

JOHN 13 and 15 – LOVE

We are currently focusing upon what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and in our series so far we have covered and considered calling, counting the cost, sacrifice, suffering, servant hood, obedience, extravagant giving and fruitfulness – all being hallmarks of genuine discipleship.

Today I want us to consider what is – according to Jesus – the authentic hallmark of anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus. Without this one thing any profession of the Christian Faith cannot be deemed as being genuine.

Before we look at what Jesus declared this to be – a question.

What is the most recognisable painting in the world?

(Show a picture of “The Mona Lisa”)

Where does it hang? Anyone seen it?

Did you know that the smiling lady was stolen in 1911?

Three thieves dressed as workman walked into the gallery just before it shut and hid in a basement room. The next day the Louvre was closed for cleaning and the workmen wandered into the hall where the painting was hung – took it off the wall – placed it in a bag and walked casually out. Of the three men, one was a professional burglar and the other two were art forgers who had become very good at their chosen trade – and this was their biggest coup. Within months of pulling off their amazing robbery they had forged six Mona Lisa’s and sold them to some rather gullible Americans for 500 000 dollars – in 1911 that was an absolute fortune. But then one of the men – the burglar – took the actual painting to Italy and – rather stupidly – tried to sell it there. He was arrested – the gang was captured – and the Mona Lisa recovered and returned to the Louvre – where to this day it is under heavy guard – behind a thick glass panel – surrounded by electronic alarms and with so many people in front of it you can hardly see it.

One story among many of art forgeries – with people paying huge sums of money for what they believe are originals – only to find they are actually fake

To show how easy it is to fool a lot of people – in 1977 a beautiful wooden carving of a kneeling stag was given pride of place in the antiques department of Harrods. It was advertised as having come from a French Chateau and to have been carved in 1580. The price tag was £100 000.

One day Fred Sedgwick – 47 year old fitter whose hobby was woodwork – walked into the store, looked at the carving, nearly fainted at the price tag and promptly declared “I made that”.

What was claimed to be a fine example of 16th century craftsmanship had been knocked up by Fred in a fortnight. He had carved it 5 years previously in the Kent village of Petham and sold it for £100.

It had changed hands several times and a mystical story grew up around it – and with that the price – before it ended up in the Harrods antique department.

Who knows where it would be now and how much it would be worth if Fred had not have walked in on that day and revealed the truth.

Maybe it is easy to fool people in the art world – but isn’t also possible to fool people with a Christian profession. It is true what the Scripture declares – that we can only see the outside – but only God sees the heart.

But – we are told that there should be an authentic hallmark that shows that we belong to Christ and that we are His disciples. Which is what?

Turn to John Chapter 13 (page 1020)

John Chapters 13 – 17 is a record of the teaching of Jesus to his disciples the very night before He was arrested, tried and condemned to death on a Cross.

Often called “the farewell discourses” the teaching He gave that night is both precious and poignant – it is full of comfort, challenge and hope.

Two passages we are going to focus upon – one is in John 13 and the other Chapter 15. This is all part of one discourse – in both passages the theme is the same – highlighting the true, authentic hallmark of anyone who claims to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I will read John 13 verses 31 – 35 (Judas has literally left the room to betray Jesus and then Jesus says these words) and then 15 verses 9 -17

It is very clear is it not? The authentic sign of a disciple of Christ is to love – and the measure of that Love is the love that Christ has shown and demonstrated to us.

A statistic that I think is significant and striking.

The word Love is used only twelve times in the first 12 Chapters of John – but from Chapter 13 onwards to the end of the book it is used 44 times!

Thus it is the key word in the farewell discourse Jesus has with his disciples – because it is the key ingredient in showing we belong to Christ and in our witness for Christ.

Twice Jesus says “As I have loved you so you must love one another” – and He describes it as a new Commandment.

When Jesus says here that it is “new”, it does not mean new in time because the command to Love one another goes right back to the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament – let me quote 19 verse 18:

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone – but Love your neighbour as you Love yourself: I am the Lord”

When Jesus uses the word here it is not about never having heard it before – it rather means “new in experience, fresh”.

It is pointing to a new depth and expression of this Love – which very simply is:

“Love one another in the same way that I have loved you”.

When He says “As I have loved you” – He is pointing to how He will show this by His death on the Cross. He gives us a real life example – and the measure is that He is willing to lay down His life. We will think about this shortly, but before that let me ask at this juncture – would you agree that the authentic hallmark of a true Christian profession - and of true discipleship - is love?

Some may say “What about doctrine – what we believe about the big issues such as God, man, sin, judgement etc? Of course, knowledge of scripture is important – we should want to keep learning – but remember a warning the apostle Paul gave – “knowledge puffs up – but Love builds up”.

In other words “love is greater than knowledge”

Some may say “What about faith – isn’t that the most important hallmark of a Christian?”

It is true that it is by faith in Christ that we are saved not by our works - justification by faith is a great Christian truth and the conviction that it is “by faith alone” is something Christians through the ages have actually died for. We are also told that we cannot please God without faith. Yet – Paul wrote this:

“If I have faith that can move mountains – but have not Love - I am what?

Nothing! So, Love is greater than faith.

Others may say that what counts is great experience – the person who has experienced God in a very real, tangible way. It is not about head knowledge – we need joy unspeakable and God meeting us in a dramatic, supernatural way – so our experience of God is the most important hallmark.

But Paul wrote this: “If I speak in tongues of angels – if I prophecy – if I can fathom all mysteries – yet have not Love...I am nothing”

What about this – the true hallmark of a Christian is service – to serve the poor, deprived, helpless and oppressed? Jesus said that He came not to be served but to serve - and He also said that what you do for the very least of these - you do for me.

This should be reflected in our lives in a very real and practical way – individually and corporately - and be the hallmark of following Christ.

But Paul said:

“If I give all that I possess to the poor – surrender my body to the flames – become a martyr - but have not love – then I am nothing.”

So Love is greater than service.

Of course knowledge is essential – there is no substitute for faith – we need to experience God in our hearts as well as know about Him in our head – service is so important that we are told faith without works is dead – but scripture is clear that Love is greater than all of these.

It is the essential hallmark of discipleship – so how is it to be expressed.

It begins - and ends - in this simple and striking statement:

“As I have loved you – so you are to Love one another”

This gives us something that is not abstract, vague or mystical – but is grounded and practical. The first disciples could point to specific ways that Christ’s love for them had taken form and content and because we have the gospels we too know what is meant when Jesus says to us now:

“As I have loved you”.

What did He teach, show and demonstrate about the true meaning of Love?

Love is about the other person you are with – it is about individuals.

Jesus taught that the second great commandment was to “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”.

It was not to love your neighbourhood.

Jesus taught - and also demonstrated - that Love requires a pre occupation with individuals – for this is Love’s real test.

Do you remember the Peanuts cartoons?

I remember one in which the first frame Charlie Brown declares:

“I Love the human race”

In the second frame he declares:

“It is just Lucy I can’t stand”

But – it is Lucy who is the real measure of Charlie Browns Love.

It is the same with us – we cannot say the Love of God is in our hearts if we have hatred and hostility towards another person.

Love is all about the other person – it overflows into service and sacrifice towards them – not in order to show off - but because that is its natural form.

“Love one another” – we know from the great parable given by Jesus about the practical outworking of Love that we know as “The Good Samaritan” that the Love of Christ is to cross the boundaries of culture, class, race, riches – whatever. We must never define the “one another” so tightly that it means that we only love people who are like us or who reinforce our own sense of who we are.

The opening of John 13 says this:

“It was just before the Passover feast; Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having Loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end”

Then we read that He showed that Love by taking on the role of a slave and washing their feet. In doing so he demonstrated practically the full extent of His love and also demonstrated that humble service for others is a required mark of discipleship – so we should be eager to serve rather than expecting others to serve us. He showed that talk can be cheap but that true love is costly and also hard work requiring great effort.

When Jesus was actually washing the feet of His disciples – on arriving at Peter he ran into some resistance. Peter refused to allow Jesus to do such a menial task

“No” he said “you shall never wash my feet” – to which Jesus pointed out that it meant he could have no part of him - at which Peter changed his mind and asked Jesus to wash his head and hands as well as his feet.

Then Jesus effectively said this to Peter:

“Peter, I am washing dirty feet with water right now, but shortly I will be washing away sin – not with water – but by the shedding of my blood.”

It was both the water and the blood as cleansing agents which the Lord would administer to us in humility and sacrifice. The full extent of His Love was shown in rough outline when He washed the disciple’s feet – but in detail and in full colour with the washing away of our sin at the Cross.

The washing of the feet was pointing to the greatest act of love and sacrifice – Jesus laying down His life – willingly - for the forgiveness of our sin.

“Love one another as I have loved you”

We are to express our love in acts of service to others – in willing sacrifice for the benefit of others – and not least in being willing to offer forgiveness to others.

When it comes to forgiveness – what does Jesus offer us?

It is total forgiveness - it is unconditional and it totally covers everything and anything we have done.

An essential hallmark of any believer and disciple is to receive this with rejoicing - but following this there must be a response by expressing the same measure of forgiveness to others – extending the same forgiveness “to one another”.

Loving others as Christ loves must involve total forgiveness.

This means that if we have been forgiven totally and categorically it follows that we must apply this to how we forgive others.

I can't think of a bigger challenge – can you?

What does it mean to totally forgive?

One crucial aspect of this is a refusal to seek revenge – a refusal to seek to punish somebody who may have wronged or hurt us.

John, who wrote this gospel, was later to write these words in a letter to the Church:

“There is no fear in Love, but perfect Love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4 verse 18)

One sign of not loving in the way that Christ has taught and demonstrated is that you will want to punish the person, you will want to get vengeance and you will want to vindicate yourself. There are all sorts of ways we can do this – from refusing to speak to the person to trying to undermine them to seeking to bring harm to them in some manner. Maybe that is the way of the world – but that is not the way of Christ.

The way of Christ is to grasp that as far as the East is from the West, so far are our sins removed from us – and until we fully embrace this and then practice it day by day we will not know what it means to abide in Christ, to know the freedom and fullness that He offers us and to know how we are to walk in the power of the Spirit.

What is the key to getting to this place?

I believe it is grasping and understanding inwardly the second part of the new commandment gives us – which is the words “As I have loved you”.

Turn to John 15 and verse 9:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love”

It is a remarkable statement – the Father loved Jesus perfectly and eternally – and Jesus declares “so have I loved you”.

There is something subtle here that I don't want us to miss.

Jesus uses the word “Love” rather than “Loved” – there is a “d” rather than an “s” and I want to suggest that this is both deliberate and significant.

When He used the word “Loved” it does not mean this:

“I did love you in the past – but not now in the present”

Rather it means this:

“I have loved you in the past – and that is the measure of how much I love you in the present. It is steadfast – it is fixed and it is established – it cannot change”

Think of some of the great scriptures about the Love of Christ:

Romans 8 – “We are more than conquerors through Him who LOVED us”

Galatians 2 - “ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live – but Christ lives in me. The life I now live. I live by faith in Christ – who LOVED me and gave himself for me”

1 John Chapter 4 – “This is Love – not that we love Him but that He LOVED us”

It is always in the past tense – that is deliberate and significant.

Why?

Because when we think of Love we are to always begin with the measure of Christ's love for us – we are to think of Calvary – where he loved us and which means in the present is the evidence that He still does love us.

So in our struggle to forgive, or to keep giving out in service and sacrifice – our motive – our source of strength – has to begin by recalling those words of Jesus “As I have loved you” - for that will remind us of the measure of that love which is the Cross at Calvary.

So – “As I have loved you – so you must Love one another”.

It is the authentic hallmark that we are Disciples of Christ.

You may be sitting there thinking that the challenge of that is too great and the consequences are too far reaching. It is a truly wonderful concept – but is it too much and it is too hard?

I have two responses from our passage to that question?

The first is to note that Jesus said that this is not an idea or a suggestion – but rather it is a command. The whole section finishes with these words:

“This is my command – Love one another” (John 15 verse 17)

If I was to say to you from the front:

“I am commanding you to Love one another” – you would immediately ask what right have I to command such a thing? Do I express this perfectly myself – if not then can I expect it from all of you?

You would, of course, be right to ask this.

But the command here is very different – because it is given by the one who has done everything that Love can possibly do. The Love that Jesus offers us makes us fully human (not less) – it brings us freedom and joy – we can know through Him that Love is eternal and that we are indeed Loved by God.

Because of that He does have the right and authority to give this command to His disciples.

In doing so He is not asking for religious duty and acts – but a relationship of Love and loyalty to the one who loved us first. The real evidence of that love and loyalty to Christ remains the simple – profound – costly – dangerous – command which is “Love one another”

Secondly, this teaching is given at the same time Jesus introduced the disciples to the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. There is a very important connection here! Jesus clearly taught that loving as He loved required obedience to His command – even when we don't feel like being obedient – and it also meant dependence upon the Holy Spirit to work in us continually.

Why?

Because we in our own strength and resources are inadequate to meet the challenge of this command are we not?

But...but...through the grace of God and the empowering of the Holy Spirit - and alongside that obedience and dependence on our part - the capacity to love as Jesus commanded surely is a possibility for us and therefore we are – as His disciples – to aim for nothing less than this.

There is no higher calling or challenge.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

"LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU"

1. Name some specific and concrete ways that Jesus showed His Love for His disciples.
Name some concrete ways He has, and does, show His Love to you.

2. Under what terms does Jesus loves us?
What does that imply about how we ought to Love others in His name?

3. Jesus had said (or endorsed the commandment) to "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" (Luke 10 verses 25 – 28)

Why do you think this command is in the singular and not the plural?

Is it not true that the measure of our love is found in how we treat the individual? Why is it in this context that real love is worked out?

4. Do a brainstorm of the words that you would associate with the Cross?
Are there any words from that that you wouldn't associate with the word "Love"?
Are there other words that you would add to the word "Love"?

5. The Cross speaks of the offer of "Total Forgiveness"
How do we express total forgiveness to others? Is it possible?
If so, how.