . (John 13:34)

The Bible tells us that as love was evidenced in the life and the ministry of the church in Acts, they effectively reached their pagan world. May it be so for us too.