

“Love: Commanded and Contrasted”

John 13:18-38 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹⁸ 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.’ ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.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.”

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side,^[e]²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus^[f] of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ 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.’³⁴ 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. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ 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.

Love at the Movies vs. Love in Real Life

Hollywood makes hundreds of millions of dollars every year selling a particular vision of what love is and what love should be. The vision they cast usually involves the magical experience of finding “just the right person” who will be your soul-mate, falling madly in love with that

person, overcoming some temporary obstacles and challenges, and then living happily ever after. Don't you ever wonder what would happen to these couples in real life after the credits roll?

In real life, love is more complicated, messy and difficult. Sometimes the person you just couldn't imagine living without becomes the person whose every annoying habit drives you crazy. Or sometimes you get married and find out the person you dated was really just a mask being worn temporarily by the person you married. Behind the mask, the person you married has bad morning breath, is grumpy until they get their morning coffee, has bad days, makes poor decisions and disappoints your expectations.

It sometimes feels like dating is a used car sales pitch, and then getting married is the moment when you drive the car off the lot. A few days later, you hear a strange rattle in the engine, and you wonder what you've really bought. By the way, if you think your spouse's engine has some rattles, you should hear your own.

It's not just romantic relationships and marriages either. Hollywood has its buddy movies that cast a vision of friendship as full of exciting adventure, often involving morally questionable choices. Real-life friendship also takes more work and usually involves less excitement than the Hollywood counterpart.

Hollywood's visions have real-life consequences. We are increasingly disappointed and frustrated in our marriages and our friendships, as expectations set by Hollywood can never be met in real life by real people. What we need is a new definition and a new vision of love. We get such a definition and a compelling vision of that definition in action from today's passage in John 13.

A. The Traitor: Self-Serving

Our passage begins with some sobering words and a heart-breaking interaction between Jesus and Judas Iscariot. Jesus has just washed the disciples' feet in a powerful demonstration of love. As He takes His place at the table and the meal resumes, He teaches His disciples to imitate His example:

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. ¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. 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."

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

“I am not speaking of all of you.” These words had to come like a splash of cold water to the faces of the already shocked disciples. They had never seen someone humble himself and serve in the way they had just seen Jesus do. Then He told them they were to do the same, which was probably pretty hard for these prideful men to accept, but at least they were promised they would be blessed if they would follow the example of their Master.

But Jesus knew not all of them were even going to be interested in following His example. Not all of them would be blessed. “I know whom I have chosen.” Earlier in John 6:79, Jesus had said, “Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet, one of you is a devil.” The Twelve were all chosen, but they were not all chosen for salvation and blessing. One was chosen for a very different role.

Jesus wants the disciples to know ahead of time not only that He knows what is about to happen, but that it is occurring in accordance with Scripture. So He quotes Psalm 41, which most Bible scholars have understood to have been written by David about Ahithophel. Ahithophel had been David’s most trusted advisor. 2 Samuel says the counsel of Ahithophel was regarded as the counsel of an angel of God. David trusted his heart and his plans to Ahithophel, but he was betrayed. When Absalom, David’s son, rebelled and overthrew his father, Ahithophel joined the rebellion and entered into the service of Absalom. Ahithophel would later hang himself in disgrace, just like Judas will do.

But even Ahithophel’s betrayal of David, as hard as it was, was but a foreshadowing of Judas’ much deeper and more painful betrayal. Judas would betray his Master for 30 pieces of silver, selling Him to His death. So Jesus becomes “troubled in his spirit.” This is the same language John uses to describe Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus - sad and angry, stirred up, agitated. To make sure His sometimes slow disciples don’t miss what He’s saying, Jesus clearly says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

This blunt statement by Jesus really hits the disciples hard.

The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ 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.

The disciples had no idea who the traitor was. Undoubtedly, had they known, they would’ve taken steps to stop Judas. Peter asks John to ask Jesus who the traitor is, and Jesus very quietly

and subtly identifies Judas for John by handing him a piece of bread dipped in the mixture of oil and bitter herbs.

This is the first time John identifies himself as the disciple “*whom Jesus loved.*” John identifies himself in this way for two main reasons: First, he is taking great lengths to leave his name out of His Gospel, to keep the focus on Jesus. And also, John is showing us that his whole identity, his sense of self, is wrapped up in the wonderful reality that he is loved by Jesus.

John is on Jesus’ right, where he can lean back and ask Jesus “Lord, who is it?” in secret, with a quiet whisper. Judas is evidently on the other side of Jesus, on His left, where Jesus can easily give him a morsel of bread. This places Judas at a place of intimate honor, at the side of the host, the Master of the feast. Jesus’ extending to him a morsel of bread is also a sign of loving hospitality and intimate friendship. It is very telling that the last two interactions between Jesus and Judas are signs of intimate friendship: Jesus gives Judas a piece of bread, and Judas later embraces Jesus with a kiss, a gesture of friendship designed to identify Jesus in the dark to His captors.

Jesus is showing Judas love, friendship and honor, even as He knows Satan has already put it into Judas mind to betray Jesus. With this morsel of bread, Jesus extends a final opportunity for Judas to turn from his intended path and respond to Jesus’ love with faith and devotion. Judas chooses not to do so, and so Satan enters into him when he eats this morsel from Jesus, and Jesus tells him poignantly, “*What you are going to do, do quickly.*”

B. The Commandment: Self-Giving

After Judas leaves, with the rest of the disciples still confused and not understanding what is happening, Jesus returns to teaching about love and about following His example. He transitions in His teaching from giving a demonstration to giving a command with a clear and compelling definition of love:

³¹ *When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

Jesus says this is a new commandment. Yet earlier, when he was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, He had said, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and*

with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*” So, love had already been the centrally important hinge of the Law, so what’s new?

What’s new are these words: “just as I have loved you.” This redefines love in a radically Christ-centered way. Jesus is not only our example of love, but He is now our definition of what it means to love. True love seeks the glory of God above all else and sacrifices whatever is required to love one another. This kind of love is not convenient, easy, cheap or Hollywood-glamorous. It is defined by a bloody cross, the costliest self-sacrifice for the glory of God and the good of another.

This kind of love is so different from the way the world loves it has the power to identify the true disciples of Jesus clearly and unmistakably. Our testimony to the world, our identity as followers of Jesus, is found in this kind of distinct, self-sacrificing love for one another. So, does the world see the disciples of Jesus clearly? Do they know who we are and what characterizes our lives? Can they see the love of Jesus being lived out by us in our community?

Such questions are deeply humbling and challenging. How will we respond?

C. The Proud Coward: Self-Protecting

Peter responded with pride. Because Jesus had said “*Where I am going you cannot come,*” Peter wanted to know, “*Lord, where are you going?*” Jesus answered him, “*Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.*”

As usual, Peter was not going to accept Jesus’ cryptic answer. He was not going to submit to Jesus’ Lordship in faith. So, Peter said to him, “*Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.*” Peter was not only demanding answers, but he is making great boasts. So Jesus corrects him: ³⁸ 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.*”

I identify with Peter, too much really. I, too, want real answers to my questions – or, at least, what I consider to be real answers. When God asks me to trust Him, submit to His Lordship, and walk by faith, I balk and I get belligerent: Why is this happening? Why do I have to wait? Why do I not have the things I think I need, the things I expect to have? Why are things not going according to my plan, Lord? I suspect you, too, can relate.

Not only do I want answers, but I also can be rather self-confident, rather sure of myself and my own abilities. “Other preachers may compromise the truth, but not me, Lord!” “Other churches may be worldly and entertainment-driven and superficial, but not Forest Hill!”

Without the grace of the Holy Spirit, it is far too easy to confuse a zeal for faithfulness with a prideful self-reliance and self-confidence.

Peter was sure he would stand strong. He meant it when he said, *“I will lay down my life for you!”* When the moment came, he did more than most of us would: He swung his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the High Priest. He thought he was ready to follow Jesus anywhere, but he was so wrong. Whenever we’re tempted to think too highly of ourselves, we’re not only wrong but we’re also just plain wrong. In other words, not only is self-confidence a serious sin, but it’s also a serious error.

In time, Peter would learn. He would eventually follow Jesus to a cross, and in humility, he would request that his be turned upside-down, for he was unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. But before he could be ready, Peter had to be humbled, stripped of his pride and self-reliance. Denying Jesus three times and being graciously restored by Him would be essential to Peter’s growth.

D. The Master: Sovereign Love

And so, in contrast to Jesus’ clear and compelling command to love one another as He has loved, we see the traitor Judas, who takes Jesus’ loving honor and friendship and repays Him with betrayal, and we see Peter, boasting of his own abilities but headed for a big fall. Above it all, in the midst of it all, speaking clear words of truth and embodying the very commandment He gives, we see Jesus, the Master, exercising His sovereign love.

Think about the reality of this moment: Jesus is facing the most agonizing time any human being will ever have to face, and as His heart grows heavy at the approach of the cross, He is thinking of others. He tells His disciples of His betrayal, so that when the moment comes, they won’t be shocked and their faith won’t be shaken. He tells Peter the truth of his coming denials because He loves Peter and He wants Peter to see the truth about himself and to be prepared for the trial awaiting him. Even to Judas, His betrayer, Jesus offers hospitality, honor and friendship, giving him an opportunity to turn away from his wicked ways.

Jesus sees all, He knows all and He loves His own through it all, to the end. Throughout the next three chapters, Jesus will continue lovingly teaching His disciples, one final night of instruction before the cross, and then He prays for them, powerfully and beautifully.

How Do You See Jesus Working in Your Life?

Do you know that Jesus also stands above it all in the midst of your life, loving you and teaching you in His sovereign love? Do you see Him at work? Do you hear His words in the Word of God? Have you received His love?

Peter failed because he was self-reliant. He was confident in his own abilities, and so he was far from the truth and on the verge of collapse. How often are we so confident in our own abilities that we go through life unaware and unconcerned for the presence of Jesus and His sovereign love in our lives?

Jesus calls us to walk in humble dependence, by faith in Him and not by faith in ourselves. He also calls us to love, even as He has loved and continues to love us. It's a high calling. How can we do it? Peter thought he could. Are we wise enough to see we can't?

The only way we're going to be able to walk by faith in humble reliance on Jesus is through the power of the Holy Spirit working on our hearts and minds. The only way we're going to love one another as Jesus loved us and so show the world we are indeed His disciples is by the same power of the Holy Spirit, working on our hearts and minds. How do we get this daily help of the Holy Spirit? We ask. We seek. We knock. We wake up in the morning confessing our own inability and looking to Jesus for our sufficiency. We open the Word, we spend time on our knees, and we seek the face of God as beggars seeking bread.

Jesus is actively at work in our lives, loving us and calling us to love. Will we see Him at work by faith and respond to His call?