

Life Together

Part 1: LOVE

Text: John 13:1-5, 13-16, 31-35

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 21, 2018 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** This morning we are beginning a new series entitled, ***“Life Together.”*** This fall we have been seeking to recapture the New Testament vision for the church.
 - We have seen that the Church is the bride of Christ and Jesus is the groom. Jesus loves his Church so much that he laid his life down for her. Jesus is utterly committed to his Bride and to her well-being.
 - Since we want to love what Jesus loves, it is our great joy to love the Church and to be utterly committed to her well-being. And so we have seen that in the New Testament, everyone who received the good news of Jesus Christ was baptized and became a committed member of a local church.
- So having established that every Christian is called to be an active member of a local church, I now want to ask the question that naturally follows from this: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) *“What does it mean to be a member of a local church?”***
 - What does it mean to live life together in the local church? Being a member does not simply mean having your name on a list. As we have said, membership is a *living commitment*. Just like being part of a family comes with certain privileges and responsibilities, so also becoming part of the family of God comes with certain privileges and responsibilities.
 - So what are our responsibilities to each other and to God? That is what this next five part series is about.
- Today I want to show you that there is one thing that is to be *the* defining mark of every church member.
 - This mark is also *the* key to the church’s witness to the world. Non-Christians are supposed to see it and say, ***“Those people are clearly followers of Jesus.”***
 - So this morning I want to show you what this defining mark is, show how it is a compelling witness about Jesus to the world, and then finally show the secret to having this power in your life. So let’s talk about *the defining mark, the compelling witness, and the empowering secret.*

THE DEFINING MARK

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First then, **the defining mark.**
 - Throughout history Christians have used many different symbols to mark themselves as Christians. Some put bumper stickers on their vehicles. Some people wear crosses around their necks. The WWJD? bracelet was popular for awhile. Still others tattoo pictures or Bible verses on their bodies. One of the more popular marks is the fish symbol on your car.
- Do you know where that fish symbol comes from? Christians used it in the first few centuries as a secret symbol because to openly declare yourself a Christian meant you could be killed.
 - The story goes that when a Christian met someone new they would nonchalantly make a half circle with their foot in the dust. If the person facing them completed the other side of the fish they were declaring themselves to also be a Christian.
 - The early Christians would also mark their houses with it to secretly show other Christians that it was a safe place for them.

- Generally speaking all of these things from necklaces to tattoos to fish are meant to mark a person as a Christian.
 - Here in John 13 Jesus makes it clear that however you may want to mark yourself as a Christian, there is to be one mark that is to supersede all others.
 - What is it? **READ 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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**
- **(SHOW SLIDE 4) The defining mark of a Christian is to be his or her love for other Christians.**
 - The force of these words is driven home by the timing of them. This is the Last Supper. Jesus has just demonstrated this love when he, the Lord and Master, has washed his disciples feet. Jesus is about to go to the cross and lay down his life. All of these are great acts of loving service on behalf of others.
- And now time is short. Jesus takes his last moments with his disciples to prepare them for his departure by instructing them. The immense importance of these words cannot be overstated. Last minute instructions are always important.
 - When children are old enough for their parents to leave them home alone the parents give very clear last minute instructions. These instructions matter. They say things like, **“Do not open the door to anyone.”** When people know they are going to die and they still have their mental faculties about them they make sure their last words count.
 - In just the same way, Jesus takes his last moments to state clearly his final instructions.
- The very first subject that Jesus brings up in his last instructions, the very first thing he presses upon his disciples, is that they love one another.
 - I want to draw out three things about this defining mark.

A COMMAND, NOT A SUGGESTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5) First, this is a command, not a suggestion. READ 34a - A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.**
 - Jesus is not simply dishing out good advice from his life experience. No, this is a command and it comes from He who has been given all authority in heaven and earth, from He who will burst through the skies in blazing fire with all his powerful angels and judge the world, and from He to whom every knee will one day bow.
 - This is a command, not a suggestion.

LOVING THE CHURCH

- But let's reflect further upon this. Who are Christians commanded to love? Notice that Jesus is *not* here commanding us to love all people. Even more specifically, He is *not* commanding Christians to love non-Christians.
 - There is very clearly stated elsewhere. The second greatest command is to **“love your neighbour as yourself”** and your neighbour is anyone regardless of their gender, race, religion, age, or class.
- But that is not the focus of this passage. The command is to **“love one another.”** Who are the **“one another’s”**? Who is Jesus speaking to? Jesus is speaking to his disciples – to his followers. The command therefore is specifically for Christians to love their fellow Christians.
 - Please understand that this command is not opposed to the command of loving our neighbour. We do not choose between the two. It is not love your neighbour *or* other Christians. It is both, but with an *extra emphasis* on your brothers and sisters in Christ.

- Gal 6:9-10 puts it well: **(SHOW SLIDE 6) “Let us not become weary in doing good...therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of faith.”¹**
- So the second thing we want to say about this mark is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 7)**
 - **Obedying this command means loving all Christians but this love finds its *primary expression* in the local church.**
- Why do I say this command should find its primary expression in the local church? Well, I am certainly not saying we should only love Christians if they are our fellow church members. That is absurd. We are to love all Christians.
 - I am saying that the primary place we are to fulfill this command is the local church because the vision of the NT is that the Christian life is to be lived in, and flow out of, the local church. It is only natural then that the primary recipients of your love should be those who are your local family.
 - Let me put it this way: I love my aunts, uncles, and cousins but the primary place I love is my immediate family. In the same way, there are some ways I can love the universal family of Christ in Rwanda, India, and China but it is my local family of believers where the primary expression of my love is expressed.
- This is the pattern we see in the NT. There is this command but it finds its primary expression in the local church.
 - Take the command in Romans 12:10 for instance. It says, **“be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”** Who is that written to? The church in Rome. You can only obey that command if you are devoted to a local church and are loving the people there.
 - Where is the greatest exposition of love in the entire Bible? It is 1 Corinthians 13. Now who is that written to? To the church in Corinth. Obedying this command means loving all Christians but this love finds its *primary expression* in the local church.
- The apostle John never tired of reminding Christians to do this. The letter of 1 John is one continual reminder to Christians of their responsibility to love one another.
 - 1 John 3:11, **(SHOW SLIDE 8) “This is the message you heard from the beginning: we should love one another.”**
 - It is like John is saying, **“Do not forget it. Never forget it. We must love one another. This is to be our defining mark.”**
- One of the church fathers, a man named Jerome, says that when John was in his old age at the church in Ephesus, he used to be carried in on a chair.
 - As he passed through the congregation, he would say to the congregation, **“Love one another. Love one another.”**
 - And when they would ask him why he said this, he would say, **“Because it’s the Lord’s commandment and if you do this, it is everything.”**
- Obedying this command means loving all Christians but this love finds its *primary expression* in the local church.

A SUSTAINED SELF-SACRIFICING LOVE

- There is a third thing I want us to see in this defining mark. **(SHOW SLIDE 9) Our love for each other must be a sustained self-sacrificing love.**
- Notice first of all that our love for each other must be a *sustained* love.

¹ See also 1 Thes 3:12 for the same dual emphasis “And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you.” Francis Schaeffer writes, “Here the order is reversed. First of all, we are to have love one toward another and then toward all men, but that does not change the double emphasis. Rather, it points up the delicate balance — a balance that is not in practice automatically maintained.” (Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, 10)

- Notice how many times Jesus says we are to love. **READ 34-35 - 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.**
 - Three times he says it and all three times it is a present continuous thing – **“keep on loving one another.”**
- But notice secondly the kind of love we are to have. We are to have a *self-sacrificing* love. Let me show you what I mean.
 - Did you notice that Jesus said this is a **“new commandment”**?
 - That is a little strange because if you know your Bible, God commanded love way back in Lev 19:18 – **“Love your neighbour as yourself.”** So, it is not new in the sense that it had never been commanded before. In what manner is it new then?
- It is new in the motive and the degree of love. **READ 34 - “just as I have loved you.”**
 - How has he loved us? Love in these chapters is dominated by one theme: the cross. This kind of love has never been seen before. As Jesus says later, **“Greater love has no one that this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”**²
 - Our love for one another is to be modeled after the love of Jesus and Jesus’ love is a sustained self-sacrificing love.
- I have spent most our time on this first point because it is so important. Love for one another is the marching order for the church. Love is the badge that we wear.
 - The defining mark of the church is not programs, buildings, or projects. The defining mark of every Christian and every church is to be our sustained self-sacrificing love for each other.
 - This is not controversial. The question is, **“Are we doing this? Are we seeking out ways to show to one another?”** This is the church we all want to be part of. A church where people are caring for one another is self-sacrificial ways.

THE COMPELLING WITNESS

- Now that we have seen the defining mark, let’s come in the second place to look at **(SHOW SLIDE 10) The compelling witness.** The point here is very simple.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 11) Our witness to the world is directly linked to our love for each other. READ 35 - By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**
- Notice very carefully that this is a conditional statement. **“IF you love one another.”**
 - It is very possible then for us to obey or to disobey this command. If the world does not see us loving one another Jesus says it is only logical that the world will have a poor view of the church.
- And the world has certainly done this. Frederick Nietzsche, the famous atheist said, **“If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, look more redeemed.”**
 - Mahatma Gandhi, the famous Indian spiritualist said, **“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”**
- Yet it has not always been that way. In the first few centuries society took note of the Christians because they loved each other. A sarcastic Greek historian named Lucian despised Christians but in the 2nd century,
 - **“It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their head that they are brethren.”**
- The 3rd century writer Tertullian declared that the one thing that converted him to Christianity was not the arguments they gave him, because he could find a counterpoint for every argument they would

² John 15:13

present. ***“But they demonstrated something I didn’t have. The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way they loved each other.”***

- Tertullian later writes about how the Roman world spoke of Christians. ***“It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Look’, they say, ‘How these Christians love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another.’”***
 - In the early church love and witness were connected. Oh may this be true of today.
- This is why we call everyone at Central to be part of a Community Group. We cannot love another as we ought to on a Sunday morning. But within a smaller group, you can get to know one another.
 - And we have heard so many wonderful stories of love for one another. Oh yes, we need to keep growing but how wonderful to hear of Family Group members coming around a single mom. How wonderful to hear people coming around others while they are in the hospital, of taking meals to those who are struggling, of running errands, and caring for the practical needs of one another.
 - Well done Central family. Let us continue on with this. Think of tangible ways to do this. Think how you can offer words of encouragement. Think of ways to support each other and then do it.

THE EMPOWERING SECRET

- So we have look at the mark and the witness. Let’s come to our final heading now: **(SHOW SLIDE 12) the empowering secret.**
 - You see we cannot end with the second heading. All we have really said is love each other more. But the real question is where we get the ability to do that. You see here is what I know about myself. I know I can be somewhat loving but this verse does not say that. It says to love as Jesus did. That I cannot do. Who can love like Jesus?
 - I must immediately confess by inability to carry this out. I must confess that I am far more concerned for sustained Barton-centred living, than for self-sacrificing, others centred love. So where do you and I get the ability to love as Jesus did?
- The answer is right in the command. We are to love as Christ has loved: ***“Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another.”***
 - So Jesus’ love is the model for us to copy but it is also the power to enable us to love. It is as we look upon his love for us that our hearts melt and are changed, empowering us to love others.
 - Where do we get the ability to carry out this command? I put it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 13) We are empowered to sustained self-sacrificing love as we live beneath the cross.**
- Behold the love of Christ for you! As the eternal Son of God, Jesus enjoyed being in the presence of His Father and being worshipped in heaven. Yet, he gave all this up to become a man in order to rescue us.
 - This rescue mission culminated at the cross. Let us be clear on one thing. It was not the nails that held him to that cross enduring its agonies. He who spoke the world into existence could have whispered one word and obliterated the universe. Yet, he did not. Why? Because of His obedience to His Father and his love for sinners.
 - He set you ahead of himself. He sacrificed himself for you. He lost everything so you could gain it all. Do you love continually beneath this cross? Do you continually reflect on his great sacrifice for you? This is how you break your heart of stone. This is how you melt your self-centredness. You behold the love of Jesus for you on the cross.

- Are you at odds with a brother or sister in Christ? Let the cross melt your heart so you can forgive. There is Jesus dying. Why? Because you are a sinner who has offended God. But out of love, God did not shun you or refuse to forgive. Out of love, Christ died to forgive you.
 - As you behold the love of Christ for you in the cross, you receive the power to forgive others. That is why Colossians 3:13 says, **“Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”** The power to forgive is the gospel.
 - How do you continually fight against put yourself first and put others first. Phil 2 is clear: **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition...consider others better than yourselves.”** How? By recalling the gospel – that Christ gave up his rights, became a man, and died on a cross. The cross is the ultimate demonstration of Jesus putting you before himself. As you live beneath the cross where you were put first, you are empowered to put others first.
- So you see, this is the empowering secret to the Christian life – constantly putting yourself beneath the cross. It is when we move away from the cross that we forget Christ’s love and think only of ourselves. It is then that we fail to love others. That is why we must continually fill our minds with the gospel.
 - That is why we must read scripture – it reveals what Jesus did on the cross. That is why corporate worship is so important – it brings us back to the cross. That is why we eat the Lord’s Supper – to reminds us of the cross. That is why we preach – to develop the cross. That is why we sing – to glory in the cross.
 - Our whole lives must be bent on living beneath the cross so that we can apply the gospel to our lives.
- So where do we get the ability to fulfill this command? By continually putting ourselves under the cross. Only as we as a church continually recall how much he has loved us will we be able to have a sustained self-sacrificing love for each other.

CONCLUSION

- So, what is the defining mark of the church? What must be the defining mark of *this* church? Towering above all others is Christ’s call for us to love each other.
 - **“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.”**
- So how are we doing with this at Central? How are you striving to love others here? How are you doing it with words? How are you doing it with actions?
 - What is one way you can express your love to this church?
 - The defining mark of a local church must be the sustained self-sacrificing love of its members for each other.