

“If You Have Love for One Another”

The Forty-Forth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 13:21-38; Leviticus 19:1-18

Jesus is about to depart from his disciples and return to his Father. But there is much for Jesus to reveal to them before the Passover celebration comes to an end, when Jesus leads the disciples to an olive grove known as the Garden of Gethsemane, where he is arrested, and then crucified the next afternoon. As the Passover celebration began, Jesus did the unthinkable—he washed the feet of his disciples. Jesus then spoke of how washing the disciples’ feet pointed ahead to a much more important washing—with the blood he will soon shed upon the cross for all those given to him by the Father. As the Passover celebration continues to unfold, Jesus reveals more and more about why he is leaving, and how this will impact his disciples. In the next phase of the discourse, two of Jesus’ disciples (Judas and Peter) will be shocked at predictions made by Jesus, and that one greater than Moses (Jesus, the true Israel) will give the disciples a new commandment.

We are working our way through the Gospel of John, and we have come to the so-called “Upper Room” discourse which is found in John chapters 13-17. As we saw last time when we covered the first half of chapter 13, Jesus’ public ministry to Israel has come to an end. With the arrival of the Passover (sundown on Thursday evening of Passion week), Jesus gathers his disciples in a rented “upper room” in the city of Jerusalem to celebrate his third and final Passover with the twelve. Jesus knows that with the coming of the Passover, so too, his dreaded hour has come. Our Lord also knows that this evening will end with his betrayal (by one of his own disciples sharing the Passover meal with him), his arrest and trial (before the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, and then before the Roman governor, Pilate), the agony of a Roman scourging and crucifixion the next afternoon, followed by his bodily resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday. Jesus knows that all of this is just ahead—hours away, in fact. Accordingly, our Lord speaks with a solemnity and seriousness of someone saying his final goodbyes. But his disciples do not know what is about to transpire, and they are struggling to understand what Jesus is telling them.

We know from the synoptic gospels, Jesus has been openly speaking of his death and resurrection in the days before his entrance into Jerusalem. Yet, despite the many miracles which Jesus has performed (especially raising Lazarus from the dead just a week or so before), followed by his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus’ disciples surely sense that the atmosphere of celebration and triumph which marked Palm Sunday, has given way to the solemn finality of the Passover. Jesus is giving his final instructions to his disciples—although they do not comprehend what it is for which Jesus is preparing them. But this will all become clear in the days ahead when Jesus appears to them after he is raised from the dead, before he returns to his Father in heaven. As we read in John 2:22 (and which applies here as well), “*when therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*”

But on this night—the Passover—Jesus explains to them that he must depart from them and why. With the momentous events of his death and resurrection at hand, Jesus has much to teach them, but not much time to do so. This explains the length and attention to detail of the discourse which John sets out in these chapters. Jesus is going to leave his disciples, and then send them to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. He must explain to them his messianic mission and why it has come to an end. He must explain to them the nature of the new mission he is about to assign to them, as well as explain why it is good for him to depart. Jesus also tells them he will give them the blessed Holy Spirit, who will equip

them to preach the gospel fearlessly and with great clarity in the face of hostile audiences. These are the men who will soon “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6), although you would never know it from the events which take place on this night in the upper room.

As the scene in John 13 unfolds, John recounts how just before the meal begins, Jesus does something utterly remarkable. He humbly washes the feet of his disciples, including the feet of Judas, whom Jesus knows is about to betray him. When Peter protests Jesus’ act of humility—Peter should be washing Jesus’ feet because the master should never wash the feet of the servant—in John 13:8, Jesus tells Peter “*if I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*” Jesus is demonstrating his love for those men whom he was leaving behind. He is demonstrating his genuine humility as God’s suffering servant. In the ancient world, a master would never wash the feet of his servants, but Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.

Peter still does not understand that Jesus is speaking of something much greater than clean feet and an act of humility (as important as both of these are). In verses 12-17, Jesus tells Peter (and the others), “*do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*” Jesus is explaining to them that when he sends them out to preach the gospel, they must do so as their master has done—preach with meekness, humility, with persuasive arguments and in the power of the Holy Spirit; never with anger, badgering, manipulation, or through threats and coercive power.

As we take up our text (vv. 21-38 of chapter 13), there are three significant things going on in this portion of the discourse. The first is found in verses 21-30, when John takes up a theme which was introduced by Jesus earlier in the chapter, when citing from Psalm 49:9—“*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*”—Jesus tells the disciples that one of them is about to betray him as an act of Satan. In John 13:18, Jesus told the group that “*I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’*” The second thing revealed in this section is found in verses 31-35, when Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment, that they love one another. The third is found in verses 36-38, when Jesus announces that Peter—the leader of the twelve—will deny even knowing Jesus later that evening because he is afraid for his own life. Peter will do this not once, not twice, but three times. Judas was an emissary of Satan. Sadly, Peter will act like a coward. Both announcements shock the disciples who cannot bring themselves to accept these things as true—until after they actually happen.

As we take up the prediction that Judas will betray Jesus, we pick up where we left off last time with Jesus telling the twelve in verse 20, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*” Jesus’ act of sending the disciples to preach the gospel will be a major theme in the discourse, but after telling the disciples that Jesus will send them, and that those who receive them receive the one who sent them (Jesus), Jesus now announces to the group that not all of the twelve will be sent. We read in verse 21 that “*after saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.’*”

These are shocking words from Jesus. These men have lived and traveled together for three years. They know each other’s strengths, weaknesses, and quirks of personality. At no point did any one of them reveal the slightest hint that they could actually betray Jesus. And yet, Jesus reveals exactly that—“*one of you will betray me.*” Who among them would stoop so low as to betray Israel’s Messiah and the very

Son of God? Jesus was clearly troubled, because he uses the solemn “truly, truly” formula when revealing this to them. But it was true because Jesus “testified” of this as a fact. Of course, no one in the room except Jesus and the betrayer himself (Judas) could have known that a deal was already struck for thirty pieces of silver to reveal to the Sanhedrin the moment when Jesus was most vulnerable, so that Jesus could be arrested at a time when the crowds would not be present to protect him.

Nor should we be surprised by the incredulous response from the disciples. John tells us in verse 22 that *“the disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.”* Eleven of the twelve knew that they were not the traitor, and with human nature being what it is, all of them were wondering to themselves “who is it?” “Who could do such a terrible thing?” This was a very difficult thing to hear from Jesus, much less understand how one of their own could actually betray their teacher and Lord.

John, who was present that night, introduces himself for the first time in this gospel. According to verses 23-25, *“one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, ‘Lord, who is it?’”* As we saw early on, when we covered the authorship, and the date of the writing of this gospel, this is likely John’s self-designation, the “beloved” disciple. Although this may sound like John is bragging—“Jesus loves me more than all the others”—this is not John’s intention. He may very well mean something like, “I cannot believe that Jesus loved even me.” This can be seen in the fact that the disciple “loved by Jesus” is never named. John may even see this sort of anonymity as a model for Christians to emulate—Christians know that even though we are unworthy of God’s love, nevertheless, through faith in Jesus Christ, we are the beloved of God.¹

Unlike the famous Da Vinci painting of the Last Supper when the disciples are posed, seated at a table like a little league team photo, it was customary to eat the Passover meal while reclining, propped up on one’s elbows with pillows. But this was the customary way to eat a celebratory meal like this one, and by Jesus’ time the Passover was eaten very slowly in light of the fact that the first Passover had been eaten in such great haste. The posture here (reclining), and the act of dipping bread into a sop, clearly indicates that this is a Passover meal, not a preparatory meal eaten a day earlier.

By this time, John (at Peter’s urging) has motioned to Jesus to reveal who the traitor is. In verses 26-27, Jesus tells them who will do the dastardly deed. *“Jesus answered, ‘It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.’” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘What you are going to do, do quickly.’”* Jesus is the host of the meal, and it falls to him to hand Judas a piece of bread which he had dipped in the sop. This means Judas was physically close enough to Jesus that it was easy for Jesus to hand the bread to the traitor—Judas may have been reclining in a position of honor next to the host (Jesus), as was John. This may help to explain why the disciples do not yet understand the significance of what was happening until after Judas has done the deed.

While the synoptic gospels tell us that Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper during this meal, John tells us that our Lord’s act of giving the bread to Judas was the instant he became possessed by Satan. Satan had tempted Jesus to no avail in the wilderness, and no doubt, the devil thinks that his possession of Judas before the Passover is a coup which will lead to Satan’s eventual victory over the Son of God. Yet, as we mentioned last time, the rage of Satan against the Son of God, manifest in the

¹ See the discussion in: Carson, The Gospel According to John, 472-473.

devil's seeking to get just one of Jesus' own to betray him, becomes the very means through which Jesus saves those given him by the Father (when he dies upon the cross), and which secures the ultimate and final destruction of Satan and his entire kingdom.

Jesus then commands the satanically-possessed former disciple to do what he must do, and do it quickly. Jesus' hour is coming soon, and even in his treachery and rebellion, Judas will bring foreordained events to pass. As we read in verses 28-30, "*now no one at the table knew why he [Jesus] said this to him [Judas]. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the feast,' or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.*" John's emphasis upon the fact it was now night is very likely intentional, since John has repeatedly used "night" as a metaphor for unbelief and rebellion against God.

Judas was the group's treasurer, a position of honor. Not one of the disciples understood what had just happened (although John as narrator, explains this to the reader). The others thought Jesus was sending Judas to the store, or to help the poor and needy. But according to chapter 18, the disciples will see Judas again later on that night when the traitor shows up in the Garden of Gethsemane with an armed mob sent by the Sanhedrin to arrest Jesus in the dead of night, away from the crowds. John will tell us that at the moment the mob asked Jesus who he was, Jesus replied, "*Whom do you seek? They answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus said to them, 'I am he.' Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them.*" Judas is no longer one with the disciples. His defection is complete and final. He now stands with the armed mob, doing the bidding of his new master, the devil.

Once Judas has departed to betray Jesus, the next thing recounted by John is that Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment (vv. 31-35). With Judas gone, the so-called "Upper Room" Discourse (identified as such because of where the discourse is given) takes on the nature of a farewell discourse in which Jesus gives the remaining disciples an explanation of his messianic mission, and reveals what they must expect after he returns to the Father. The Jews of Jesus' day were very familiar with such discourses—they knew the farewell speech given by Jacob to his sons in Genesis 49. They knew that Moses did much the same thing in the Book of Deuteronomy when Israel is on the plains of Moab, before Moses dies, and the people enter the promised land under the leadership of Joshua (Moses' successor).

In verses 31-32, John tells us that "*when [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.'*" There is an inevitability to Jesus's words and solemnity in the tone of the discourse itself which we must not overlook. Once Judas has departed and is on his way to the Sanhedrin to reveal when and where they can arrest Jesus, there is no reversing course. This means that "now" is the time for Jesus to be glorified. We tend to think of the revelation of God's glory as a display of blinding light (or some other extraordinary sensory manifestation), because this is how God's glory is often described in the Old Testament. But in his gospel, John associates Jesus being glorified in and through the self-revelation of who he is, and in what he has come to do.²

Identifying himself again as Son of Man (which according to Daniel 7 is a divine figure associated with the heavenly glory of YHWH), Jesus is going to reveal with the greatest possible clarity his divine identity. And this he will do while hanging upon a Roman cross, suffering and dying for us and in our place. This why Luther and then Calvin both make a distinction between a "theology of glory" (the futile

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 482.

attempt to see, or explain God as he is in himself) and a “theology of the cross”—wherein we focus upon God’s self-revelation. In this case, we focus upon the actions of a humble messiah who washes the feet of his servants, and who can summon an army of angels to deliver him, but nevertheless allows the likes of Judas, Caiaphas, and Pilate to betray him, arrest him, and then crucify him, in order that his glory might be revealed to those to whom he gives eternal life, faith, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In Isaiah 49:3, the prophet spoke of the revelation of God’s glory in connection with the coming servant of the Lord. *“And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’”* In John 13:31-32, Jesus is the one who will reveal the glory of Israel (because Jesus is the true Israel) through his suffering and dying. Jesus is therefore the true servant of YHWH, and the true Israel who reveals the glory of God through his personal humility and suffering. This is the exact opposite of what the people of Israel were looking for when they identified Jesus as a political Messiah, and this probably comes as a shock to the disciples, who, no doubt, were thinking to themselves how great it will be for them, once Jesus claims David’s throne and defeats Rome. They’ll be ambassadors and servants of the great king in his all-powerful kingdom. Instead, the king now tells them his glory is revealed through his suffering and death. Not what they expected. No wonder this was all so difficult for them to understand.

In verse 33, Jesus tells them, *“little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’”* Jesus speaks affectionately to them, calling them his dear children. The words are hard for them to hear, but Jesus tells them the truth anyway. “I am going away soon, and where I am going you cannot come.” If Jesus’ messianic mission to Israel was over, so too is his time with the disciples. And since the disciples cannot come with Jesus once he leaves them, he explains to them in verses 34-35 what they are to do in his physical absence (they do not yet know that Jesus will indeed be present with them through the indwelling Holy Spirit). Jesus says, *“a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

The commandment is not “new” in the sense that the disciples were unfamiliar with what Jesus is commanding them. This commandment is a restatement of both Deuteronomy 6:5, (*“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”*), and Leviticus 19:18, part of our Old Testament lesson (*“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord”*). What is new about this commandment is that Jesus is about to fulfill all righteousness and bring the Sinai covenant (the “law”) to an end. Jesus will establish a new covenant in his blood—that covenant of grace first promised to Adam, then revealed to Abraham (Genesis 15, 18, 22), renewed throughout the Old Testament (i.e., with David) and finally foretold by the prophet Jeremiah. As the mediator of this “new covenant,” Jesus has the authority to restate and apply the commandments in light of his own redemptive work. He is that one greater than Moses, and that one to whom the people of Israel were to listen.

Jesus does so in such a way that even a small child can understand what God commands (“love one another”), and yet in such a profound way that a lifelong believer is continually reminded of how far short we fall in keeping this simple command. This is what John meant back in verse 17 of chapter 1 of his Gospel when he wrote, *“for the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”* A distinguishing mark of believers under the new covenant (a mark which non-Christians can recognize) is that Jesus’ disciples demonstrate their love for one another in fulfillment of this command.

Just repeating these words should remind all of us how very far we as individuals and how far Reformed

churches often fall short of proper obedience to Jesus' command. I think very highly of the work of Francis Schaeffer, but when he speaks of the fulfillment of this commandment as the "final apologetic" (i.e., the ultimate proof of the truth of Christianity), I cringe. In response to Schaeffer, any non-Christian with any gumption at all can simply point to the current state of Christ's church as a good argument as to why Christianity is not true. But the fact is, Jesus commands this of us, and we must strive to fulfill it.

If you know how the Reformed approach the relationship between law and gospel, you already know that the commandment (law) does not carry with it the ability to obey it. The commandment as given, therefore, condemns us. It shows us our need of the very redemptive work which Jesus is about to accomplish for his people upon the cross. The great paradox here is that when we seek new life and forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, suddenly we will find ourselves desiring (however feebly) to love our fellow believers, however unlovable they may be. It was Spurgeon who said, "rest assured, if motives fetched from the gospel will not kill sin, motives fetched from the law never will." Only the gospel proclaimed will give us the desire, and the power, to love one another—because we are, after all, so lovable in ourselves.

We have seen from our study of 1 John (a while back), that this love is not a mere show of emotion, nor is it just a smiling face or a hug. The love of which Jesus is speaking takes the form of concrete acts of love—such as caring for the sick, comforting the suffering, consoling the grieving, and helping all those struggling in our midst in tangible ways. If we are members of this new covenant to which Jesus calls us, and which he institutes with his shed blood, then we are indeed to strive to love one another. Jesus himself says that non-Christians are watching, and they should know that we are Christ's disciples, in part, because we do these things. But this starts by looking to a suffering Savior on a Roman cross. The place where such love is to be demonstrated is within our local church, and then to our neighbors.

Peter, who has been listening closely, picks up on something Jesus said which troubles him greatly. In verse 36, we read that "*Simon Peter said to [Jesus], 'Lord, where are you going?'*" The new command makes sense to Peter, because as a Jew, he knows the verses we just mentioned. It is the revelation that Jesus is leaving them which troubles him. "*Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.'*" Jesus is referring to his ascension, and then to Peter's eventual death, when the disciple enters Jesus' presence again for eternity. Yet once again, Peter does not accept Jesus' answer. He blurts out, "*Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.*" Peter truly means what he says, but in just hours all courage will leave him, and he will desert Jesus at the very moment when Jesus needs him most.

Jesus reveals to Peter something which must have come as a complete shock to him, given the bravado Peter has just expressed. "*Jesus answered, 'Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.'*" When the moment comes for Peter to be arrested and likely suffer the same fate Jesus does, Peter will deny knowing Jesus, even to a young girl who points him out. Peter's courage will leave him, and Peter will leave Jesus to face his ordeal alone—which is something also ordained by God. Where Jesus is going, and what he must accomplish, he must do alone. But the knowledge that Judas has betrayed him, and that Peter will deny him, must weigh heavily upon Jesus. In this we see the depths of humiliation Jesus must endure to save us from our sins, which he is about to do for us in his suffering upon the cross.

In this portion of the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus leaves us with both a new commandment, that "we love one another," as well as an exhortation, "*by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" In an age in which Christ's church is torn apart from false doctrine,

personal scandals, and other sinful behavior, it is vital that we strive to love one another in the concrete ways that Jesus has commanded of us. The world is watching, and we often fail miserably to love as we ought. Yet, the new commandment Jesus gives us only condemns us apart from the gospel. In order to do what Jesus has commanded us to do, we must constantly seek God where he has revealed his glory to us—in a bloody and suffering Savior about whom John says in chapter 4 of his first epistle, “*in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*”

The only way to love one another in obedience to the command of Jesus, is to look to that Savior who loved us first, and who has revealed his divine glory while hanging upon a Roman cross to save us from our sins.