

## Leaving, Loving, and Living

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<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

<sup>36</sup> Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward." <sup>37</sup> Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake." <sup>38</sup> Jesus answered him, "Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times. (John 13:31–38)

One of the founders of a certain religion lived at the time of Jesus. His life actually overlapped with the life of Jesus; they lived at the same time. On his deathbed, his disciples came to him, and he began to weep. They asked him, "why are you crying?" He said, "when I am being led into the presence of the King of Kings, the Holy One,.. and before me lie two ways, one of Gan Eden [heaven] and the other of Gehinnom, [hell], and I know not to which I am to be led -- shall I not weep?" Terribly disturbing that the founder of a religion had no words of comfort or assurance for his disciples on his deathbed, and had no confidence as to where he was going.

That stands in stark contrast to the rabbi we believe is Lord Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. In His last hours, His words to His disciples were not filled with despair, but with confident hope and assurance of where He was going, and what His disciples should do in His absence. We find that in John 13-17, the Farewell Discourse, or the Upper Room Discourse, a four-chapter lesson on the Christian life. Here Jesus will teach His disciples, and us, what the Christian life is – how to live the Christian life when He is absent.

This is the part of the Gospel of John known as the book of glory. The first part was the book of signs, a collection of signs Jesus did to show Himself to be Messiah, along with the debates and discussions that ensued around those signs. The testimony of Jesus to the world is complete, now what remains is teaching His own, and going to the cross and crown. These chapters are for those who already believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. This is for those who have already experienced eternal life. These chapters show us what eternal life looks like in those that have it.

What we're going to find in the very beginning of the Upper Room Discourse passage is that the very first thing Jesus wants us to remember is the thing we are most likely to ignore. The thing that will make the most difference with Him absent, is the thing we brush off and dismiss. And we know we do that, because placed in the account is the very leader of the apostles, who did just that.

Familiarity breeds contempt, the saying goes, and it is easy to think that we already know what Jesus means, as if this is an ABC lesson for beginner Christians, because we long ago graduated from such infantile teachings. And like Peter, we might actually ignore the words of the Master-Teacher, Jesus, thinking we know better than He does. But instead of falling into that trap, we should slow down, and consider why Jesus chose these words to open the Upper Room Discourse.

We may find that the simplest commands, when obeyed sometimes have the most revolutionary effects on our Christian lives.

Watch this story unfold in three terms: leaving, loving, and living.

## **I. Context: Jesus is Leaving**

<sup>31</sup> So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately. <sup>33</sup> Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you.

Judas leaves the room, and Jesus immediately changes tone. From the troubled heaviness of having a false believer among them, it's as if the sun comes out, and now the tone changes to glory, and love.

Final words are always poignant, and highly compressed in sincerity and meaning. In fact, Jesus knows that Judas has gone to fetch the Sanhedrin and they will be coming back to this Upper Room. Jesus is going to move them in the middle of this discourse, to give Himself extra time to teach the disciples what He wants to say before He is arrested. Judas will no doubt come to the Upper Room, find they are gone, and then guess that they have gone to Gethsemane.

Jesus explicitly says there are many other things He wants to teach them, but they're not ready for it. <sup>12</sup> “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. (John 16:12)

In essence what Jesus is saying is: the time is come for me to do what I came to do, and that means I am going away. The key word here is glory. In the Gospel of John, the glory of Jesus includes both the glory of the humiliating cross, and the glory of the resurrection, and the glory of the ascension.

Now that Judas is gone, and the betrayal was under way, the great saving act to be consummated at Calvary was launched. So Jesus speaks as if the whole glory is already here. The Son will be glorified as the humble substitute and victorious conqueror, and the Father will be glorified in the Son's obedience, since they are mutually indwelling each other. And when the work is complete, verse 32 suggests, the Father will take up the full Person of Jesus, God-Man and glorify Him. Jesus uses the term 'the Son of Man' here for the last time. And this is 'immediately' already happening, now that Judas is gone, the countdown has begun.

So verse 33 is the practical result. I am with you a little longer. You will look for me, but you won't find me. The reference here is probably both to the empty tomb, and then to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. But where Jesus is going – to death, resurrection and ultimately heaven, His disciples cannot physically follow Him in that.

It's hard to imagine what the eleven are feeling at this moment. Jesus has been teaching and warning them that He was going to the cross, that He would die, but now it is almost like being at a hospital death-bed. These could be the last moments, and the reality sets in. There is no Plan B. Jesus is going to die and they will be leaderless. Their rabbi, leader, shepherd, friend is going. We talk about big shoes to fill if someone important leaves. But who can imagine the gaping hole left by Jesus. Can anyone fill that hole in their lives?

This is the only time in the Gospel that Jesus uses the word translated “Little children” It is a term of great endearment, of affection. He says this to men who at this moment may have lumps in their throats, who are tearing up, shaking their heads in disbelief.

So what happens next is that Jesus is going to give them what they need for His absence.

## **II. Command: Christians Be Loving**

<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one

another. <sup>35</sup> By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Here is what they must do in Jesus' absence. Love one another as Jesus loved them. It's repeated twice.

This is a new commandment. This is something beyond the Old Testament Law. This is a new covenant command given on His authority as the Messiah: love one another, as I have loved you. Now there is nothing new about the command to love.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18). And when asked, Jesus said the two greatest commandments from the Law were to love God wholeheartedly, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

But what is new is the degree we are to love, and the enablement to perform the love.

No longer love fellow believers merely as yourself. We are to love the way Christ loved us. How has He loved His people? Look at the beginning of the chapter. Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. (John 13:1)

He loved them to the end. He loved them to the goal, to the fulness, to the uttermost. And He tells them exactly what that looks like in 15:12-13: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. (John 15:13)

Jesus loved His disciples with sacrificial, serving love. He gave them a taste of it by washing their feet, and in a few hours He will pay for their sins on the cross.

So what then is love?

Love is desiring the good of the beloved. Love delights in the beloved, and so seeks whatever will bring maximum blessing and good to him. If you love someone, in the biblical sense, you desire for that person what God says is best for him or her. If you love someone, you gain joy from them gaining joy. You want their ultimate happiness, and it makes you happy to seek their happiness. So much so, that you will embrace hard things, do difficult things, endure unpleasant things so as to bring them that joy. You will wash feet, you will endure hardness of heart, you will go to a cross so as to secure their joy.

Love does not mean you do whatever makes someone happy in that moment. Because what makes them happy might actually be destructive to them. If all you care about is pleasing someone so that they like you, that's not loving them, that's loving yourself. Love means you have a standard in your mind of what is best for the person: for your spouse, for your child, for your friend. That standard is what God says is best for a human being. When you know what God's Word says is best for someone, you pursue that for another person, at cost to yourself.

That's what the early Christians did. Remember the description given by Aristides, the Greek Christian who died in the year 134. He wrote to the Roman emperor Hadrian, defending Christians and explaining their lives. He wrote “they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they

hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.”

Love is both the easiest thing, and the hardest thing. It's the simplest thing to understand, and the deepest and richest concept of all. It is the thing we are attracted to most, because of its delights, and the thing we flee from the most, because of its cost and commitment. But love is at the very centre of the Christian life.

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

<sup>14</sup> For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Galatians 5:14)

If you really fulfill *the* royal law according to the Scripture, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself,*” you do well; (James 2:8)

<sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. (Ephesians 5:2)

But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. (Colossians 3:14)

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, *from* a good conscience, and *from* sincere faith, (1 Timothy 1:5)

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “*love will cover a multitude of sins.*” (1 Peter 4:8)

Why should we love as He loved us? Jesus gives us two reasons why we must love like this. One is implicit, the other is explicit. The implicit or unstated reason is this: if you love as Christ loved, then you are being like Jesus to each other. Love is how we fill the void left by Jesus' absence. It's as if Jesus is saying, Be my love to each other. Stand in for Me with your love. In all your trials, pains, difficulties, you, My disciples, have the power to be just as I would be: the same compassion, the same tenderness, the same care, the same truthfulness. First reason, love as I've loved you, because that's how you'll experience Me when I'm gone.

Second, verse 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

People will recognise Me, my love, in how you treat each other. The best sign that you are Jesus followers will be how you treat each other. That works the opposite way too. Mistreatment of each other is the biggest distortion of our testimony to the world.

Love for each other is how we show the world who Jesus is. This is what gripped the Roman world, filled as it was with a fairly brutal honour culture. Tertullian, writing in 250, said that the pagan Romans exclaimed of the Christians “See how they love one another, how they are ready even to die for one another, they say, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; for they themselves will sooner put to death (The Apology, ch. 39).”

Probably more people have been won to Christianity by seeing love and being loved than by any apologetic arguments to defend the faith. “Upon His authority He gives the world the right to judge whether you and I are born-again Christians on the basis of our observable love toward all Christians” – Francis Schaeffer.

So how do we get this love?

This is not a love we conjure up. It reflects the new order of the new covenant, where the Spirit of God lives within us, filling us with the love God has for His people.

And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare *it*, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:26)

<sup>9</sup> “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. (John 15:9–10)

With the indwelling Spirit, according to Romans 5, the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. As we abide in Christ, as we live in practical union with Christ through His Word, God will empower our love for each other. He didn’t promise that He would empower our feelings. He will empower our ability to seek the good of our brothers and sisters at personal cost to ourselves.

Now at this point, you might hope the disciples ask Jesus about love, how to love, what that looks like for them. But instead, we find that what comes next is all too familiar.

### **III. Conceit: Living Ignoring Loving**

<sup>36</sup> Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.” <sup>37</sup> Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.” <sup>38</sup> Jesus answered him, “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times.

It’s as if Peter has completely ignored the commandment on love, and goes right back to the question of Jesus leaving. “Where are you going?” Jesus doesn’t say, “I am going to the cross, the grave, and the sky.” He wants them to focus on what they can do, and it is not their time to die as martyrs.

Peter intuitively that Jesus is talking about death and then makes the boast that he will lay down his life for Jesus. Here is some real irony. In the first place, Peter was not ready to lay down his life for Jesus, as we soon find out. And second, it was Jesus who was going to lay down his life for Peter, dying for his sins on the cross.

Peter is ignoring, dismissing, skipping the whole central section on love. It’s as if Peter is saying, “Yes, yes, love, very nice, but back to the real topic – Jesus going away. I’m willing to go the distance, I won’t leave your side.” Peter, at this point, has inflated intentions. He has a bloated view of his own spiritual maturity and strength, and he is treating the love command like something to be dismissed, like some kindergarten teaching that he has long ago mastered.

He is focused on what he thinks he is capable of doing for Christ. Even though Peter had the warning from Jesus about himself, he still fell into the sin. This shows how blind we are about ourselves, how terrible our self-estimation really is.

Our inflated intentions mask our lack of love. We skip the love command and focus on our supposed lofty goals. Many people convince themselves that they love God because of all the future plans they have to serve God. The things they will do, the places they will go, the hardship they will embrace. And so they deceive themselves into imagining, I would lay down my life for Jesus. But they do not love Christ in His people right in front of them. One of the best ways to know who you really are is try to love other Christians.

Peter can't see that the only thing that would have enabled him to pass the test that night was love. Had he possessed a deep mature love for Christ, and a Christlike love for his fellow believers, he would not have denied Christ. In fact, about thirty years later, Peter was put to death under Nero. And when he faced that trial, he was so filled with love for Christ and His church that he requested he not be crucified the same way Jesus was. He asked to be crucified upside-down, because he was not worthy of being crucified as his Lord was.

It's so easy so overestimate just how much we love God. We think we love Him far more than we do. One of the best ways to know how much you really love the Christ you have not seen is how much you love the Christians you do see.

Beware of hypothetical love for God. John warned us against that. <sup>20</sup> If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also. (1 John 4:20–21)

It's very easy to fall into the trap of conceit. "I love Jesus directly, I don't need to measure how much I love other Christians. I have my own personal relationship with God, other Christians are just other warm bodies that gather near me on a Sunday morning." But that's not Christianity. Your relationship with Christ might be very real and personal, but it is never private and secretive. It is a relationship to Christ who has a Body, a Bride, a Flock, a Living Temple. The very first thing Jesus says to us as He's departing is: be like Me to one another. Be my love to each other. Act in my place while I'm gone. Not only will that nourish your own souls, but it will be proof positive to the world outside that you truly are followers of Jesus.

So if we eliminated all the Peter-intentions in your imagination: all that you mean to do for Jesus, all that you say you intend to do, all that you imagine yourself doing, what we are left with is the evidence of what you are doing for His people. Are you the love of Jesus to the people in this room?

God is gathering a household – a family of people that are loved by God and love like He does. Jesus dies and rises to save this family and make them one. Those who are on the side of God's glory, get to experience God's love in God's family. While He is gone, we are to be like Him to each other, and in front of a watching world.