

## “So That You May Love One Another”

Acts 10:44-48 • Psalm 98 • 1 John 5:1-6 • John 15:9-17

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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I am going to read through this morning’s John 15 passage a second time, and I’d like you to *count*. Count how many times the word “love” (or “loved”) appears in this short passage: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” How many did you get? Nine. Nine mentions of the word “love,” in nine verses.

Now let’s do the same thing with the passage from 1 John. Count again: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it who conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.” How many? Five times, in six verses.

I asked you to count so that you could see, with your own eyes, what is plainly obvious: these two passages are fundamentally about *love*. If you’re looking for passages about *love* in the Bible, these are two of the most important. But *whose* love? *Who* is loving *whom* here? Let’s start over again:

“As the Father has loved me” – that, obviously, refers to *God* loving *Jesus*.

“So I have loved you” – and that, obviously, refers to *Jesus* loving *us*.

This is the starting point; this is the basis of all that follows. *God* loves *Jesus*, and *Jesus* loves *us*. As that oh-so-familiar song goes, “Jesus loves me, this I know; for the Bible tells me so.” This is one of the most basic and profound truths of our faith. *You are loved*. You are immensely and deeply *loved*.

Sometimes people think they are not worthy of Jesus' love. Sometimes people think that some of the things they have done in their life has caused them to lose that precious gift. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There is nothing that you or I can do that would cause Jesus to stop loving us. Oh, sure, Jesus might be *disappointed* in us at times. Jesus might be *angry* at some of the choices we make. But *Jesus never stops loving us*. There is *nothing* you can do to cause Jesus to stop loving you.

So this is the starting point, the fundamental starting point for all discussions of our Christian relationships, both with God and with one another. *We are loved*. We are deeply and profoundly loved. God loves Jesus with an incredibly deep and abiding love, and Jesus loves us with that same incredibly deep and abiding love. Which, when you stop and think about it, is really pretty remarkable. Jesus was sinless. We're not. God loved Jesus, who was completely without sin. And Jesus loves us, who are *full* of it. Jesus's love for us is *all the more remarkable* in that he loves us with a profound love *despite* our sin.

Indeed, Jesus loves us so much that he *gave his life for us*. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus was willing to *let himself be killed* so that *we could be saved*. From time to time we hear of remarkable people sacrificing themselves to save others, like some heroic firefighters, soldiers, police, whistleblowers, and activists. What Jesus did went beyond even the best of those, for *the whole point of Jesus coming here in the first place was to save us*. Great Christian writers like John Milton (who wrote *Paradise Lost*) have argued that *Jesus knew what he was going to have to do* before he ever arrived on earth, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. *Jesus's whole trajectory from start to finish was directly solely towards our salvation*. That's a truly remarkable form of self-sacrificing love. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

So the love that Jesus has for us goes beyond *anything else* the world has ever seen. What does this mean for us? "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Love one another *as he has loved us*, with that same self-sacrificing love. Simple, right? No. Not simple at all!

This is such a beautiful teaching. In theory, it really is *quite simple*. Jesus loves us *immensely*, so go love other people, *immensely*. It's simple *in theory*. But it's not at all simple in *real life*, is it? For in real life, we're dealing with flawed human relationships. We're flawed, the people we're trying to love are flawed; that means our relationships are fundamentally flawed by nature. There's no such thing as a *perfect* human relationship. Even when we fall madly in love, there comes the day when you realize that your relationship with that other person isn't as perfect as you once felt or believed or imagined it was. Anyone who's ever been married or been in any kind of long-term relationship knows that it doesn't just *happen*. It takes *work*. It requires listening and communicating, apologizing and forgiving. There are oh-so-many mistakes, things that were said or done or not said or not done, things that were simply misunderstood, too many times when one or the other feels hurt, abused, neglected, or forsaken.

Jesus, thankfully, loves us *perfectly*. He doesn't make *any* of those mistakes. We, unfortunately, don't know how to love *anyone* perfectly. Even when we try our *best*, we fail. Jesus is perfect. We're not.

So what Jesus is asking us to do is, for all intents and purposes, *impossible*. We are simply not *capable* of loving anybody with the *same* kind of immense love that he has for us. So why does he ask?

Well, let's consider another aspect of what Jesus says here. "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have

heard from my Father.” “If you do what I command you” refers to the fact that there are things Jesus wants to *teach* us. “I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” means that everything that Jesus wants us to know came directly to him from none other than *God*. There are *divine* teachings and precepts that Jesus wants us to follow. They’re not just *random sayings*, human proverbs or insights passed down from one generation to the next; no, there is *divine truth*, revealed in Jesus Christ. “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.” “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” What Jesus has to teach us *helps us know how to love*. In other words: if you want to grow in your ability to love other people in ways that mirror Jesus’ love for us, *you have to listen to everything else that Jesus has to say to us*. All of the teachings of Jesus help us grow in our ability to truly love.

First John reiterates this point: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.” There’s a relationship here between *loving people* and *loving God*, and there’s a relationship between *loving God* and *obeying God’s commandments*. Specifically: Jesus tells us in the Gospels that the two greatest commandments in the scriptures are “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” from Deuteronomy; and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” from Leviticus. These are the two most fundamental things every Christian is called to do: *love God, love neighbor*. Here, Jesus begins to spell out what that looks like: *loving God* means *obeying God’s commandments*. John is not talking here about all the commandments in the Old Testament that no longer hold claim over us; rather, John is talking about the commandments that Jesus gave us, in all his teachings. *If you want to love God, you have to sit at the feet of Jesus*. Learn what Jesus wants us to be and to do. And then go *do* that. Don’t just love God in your *mind*; show your love for God in the way you *embody* and *exemplify* the teachings of Jesus. This, then, leads to a greater ability to *love others*. “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.” In other words: we can only *truly* love others when we are loving *God* – and we can only *truly* love God when we are obeying God’s commandments, that is, *earnestly seeking to live our lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ, in all things*.

Again, that is simple in theory, but maybe not so simple in practice. It’s harder for those who rarely show up in church, or who never crack open their Bible at home, or who never show up at a Bible study, or who never pick up a good Christian book that will help them think and reflect on how they are living – or *not* living – in accordance with the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Be warned, there’s a lot of Christian “fluff” out there that makes people *feel* good but doesn’t really challenge you to *grow*. If your Bible study or devotional life never causes you to think or question your values or the way you are living your life, you probably need to go *deeper*. There’s always *more* that Jesus calls us to be and to do.

“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” This is the goal. This is the life that Jesus is directing us toward. Jesus loves us with an *immense* love, one that we can never fully replicate, but we can grow in that direction more and more over the course of our life. How? By loving God. How do we do that? By learning what God wants us to do and who God wants us to be. How do we do *that*? By sitting at the feet of Jesus, studying his teachings and applying them to our lives, slowly but surely transforming our lives from the inside-out, growing gradually in Christ-like graces.

To put this in the simplest terms: we learn how to love others *best* when we love Jesus *first*.

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