

A Lesson in Love

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I wonder, what is the most loving thing that anyone has ever done for ye? Perhaps there's a time or a gift or a relationship you look back on and think, I've never felt so loved. A time, perhaps, when ye had to depend on somebody's kindness and found in them a kindness and a generosity greater than you'd ever dared to imagine.

Perhaps a gift so special and perfect that it took you by surprise to find out just how special and valuable you were in the eyes of the giver. Or perhaps a relationship so close, a friendship so committed that sometimes you feel, this person knows me better even than I know myself. There are different kinds of love, aren't there? We can feel loved in different kinds of ways. But this morning, we are getting a lesson in true love from the Lord of love himself. Because what Jesus shows us in these words, the night before he died, is not a special kind of love.

Though he is going to show us what love really is, the love out of which every true love flows. For in Jesus, in this act, we see the very definition of love itself. To set the scene, we saw before Easter, didn't we, at the end of John chapter 12, the curtain drop on the public ministry of Jesus. He gave one final epic speech that whoever and anyone should come to him and believe in him would have eternal life. And then he dropped the mic and he walked off stage.

And now at the start of chapter 13, we find ourselves sitting at a table, just 12 others and Jesus. It's night, the doors are closed, dinner is being served. The upstairs room where we are meeting is lit only by candlelight. And we are not going to leave this table until the end of chapter 17. For us, as a church, this meal is going to last till the end of June. A long meal indeed, because we know, and Jesus knows, that this is his last night with his people before he goes to his death. It is his last supper. And Jesus uses this time over the next five chapters of this book to get us ready for life in the world once he's gone. How can we follow Jesus when he is not here in body?

Well, that's what these chapters are here to teach us. And the first lesson Jesus gives us is a lesson in love, how he has loved us and how then we are to love. Firstly, then, he teaches us what love is, what love is. Now, this is a meal by candlelight, but it's not a romantic meal. And yet, it is a meal soaked in love, because, verse 1, it is the Passover meal. Now, Passover has been on the horizon for a long time in this gospel. And as it gets closer, we see that it is enmeshed with the hour of Jesus' death and glory, because both are about a rescue. At Passover, God's people remembered how God had rescued their ancestors in the past from being slaves in Egypt. If you were here last Sunday morning, this is what you were looking at with Craig in the book of Exodus. And so on that night, every year, they reenacted what had happened on the scene of that rescue. In every home, around every table, taking a lamb and killing it and eating it together. As they did that, they remembered how on that first night, the lamb had died instead of their firstborn sons. God had told them to paint the blood of the lamb outside on the door so that no blood would be spilt inside the home. But this year, this year, blood still more precious was going to be spilled. The lamb of God would be taken and killed for the sins of the world. He would die instead of whoever and anyone would put their trust in him. And so, as they remembered how God, his faithful covenant love through the ages, had saved them before by giving them a lamb. Well, Jesus shows them now how he will love them by giving them himself.

[4 : 58] Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. So then, what is this love? Well, to get this, we need to see what Jesus knows going into it. He knows three things. If you've got the Bible open in front of you, glance at verse 1 with me, what did Jesus know? Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. He knew his death was only hours away.

Then, secondly, verse 2, we're told Jesus would be betrayed to his death. If you glance over at verse 21, Jesus also knew he was troubled in spirit. And he testified, very truly, I tell you, one of you is going to betray me. And finally, thirdly, if you'd have a look at verse 3, what lastly did Jesus know?

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, that he had come from God and was returning to God. Three things Jesus knows. He knows he's about to die, he knows he's about to be betrayed, and he knows that God has put everything in his control. Now, let's see, don't they, knowledge is power. Now, what would you do, okay, with that knowledge? If you knew that, with that power, if you knew in the next few hours, someone close to you was going to send you to your death, but you knew, too, that you had the power to stop it. The whole world in your hands, nothing outside of your control, and the next few hours laid out in front of you as clearly as God's own heavenly calendar, what would you do next? Well, I doubt any of us would do this. Read with me from verse 3. Jesus knew that the

Father had put all things under his power, that he'd come from God and was returning to God, so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. What is love? Well, that first word in verse 4 says it all. Not but, not despite this, so.

Therefore, the supreme, all-powerful God, King, and Lord of the universe, knowing fully who he is, knowing fully what is going to happen to him, he uses his complete knowledge and infinite power to one by one serve his people. And not simply to serve them, but to serve them in the most humiliating and degrading way possible. He washes their feet. Now, the streets back then, they were not clean and sanitary, whatever you think of our city. Jerusalem was far worse. They were dusty and filthy streets. And so, foot washing involved cleaning dung, animal droppings, dirt, filth off people's feet at the end of the day. You know, if I said to you, we're going to get up and wash each other's feet now. I doubt any of us would be throwing ourselves into it. And so, imagine doing it then. This is the task of the very lowest, lowest servant. You think of the guys who clean out sewers in India. The kind of thing nobody would choose freely to go and do. And yet, Jesus,

[8 : 55] Jesus got up freely and chose to do it. Jesus, we've just read, haven't we, the only person who had every possibility open to him, every other option available to him. He could have done anything he'd wanted, power, knowledge beyond what we could imagine, and he chooses to serve.

If you want to know what love is, says John, you're looking at it now. This is love. See the king of the cosmos. Leave his throne. Take off his crown. Roll up his sleeves. Kneel down. Become the very lowest servant so that he could wash his filthy, dirty people clean.

My friends, when else have we ever seen power used like this? Is that how people with the most opportunities choose to live? Or even God himself? People sometimes say, don't they, you know, perhaps you've said it yourself, if God is all-knowing, all-powerful, well, why doesn't he help us? He could end wars and hunger. He could crush tyrants. He could stop sickness and death. And yet he could do those things. Yet the Bible says this, this is how the all-knowing and all-powerful God chose, chose to use his knowledge and his power. You read it earlier in our service, being in very nature God. He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. This is how, in Jesus, God, the God of the universe, chose freely to come into the world not to be served, but to serve. And brothers and sisters, let's just pause and let that sink in. You read earlier, the beginning of our service, this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us. That his Son came to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins, to serve us.

So that's ultimately where this love takes us, because it becomes clear, as Jesus explains what he's doing, that the washing of the feet is merely symbolic of his death. Some would call it an enacted parable.

Now, Peter takes the words right out of our mouths, doesn't he, in verse 6, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? What, Jesus? Surely you're not going to do this. Look how Jesus replies. This is the giveaway in verse 7. You don't realize now what I'm doing, but later you'll understand. If you think this is too far, says Jesus, just wait. Just wait until you see where this ends. See, it's only in the light of his death on the cross that his kneeling at their feet will make any sense, because as he had knelt down on the ground to serve, so he would be lifted up to die, to wash them clean, not from dirt and dung, but from sin and uncleanness before God. Peter still objects, doesn't he? No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet. But Jesus is equally uncompromising, isn't he? He answered, unless I wash you, you have no part with me. See the irony here. You, Peter looks down on Jesus kneeling before him, calls him Lord, and then tells him, no. No, Jesus. Peter still wants a king on his own terms, doesn't he? Not a king kneeling down to serve, not a king crucified on a cross. But Jesus makes it crystal clear that this is not a nice thing.

[13:17] that he is doing. It's not a nice thing that we can take or leave and still belong to him. If Jesus is to come to us and serve us, he must serve us in his way, on his terms, in the ultimate way. You, perhaps, like Peter, we think we treat Jesus as king by not letting him serve us through his death.

Perhaps we feel we are not worthy to be served by Jesus in such dramatic way. But the twist is that by not letting Jesus wash us clean from sin, we're not treating him as king, but as our servant, presuming to tell him how he should and shouldn't serve us, instead of simply being served by him, being blown away by him, and being blown away by it, receiving from him, glorifying him for serving us in such love, simply thanking him for suffering the painful and shameful death of the cross to wash us clean. Friends, we do not need to tell Jesus how to serve us.

He knows perfectly well what you and I need, and he can perfectly well meet that need. Unless he washes our hearts clean through his death, unless he serves us, we do not belong to him.

So the words of Jesus. And when Peter sees that, see, he changes his mind. If that's the case, Lord, he replies, well, not just my feet, my hand and head as well. You see, it is right.

It is right for us, friends, to cry out to Jesus for that cleansing, to beg to be served by Jesus through his death. And so if you know that you haven't done that, that you still need to do that, don't wait for this sense to pass, this vision of great love to drift away before you pray and ask him to do it for you. Seeing how freely, how generously he has chosen to love, how can you doubt that he will wash your heart clean if you cry out to him for it?

[15 : 40] And wonderfully, he assures us that that one cleansing of our heart, one time only, is enough.

Brothers and sisters, if you've been washed clean by Jesus, wonderful news, it doesn't wear off. You can't undo it. You can't re-dirty yourself before God. You have a dirty your heart feels, however unworthy you know yourself to be. However deeply you still struggle with ongoing sin in your life. Jesus' one-time death is sufficient. We are washed clean by his finished work forever.

That is what he says in verse 10. You are clean, Peter. You don't need me to wash you again. His word, his gospel has made us clean if we have believed it. Friends, we don't need to be saved again and again. We don't need to ask him to save us again and again. Once we need to ask, and that is enough. And it is done, and never again.

What love that he would serve us in such a way. But does then that mean that because of his great love, we can go off and live in any way we want? Well, no. Secondly, we see what love does.

What love does. Now, if somebody says to ye, I love ye, what's the phrase that just went through your head? How would you reply? Well, I love ye to you. There's a right response, isn't there, to that love? And that is no different with Jesus. Once he's washed our hearts clean, what is the right response that he wants from us? Well, he doesn't make it difficult, does he? Read with me, please, from verse 12. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

[17 : 45] Do you understand what I've done for you? He asked them. You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I've set you an example that you should do as I have done for ye. Now, notice, firstly, in this response that Jesus' love isn't leverage, it's not manipulative.

It's not a kind of self-serving love that says, I did this for you, now you do this for me. No, he's loved us, and the response he wants from us is to love others, one another. That love that flows down from him to us, it goes outwards, doesn't it? And if we've understood this love, then we know that it means that as he has served us, so now we must serve each other. Now, in some circles, in some churches, that instruction is taken very literally, and Christians literally wash one another's feet, thinking that they are obeying Christ and showing him true love. Now, there's nothing wrong with washing people's feet, but we have to understand that in its context, this wasn't a spa treatment.

It was not a nice thing to do back then. It was degrading and humiliating and shocking, so much so that it can serve as a picture of Jesus' death. Now, I have not seen your feet, but I doubt that they are that bad. Here, our streets are clean enough, our footwear is solid enough, our hygiene is good enough that foot washing, it just cannot carry the same depth of meaning, of shame as it did then. So, even if we were to take Jesus' instruction as it stands and wash each other's feet, it's just not the same thing. And in fact, it could even be an easy way out, couldn't it? Because Jesus says, verse 15, that you should do as I have done for you. How many of us have had our feet physically washed by Jesus?

Okay, good, no one. But for how many of us has Jesus died? Jesus gave them a picture of his death, but he has given us the real thing, his actual death for our sins. And so, when he says, verse 14, now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash each other's feet. Do as I have done. That is not a one-time instruction, that is a way of life, a giving of ourselves over to one another. You rightly call me Lord and teacher, he's both.

So then he says, if I have loved and served you, given myself for you in this way, then I have set you a pattern to follow, an example to walk in. Brothers and sisters, foot washing isn't necessary, but giving our lives for one another is. If you're in any doubt about that, have a look at verse 34. What does he say? A new commandment I give you, love one another.

[21 : 11] As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Jesus is more than an example, isn't he? He's our rescuer, we know that, but he's surely not less than an example. He says here, I've set you an example.

So then, what does this love look like for us, for this church family, to serve one another like this? Giving ourselves, spending our time, using our energy, lending our resources, giving our finances, opening our homes to each other, for each other, for building each other up. We would grow in love with Christ, and in likeness to him. It's the fortnightly Bible study, with a friend or two, with your neighbourhood fellowship group. It's catching up and praying with a younger brother or sister in the faith. It's dinner with the couple struggling to connect with a new church.

It's serving on a Sunday in a way that's maybe not comfortable for you or convenient. Sending a verse to a friend that has encouraged you and praying for their heart.

It's family worship around the dinner table. It's giving sacrificially to your church. It's talking to somebody new, perhaps somebody you don't know very well, perhaps somebody you don't get on with. It's coming here on a Sunday when you wake up and it's a struggle.

It's reaching out with an offer of help. It's offering and sharing prayer requests with one another, praying with one another. Friends, the possibilities, they go on and on, don't they?

[23 : 06] So, please, let me ask you, do you think about what true love looks like for you right now? Talk about it over lunch. Ask each other over coffee after the service. What does it mean practically?

What does it look like for me, for us, to love this church family, your church family, as Jesus has loved and served us? Let me say, it might not be the same for everyone. It might not be the same as it has looked in the past for you. It might not be what it is in the future. Seasons of life change. Your age and stage, what's possible for you right now, maybe isn't what's been possible in the past or what will be possible. Your work or your studies might open up possibilities, close off others. So, I can't stand and tell you what this love must look like in your life.

But what none of us can do if we're following Christ, trusting him, is to say, well, this isn't for me. To think that we're just too busy, too preoccupied, have too many other commitments that mean we just can't serve others in Christ. To think that we can receive Jesus' incredible love and service and not respond with the same self-giving love by serving each other. Hear the call, then, of our Lord and teacher. Love one another. Love one another. Friends, if our master bled and died for our rescue, who are we not to serve those for whom he died? If the one who has sent us out loved us, gave himself for us, who are we not to go out and do the same as he has done for us? By this they will know that you follow me, he says, that you love one another. Because this is what true love does, and we, of all people, we have been truly, truly loved. But finally, and more briefly, we see Jesus show us what this love has cost him. What love costs. No one, hope, who's getting ready to propose, goes into a jewelry shop and says to the owner, show me the cheapest ring you've got. Okay, the love in that gesture, proposing to be married, is shown, isn't it, in the costliness of the gift. The love that shines brighter against the darker background against which it's set, and in the background of this true love that Jesus shows to us here is the greatest cost of all. His life is going to be betrayed.

He knows that. You've seen that. He knows who it is who's going to betray him. He knows that it has to be that way. He must be betrayed. And he knows it is going to be one of those whom he has served.

Jesus was troubled in spirit, and he testified, very truly, I tell you, one of ye is going to betray me. And again, armed with that knowledge, that foreknowledge of what is going to happen to him, what does he do? Well, he washes the very feet of his betrayer. We have no reason to think that Jesus skipped the feet of Judas as he washed the feet of the twelve.

[26 : 52] Just let that sink in. In the next hour, this guy is going to sell Jesus to the authorities. He's going to strip him and flog him and crucify him until he is dead, and Jesus bends down to the ground and he washes his feet. Jesus knows the cost, and yet he loves and serves his betrayer.

And then he sends his betrayer out to sell him to his enemies. See that? Verse 26, everyone's asking, who is it? And Jesus answered, it's the one to whom I give this piece of bread that I've dipped in the dish. Dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, and told him, what you're about to do, do you quickly? His life wasn't taken. The cost wasn't drawn out of him, tortured out of him. No, he gives himself, the bread, his body, his self over to death.

Knowing the cost, Jesus freely pays it. He gives himself to his enemies, to the betrayer, to even, we see, Satan, to darkness, to the curse of sin, to the anger of God, so that he could serve us, love us, cleanse us. He willingly became this Passover lamb slain to ransom people for God.

He willingly had his blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. And he knew what it would cost him. It even terrified him. There's that word again in verse 21. Jesus was troubled in spirit.

We've seen that word before in chapter 12. Horrified, shaken, terrified, yet he did it. Peter will later call his blood priceless blood. His life too great to be even valued, and yet he paid for our lives with his own. And he tells us this in chapter 13, way before the end, so that when it does happen, we will know what. We've seen what Jesus knows. What does he want us to know?

[29 : 13] Look at verse 19. I'm telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe that I am who I am. Or in Greek, simply, that I am. Who will I tell the people you are, asked Moses, that I am who I am, said the Lord God. And so now Jesus says, this is how you will know that I am this I am. The great I am. I am who I am. The one true and living God. When we see his divine knowledge and infinite power used to love us by laying down his life for us. Friends, the shock of the gospel is that it is only in light of the cross, Christ crucified, that we see his glory and worship him.

Do you love him for that? Does your heart not overflow with praise and thanks to God for this inexpressible gift? And do our hearts not overflow then with love for one another? You know, how can we, perhaps you wondered, how can we love in such costly ways to give ourselves to sacrifice for the sake of one another? Because our God has paid the price for us. Because our God was sacrificed for us.

Because our God, the Lord Jesus Christ, loved us and gave himself for us. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Let's praise him for that. Let's pray for that together now. Let's pray.

God, our Father, how we praise you for the deep, deep love of Jesus. We thank you for his coming in humility and his becoming a servant for us, in his going to his death on the cross to pay for our sins, so that we would be cleansed and our hearts washed clean before you. Father, how we praise you that as we stand before you now and our trust in him, we are as clean as we will ever be before you, that we cannot be washed cleaner than by the blood of Jesus, poured out for our forgiveness.

[32 : 00] And so we pray, our Father, help us to praise him for that, to glorify him and to love one another. Lord, we pray that these words would not sit lightly on our hearts, but help us, please, give us wisdom, each of us, and as a church family, to know how to love and serve.

Father, we thank you for the Spirit of Christ, and we pray that we would have his mind among us, and that we would share, Lord, in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that through his death, we might share with him an eternal life. These things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.