

The Greatest of These Is Love!
John 17:25-26

Well, tonight we come to the end of this glorious high priestly pray of Jesus. We have seen Jesus pray and petition the Lord concerning himself, for the disciples, and also for us who will come after and believe on him. In it we have seen the heart of Christ. We learn so much about his passion and his personhood by what he prays. He opens his inner man with all his desires for those who are his people. And as we walk away from this prayer we have such a greater and more glorious understanding of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

And as we come to the last couple of verses, we have to ask the question: what is the chief mark of the church? What is that one mark that truly defines us as followers of Christ and worshippers of our great God? If you had one mark in what the church should be known by what would it be? And we might come up with many attributes that have been missing, but the one attribute that is key in our living and functioning and worship of God, in fact we cannot worship God or relate to one another without it is love. Think of that great description of love Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13, and then he ends it off that chapter in verse 13, **“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”** The Corinthians were coveting other gifts and other manifestations of God’s presence, but the greatest manifestation that God is with us and has touched our lives is love.

And we even see the priority of love in the words of Jesus in John 13:34-35, **“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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** How will people know we are followers of Jesus Christ? It is by our love for God that causes us to love one another. And it is new in the sense because of the example of how Jesus has loved us. Love is defined by the cross. It is self giving. It meets our greatest need. Love seeks the welfare and blessing of another. It is costly and we cannot pay back or reciprocate that love. And you can imagine the glory of that love of Christ. The love of God is meant to change us in how we love in our family, our church, and those outside of Christ.

Maybe everyone here is on the same page with what I have said, but then the question becomes, am I a loving person? Has the presence of Christ and his gospel so impacted my soul to cause me to love others the way Jesus has loved me? And think if you ask most people in the world if they are loving individuals they would say yes. Yet the way the church loves is suppose to shock them as far as what love is. They should see that testimony as we live and function together. There is such a glorious and strong bond and care and desire to bless one another. But I think if you asked most people in the church if they have this chief mark, if they are loving individuals they would say yes. But are you? And are you growing in that love for Christ? Is your love shocking in any way? There is so much self-focus and self-centredness in our lives that we become blind to what true biblical and Christ-honouring love looks like. We see but have not seen. We taste but we have not tasted that the Lord is so very good and loving.

So today, I want us to look at these two verses and the priority of love in our lives. It truly is such a bright sign over our lives that we have been touched by the

glorious love of Christ. I want us to see a couple of things in this passage that I truly hope will help us evaluate our love, and hopefully spurn us on to love Christ and love others with a greater passion, with a greater intensity for the glory of our great Christ.

1. We need to see that love is always based on the understanding of God. V.25.

I can remember talking to a gentleman one time who came for a service from a different church. He loved the expository preaching of God's Word. He loved the Christ saturated hymns we sung, but he cautioned me with this statement, "Doctrine divides but love unities." "We have to be so careful in what we teach and say, because God places an absolute priority on love." And those words for many in the church seem to have so much wisdom. It is short and seems to carry biblical themes. Even as we said in the introduction — God does place a premium on love. It truly is the distinctive mark of the believer. We also realize that knowledge can puff up. People with knowledge can look down on others who do not have the knowledge they have.

But the statement, "doctrine divides but love unites" really is a fallacy. It is a short statement that many times is not talked about. Doctrine in one sense does divide and it is meant to. But here is the point of verse 25 and even into verse 26 — Christ has made known to them the Father. He has revealed the Father to them. He has revealed who he is and why he has come. And it is through that knowledge that they have come to love Jesus and love God. You cannot love God, and the overflow of our love for God is loving one another; you cannot do either without a knowledge of who we are loving. The whole revelation of God is giving us knowledge of who he is so that we would love him. Doctrine or the teaching of the Word causes us to love God, and causes us to love him in a more deeper and significant way.

So look at verse 25 with this in mind, "**Oh righteous Father.**" Notice this is doctrine. This is something that the world does not know or does not accept about God. He is all righteous. He is upright and holy and just. And this attribute describes all his other attributes. It describes his power. His power is ruled by his righteousness that means he will always do what is right and just. It speaks of his wisdom. He has the knowledge to plan all things in our lives so that rightness will prevail. His judgment is righteous. His mercy and love toward sinners is righteous. Because of what Jesus has done on the cross, he is right in loving those who trust in Jesus Christ. In a world where people turn from the left and to the right, I can bank on the righteousness of God. He will always be true to his word. He will always work out all things for the good of his people and for his glory. He is righteous!

And we could park here for the rest of this afternoon and just talk about the glory of God being righteous. And what that would cause us to do is admire, be in awe, glory in him, and worship him. We would realize God is an all righteous God. God could be no other than righteous. But here is my point — that knowledge of God truly does change us. It truly does alter us, and it is meant to alter us.

And look how he goes on in this verse, "**O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.**" Look at the word here "know." Notice that Jesus divides the world into two — those that know the Father and those who do not know him. That is the division that exists today. Think of what the religious leaders are going to do that very night. They are going to take Christ and that will culminate in his crucifixion. And think of the hatred

they have for him in their hearts. The reason for that hatred is because they do not know God. They really do know Christ. Even the people we rub shoulders with at work or we know, we often ask — how can they do the things that they do, and really not care about others or God? And it is right here in the passage — they do not know God. The knowing here is more than knowledge but a deep abiding relationship, but it is not less than knowing because that knowing is part and parcel of the relationship.

And here is what the disciples knew — that Jesus was sent by the Father. Now they did not have a greater knowledge of it until after his death and resurrection, but they realize that he was sent by God the Father. And that is what we know. We see the extreme love of God in Christ Jesus. It causes us or should cause us to love like God and Christ have loved us. It creates that caring community, that self-forgetfulness, and humble love toward others. And we all have been recipients of that love, and we all have given that to others in the church. And the reason is because of the knowing of our great and loving God and our great and loving Saviour. Think of the way we love our spouse or children or employer or fellow believer is because we have been informed by God in how to love them, how to think about them, how to truly be Christ-centred in our love for others. It is so different than the self-centred love of the world.

Now as I mentioned many believe that doctrine creates a cold and indifferent heart rather than a warm heart. And what they are talking about is the proud believer who is more in love with what they know rather than loving God. They are always ready to correct others and show where others are wrong. And we should be warned about wolves in sheep clothing, but often not warned about proud and unloving believers. You cannot be loving and proud at the same time. Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 8:1, **“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.”** Here was food offered to idols and some of the new believers thought it was wrong because they might of thought the meat was inhabited by demons, so they thought they were sinning against God if they partook. But here is the doctrinally astute believer that mocks and scorns the weaker brother for not eating this meat which is just meat. What is the problem? He doesn't know as much as he thinks he knows, and has not made that knowledge personal, seeing the love of God for such a sinner like him.

Remember, love is patient and kind, it is not arrogant or ruff or rude. Paul is not condemning knowledge in this passage but the cold and unfeeling and arrogance that knowledge can have when divorced from seeing and savouring the love that God has for sinners like us. We should be humbled and amazed by the doctrine of total depravity that God truly loved a person who wanted nothing to do with him. We should be amazed that God chose us, not because we are better but because he is merciful. We should be in awe that we have persevered in the faith, not because we are great but because of the One who has kept us and persevered us.

So loving Christ and even loving others can only come through a knowing of the Almighty. Think of it, there is more in this simple verse that should amaze us with the knowing what God is like than if God created a million worlds where various different creatures were inhabiting them. John 3:16 says, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** You want to manifest who God is? You want to be a more loving person?

Look to this knowledge of God. See who he is and his glorious and high and awesome love he has for us in Christ. It cannot help but change us.

2. We are to grow in loving God and one another. V. 26.

Our love can be incredibly fickle this side of heaven. We can love and sacrifice for others, and really give ourselves for the welfare and the joy of others not expecting anything in return — the way that Christ loved us, but then the next day our love wanes. It grows cold and we become distant and selfish. We might even rest in what we have done in our past. But again, as you look at love for God and others it is either going forward or backward. And the more we learn about the love of God, the more we realize that his love is so beyond us. We will never reach the height of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. And that might seem like bad news but it isn't, because it informs us that there is always so much more of God's love to revel in and enjoy and experience. There is new and glorious ways that we can constantly grow in the love of God. And God's desire and will for us, as we see in this prayer is not only to be loving but growing in the love of God.

So look at the beginning of this verse, "**I made know to them your name.**" Now again, the name here stands for who God is and what he has done and accomplished. And it is through the coming of Christ — his words and works — that we come to know the great God of love and grace and righteousness. If we want to know what God is like and be changed and transformed, it is by looking at the Son, because the Son is the imprint and the exact representation of the unseen God who is Spirit. Christ has made known the Father. Jesus has made known God.

But look how the verse continues, because the first half is past tense, but look at the progression, "**I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known.**" "I will" speaks of what Jesus will do in the future. Now what does that mean? And it could mean that Jesus will give direct revelation to the apostles who will then codify that revelation and write it down in what we call the New Testament. But he could also mean that through the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God and through the all-sufficient Word of God given that Jesus will continue to teach us. He will continue to manifest the Father to us. And think of the Scriptures not as a text book where we can only glean so much truth about a certain subject, but the Scriptures are the inexhaustible treasure of the knowledge of God. We can never plum the depths of glories of the Scriptures.

That means as believers we never arrive as far as knowing God. There is so much more to know and delight in. There is so much more to captivate our hearts and glory in God. Think of eternity, and think of who God is. He is infinite and we will never be infinite in power, wisdom, love, and being. And that means for all of eternity there will always be so much more to learn of God. And because sin will be eradicated, that knowledge will keep taking our breath away. We will see the true glory and awe of those truths about the God who sent Christ to live and die for me. And here God has left us a storehouse of treasure to know and increase our knowing. And the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit doesn't just give us the facts through preaching and teaching but causes us to see the glory of those facts so that there is a true knowing of God and a true loving of all that God is for us.

So look at the end of this verse, **“I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”** There is a purpose of God giving this knowledge. Again, it is not to stoke our egos or make us proud or look down on others with our vast comprehension of God. No, the whole is that the same love which the Father loves the Son might be in us. Now let me make a couple comments about this. One is that this is where worship enters in. This is why worship is not mechanical and cold and sullen or just going through the motions. This is why we delight in Christ, mourn over sin which is against God, rejoice in who Christ is — it is because through the knowledge of the holy One, God has implanted this love in us. When we come together to worship, this is not dead ritualism or just going through the motions, but worship that is inspired by love. Just like lovers we celebrate that Jesus is mine. We are amazed at his love for us and we grow in seeing that love for hell bound sinners like us, and that causes us to love God — to love Christ — it causes worship in spirit and in truth. That is love.

But true love for God that causes this worship also causes the work of love. As we love God it causes us to love others — intentionally, emotionally, physically — even if they do not deserve that love or deserve the exact opposite. Aren't you amazed when you come into a Christ-saturated congregation the love and patience and the forgiveness, and care, and sacrifice that takes place among the members when we look at the world and it is so selfish and full of resentment and getting even or whatever. What is the source? It is God. The love of God placed in the believer with its outward manifestation of loving the people of God is one of the clearest manifestations that we are his. Listen to 1 John 3:14, **“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”** How do I know I am a believer — that I am in Christ? By my love for those who are his. And he says something sobering, “Whoever does not love abides in death.” When you look at some who claim Christ and they constantly shred others apart or cause church division and splits and foster hatred, or could care less about the people of God or being with them, according to this verse you have to wonder about the state of their soul. One who is a believer will not only want to be with believers but will love those who are of the household of faith. Our coming together can be somber as we look at our hearts, but should be joyous — we come to worship the one we love, and we come to love those whom Christ loves!

Now you might struggle with loving an individual in the church, and even wish they might not be in the church, and maybe wonder why God has put them in the church. And let me say the reason why is the struggle to love more often than not is not easy. But that struggle is good for us, because the struggle causes us to use our spiritual muscles and think and ponder the love God has for a difficult person like me. And as we seek to love through tangible acts, it is incredible how often the right emotions of love also follow. Remember, love is not first and foremost a feeling. God commands us to love. When we do concrete acts of sacrifice and blessing to others it is amazing how the right feelings come. Let me encourage you to seek to know the love God has for us and love him by seeking to love others. We grow most in love many times not through the easy relationships, such as our best friend or grandchildren

or whatever, but through those difficult relationships. God is stretching us to love the same way that he has loved us. God really is that loving.

And you might still say there is no way that I can truly love so and so. There is a past of hurts or betrayal or whatever that I just cannot get past. But here is the encouragement and strength for you. You are not left to your own resources. You are not alone. Listen to the last four verses of this chapter, "**and I in them.**" Who is in us? Who realized that my situation and my love was so weak that he came right inside of us? And the answer is Jesus — through the person of the Holy Spirit. Therefore encourage your heart. God has not called us to an impossible task but knew what we needed most in order to love him and love others and that is himself. And that should give each one of us the impetus to go and give our lives for the welfare of others even when they do not deserve it. God is magnified and his gospel of love is exemplified. Praise God we have not come to the end of his love. And praise God we can grow in the love of Christ Jesus our Lord!