

“What is Love?”

John 13:31-35

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What is love? No, I’m not talking about the early 90’s Haddaway hit song, although it is a catchy tune. And no, I’m also not calling into remembrance the most famous use of that song with a couple of head-nodding night clubbers. Is it what you hear in the news on a daily basis, that “Love is love?” Or, perhaps, the old adage of “Can’t we all just get along?” Or, maybe, even the raging fad of the WWJD bracelets we experienced several decades ago. A fad designed to make sure that everytime you make a decision, just ask yourself, “What Would Jesus Do?” So again I ask, what is love?

In our text this morning, Jesus gives His disciples “a new commandment,” that they must love one another. You have to think that they were probably a bit confused. Of course they love one another. They’ve been together at this point in Jesus’ ministry for the better part of three years, and have quite literally spent nearly every moment together. Why would we need this “new command” to do something we have already been doing? One could easily see the perplexion they might have been experiencing. But Jesus, relatively quickly, clears up any confusion. “Just as I have loved you,” He says. So, the disciples must feel about one another the way that Jesus feels about them. Simple enough, right? But we cannot comprehend the way our Lord and Savior, God of very God feels about us. And besides that, love is not a feeling, as the world would have you believe.

God’s Law commands us to love, but what does that truly mean? In so many instances in Scripture, God sets forth for us the principles and guidelines for love. The Lord says in Deuteronomy 7:12, “And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that He swore to your fathers.” So, keep His commandments, and He will return that loving obedience with love. In Chapter 10, verse 12, “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...” God commands His people to love Him. Their God, who delivered them out of Egypt from the hands of the evil Pharaoh, requires in His holy Law only that they love, obey, and serve Him. Doesn’t seem like too bad of a deal to me.

If we abide by the worldly standards, we must take the stance of “loving” everybody, regardless of their acts or choices. The homosexual, the transexual, the abortion activist,

the criminal, the politician. And don't you dare say anything against them or their choices, lest you be labeled a "hater", a bigot, or a misogynist. The people of this world relish in taking our loving correction and using it against us. When we respond to the sins of this world with Scripture, they love to twist it to fit their definitions of love. We point out Amos 5:15, "Hate evil, and love good..." They say, but I'm not doing anything evil, God just made me different. We quote the famous John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." They say, well, I believe, so that's all I need. I can do whatever I want. They are always missing the true message.

In 1 John 2:15, the apostle says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." This is a command of how we must love. "Do not love the world." This evil, unforgiving society in which we live, is not here to be loved. It is to be condemned through God's law and His wrath. Those who put their faith in the things of this world are putting their faith in finite things that are doomed to wither and die. Quite possibly the most widespread Scripture verse that the world loves to turn on us as Christians is "The Golden Rule." Matthew writes in 22:39, "...You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The people of this world are now sitting there, gleefully contemplating, "I've got him. There's no way he's getting out of this one." They then proceed to throw it in our face. You can't condemn the sins in this world. Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself, and you are being mean to me by saying I'm a sinner, so you aren't abiding by Jesus' own rule. This verse, when turned into law, is used constantly in our society, even in the church, to dictate how we must live our lives and make sure we are "right with God." But that is just not the case, because the Gospel tells us what Jesus really meant in this verse. And we have to ask, just as the Apostles may have been asking themselves in our text, "How does Jesus love us, and by extension, how do we love one another?"

The Gospel tells us about love from Christ's perspective. Christ loves as the Father loves. Jesus Himself says this in John 15:9, "As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you." So, naturally the question becomes, "How does the Father love?" You could sit and rack your brain trying to come up with the ways the Father loves, but Jesus takes care of that for us, too. In His high priestly prayer to the Father in John 17, Christ says this in verse 24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see My glory that You have given Me because you loved Me before the foundation of the world." The Father gave Christ His glory out of His love for His Son before the foundation of the world. The power in this statement is underscored with the fact that Christ was there with the Father before the foundation of the world, before the

creation, and the Father glorified His Son, the Word Incarnate, above all in heaven. This is the promise we are given. This is the love that Christ has for us, poor miserable sinners though we may be. He prays to the Father for us to be with Him in His glory given to Him by His Father out of pure love.

He gives us the perfect example of love through His death for our redemption on the bloody cross of salvation. Nothing like it had ever been known or seen on this earth, until Christ. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” The only Son of God gave Himself up to be crucified for our transgressions, sins that He washed onto Himself in His baptism with John, so that He might bear them to the cross to redeem the world. THAT is Christ’s love. Christ died a death that we deserve, taking our place on that cross of suffering that we might have everlasting life through His love.

We mentioned the “WWJD” fad earlier and how it was used, but the reality is that they got it backward. It’s not about “what would Jesus do.” It’s about what Jesus has already done! Christ shows us the greatest example of love the world has ever seen, just as He says in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” And that’s what Jesus did. He went willingly to the cross to suffer and die in our place that we might be forgiven and share in His glory, glory given to Him by the Father. Jesus says again in John 10:17, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.” Christ’s love is of the Father, and the Father in turn loves the Son because the Son loves His people.

The apostle Paul spends much time on the love of Christ in his epistle letters. In Galatians 2:20, he writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” What power resides in that statement. The love of Christ is the essence of our faith. We are baptized into His death and resurrection, and therefore crucified with Him, replacing our own sinful natures with Christ who now dwells in us. We live in this world and we believe in the incarnate Son of God only by His grace. Grace which he freely pours out on us without merit. Grace which we receive at our baptisms, in the Word, and every week at the Lord’s Supper through the means of grace. And when we receive that grace, we hold fast to it. As Paul says in Ephesians 5:2, “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” We treasure it in our hearts and we use it every day. We walk in His grace because of His love, and we know His love because of His grace, which He shows us in the forgiveness of sins.

In His command to His Apostles that they love one another, Jesus tells them to do so “just as I have loved you.” The significance of this for them and for us cannot be overstated. Our Lord and Savior is commanding His people to live a life full of the forgiveness which He has won for us on the cross. He gave Himself up into death so that we would be washed clean of the stain of sin, and live as His righteous brothers and sisters according to the divine promise of our Heavenly Father. This cleanliness which He has given us is the way in which we must love one another. That is His new commandment. He loves us by forgiving us of all of our sins—every one of them, which He bore willingly to the cross to die for that we would be redeemed. And out of that forgiveness we are called to love one another in turn, forgiving the iniquities of all.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that this command is given in the context of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. That is the greatest sign of love from our Lord and Savior—to keep them clean. He loves them so much that He wants to keep them pure until the day of salvation, and He will show them the greatest act of love to keep them clean when He goes to Calvary to bleed and die for them. We are to lay aside our own lives that we might love one another in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. As those who have been born anew into the body of Christ, we now show His love to each other as we keep one another clean by the washing of forgiveness in Word, water, bread, and wine.

Every week we get the blessing to gather for worship and receive the loving gifts of our gracious God. As Christ says in the last part of John 15:9, “Abide in My love.” We come to worship to abide in His love—His forgiveness—which he pours out on us through the hearing of the word and the receiving of His sacraments. These gracious gifts we don’t deserve are ours by virtue of Christ’s true love because He died for us that we might receive them. The gift of forgiveness and eternal salvation in Christ is a message we hear every week, and should spread as far and wide as our human means allow. The Holy Spirit brings us the Word, and we then share that Word of Christ’s love with all men. We love because Christ first loved us. Christ loved us because the Father loved Him before the foundation of the world. And Christ showed His love for us in His dying and rising again, that we might have everlasting life and salvation through Him. Through the means of God’s saving grace, you have heard the Word of true love from Christ Himself, been made pure in the loving waters of your baptism, and through Jesus’ death and resurrection will have everlasting life with Him when He lovingly calls you home through His blessed Word on that last day. Amen.