

**“The Spiritual Practice of Love”**  
**Sermon Series *Journey Through Lent* #3**  
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**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
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**(John 13:1-17, 34, 35)**

**Introduction.**

Have you ever noticed how we use the word “love” in the English language in many different ways to mean very different things? For example, I might say that I *love* ice cream – especially if it’s Mint Chocolate Chip made by the Graeter’s Ice Cream Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. (Check it out. If you’ve never had Graeter’s before, you’re really missing out on something special, especially if you can get Julie McBride to make you some of her homemade hot fudge sauce!) Or I might say, “I *love* March Madness and the excitement of college basketball this time of the year.” (How are your brackets doing? Mine are still pretty solid.)

What am I saying when I say I *love* ice cream, or I *love* March Madness? I’m really saying I like them a whole lot. It’s not love in the romantic sense of the word, or the love I have for my children and my grandchildren. In many ways the English language is very limited, and we use the one word “love” to mean many different things.

In his book *The Four Loves* C.S. Lewis pointed out that the Greek language actually has four different words which are translated “love,” and each of these words conveys a unique and different meaning. For example, if I want to say that I love ice cream, it would use the word *storge*. It’s the Greek word for love in the sense of affection, and it means that I have great affection for something or someone. There are other words for love in the Greek language which express different aspects of what love is all about. More on that later.

My point in all of this is that when we consider the spiritual practice of love, we need to make sure that we have clear in our minds what we’re really talking about. It’s not the kind of love, which is affection that simply likes something, or even someone, a great deal. Instead, it’s the kind of self-sacrificing love, the servant-kind-of-love that Jesus described and demonstrated in what He said and in what He did in the Upper Room. On the final night of His life and before His crucifixion that would take place the next day, Jesus presented an alternative view of love which runs completely counter to the culture we live in today. Let’s take a closer look.

## **I. Jesus' Teaching on Love.**

While Jesus was with His followers in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover, He said to them, “*A new commandment I give you that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*” (Jn. 13:34, 35).

The love of which Jesus spoke here isn't the kind of love we sometimes think of when we hear the word. I think that, more often than not, when we hear the word “love” we think of the emotion of romance. It's like the little boy who was asked how you can know if two people are in love, and he said, “If people are in love, when they go out to eat they just stare at each other, and their food gets cold. Other people who aren't in love care more about the food!” But the love Jesus had in mind here is more complex and much deeper than that.

As I mentioned previously, C.S. Lewis wrote this wonderful book in which he explored the meaning of the different faces of love - affection, friendship, erotic love, and the love of God. He explained that each of the different Greek words sheds a different light on human love and the love of God.

For example, there is *storge*, which I mentioned before. It's the love of affection. It's when you love something, like ice cream, or even a person, through the fondness of familiarity. The word can also mean the love of family – like the love of a parent for a child. There is also the Greek word *philia*, which is the love of friendship. It can also represent the love of a brother or a sister. Think of Philadelphia whose name means “the city of brotherly love.” (Of course, if you know anything about the sports fans in Philly, you know how they act and how harsh their criticism is of their sports teams. Maybe we should call Philadelphia “the city of brotherly *shove!*”)

Another Greek word for love is *eros*. It's the love of romance, and it can also include the passion of erotic love. It's the kind of love Adam had for Eve. In the book of Genesis when Adam saw Eve for the first time he said, “Hubba hubba, ding ding ding; you make my head spin like a washing machine!” (That's what the original Hebrew really says in Genesis 2. Just kidding.) Our first parents experienced a unique bond of erotic love that is to be reserved for marriage.

Then there is the word that is used here in our passage by Jesus in John 13. It's the Greek word *agape*, and it is a word that has an interesting history. *Agape* is a Greek word for love that was largely marginalized and rarely used in ancient literature, and it generally meant “benevolent kindness.” But when the OT Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the translators picked up this neglected word and used it to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, which meant “the steadfast love of the Lord.” They infused the word *agape* with new

meaning and gave it a new depth of understanding. Outside the Bible, the word *agape* appears only a few times in all of ancient literature.

For the next 300 years, until the time of Christ, the word *agape* was used by the Jews to describe the love of God for humanity – His *hesed*. However, when Jesus came along, He took this word and applied it not only to God's love for humanity but also to our love for other people. Jesus intensified the OT provision to love one's neighbor as oneself, and He called His followers to love even their enemies, just like Jesus did. "*Love one another.*"

## **II. Jesus' Example of Love.**

Then Jesus did something radical. He showed them an example of the kind of love He was talking about. The passage says, "... [Jesus] got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, wiping them with the towel that was wrapped around Him" (13:4, 5).

Jesus and His disciples had come to the Upper Room directly from the street. In dry weather the roads of Palestine were dusty, and in wet weather they were muddy. The shoes common people wore in the first century were sandals, which were simply leather soles held onto the foot by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust and the mud of the roads, and for that reason large water pots were always present at the door of a home in Palestine.

Usually a servant was there with a bowl and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in. However, since the meeting was held in secret for fear of the Jewish leaders, no servants were present. And none of the disciples was ready to volunteer for the task, because each of them would have considered it an admission of inferiority to all the others.

Sometime during the meal Jesus rose from the table. He removed His outer cloak, tied a towel around His waist, and He began to perform the task of the servant who wasn't there. It was a voluntary humiliation that rebuked the pride of the disciples. Perhaps it even accentuated the tension of the situation, because Luke tells us that when the disciples entered the Upper Room, they had been arguing among themselves about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom (Lk. 22:24).

Author Scott Peck said that he believed the washing of the disciples' feet is one of the most significant events in the life of Jesus. He writes, "Until that moment the whole point of things [in the world] had been for someone to get on top, and once he had gotten on top to stay on top or else attempt to get farther up. But here this man already on top - who was rabbi, teacher, master - suddenly got down on the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers. In that one act Jesus

symbolically overturned the whole social order. Hardly comprehending what was happening, even his own disciples were almost horrified by his behavior."<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever had someone wash your feet? It's a rather embarrassing experience. I remember several years ago during Holy Week a young man named John in the church I served in Boulder, Colorado, made an appointment to see me. When he arrived, I noticed that he brought with him a thermos of warm water, a plastic bowl and a towel. He told me that someone told him once that Holy Week was the busiest time of the year for a pastor, and we wanted to wash my feet as an expression of His support for what I was doing.

I was blown away. Immediately I started thinking, "But my feet are dirty! Gee, I hope they don't smell too much. And my feet are really ticklish, too!" But how could I refuse such a kind offer? So I let John wash my feet, and I took in the experience with a renewed appreciation for what Jesus did for the disciples. This young man's kind act ministered to me in a wonderful way that Holy Week, and I'll never forget His humble act of service.

When he was finished, John said to me, "You know, you should wash your wife's feet on Mother's Day." So I did the next month on Mother's Day, because I had come to see what a blessing John had been to me, and I wanted to give that same blessing to Lorie as well.

Jesus gave a live demonstration to His disciples about what the spiritual practice of love looks like when He washed their dirty feet. In this simple gesture, Jesus explained that humility and service are at the heart of godly love. And He proclaimed the truth that if we really want to love like Jesus then we need to be willing to perform even the most unpleasant of tasks in order to serve the people around us if that is what's needed the most. The servant is not above his/her master, and you and I should follow the example of Christ.

### **III. Jesus' Sacrifice of Love.**

Later on in the Upper Room Discourse in John 15, Jesus said these prophetic words, "*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends*" (Jn. 15:13). And Jesus went on to demonstrate the kind of *agape* love He was talking about when we went to the Cross and laid down His life. He paid the penalty for our sins, and He bore the punishment we deserve.

In his book *The Cross of Christ*, John R.W. Stott says that the interpretation of Jesus' death as a sacrifice is imbedded in every important type of teaching in the NT.<sup>2</sup> Words and idioms for sacrifice are numerous and widespread in the pages of the Bible. Sometimes the reference is unambiguous, like when Paul said that Christ "*gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*" (Eph.

5:2). At other times, the allusion is less direct, like when the Bible says that Christ “*gave Himself,*” or He “*offered Himself*” for us (see Gal. 1:4 and Heb. 9:14).

The background for all this language in the NT about Jesus and His sacrifice is the sacrificial system in the OT which spelled out what was required in the Law to atone for the sins of the people of Israel. Close your eyes, and picture this scene in your mind from the time of Christ. Two goats without blemish stand before the high priest in the bright Middle Eastern sun. Lots are cast, and the priest slowly leads one to the altar to be killed as a sin offering for the people, and its blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. This goat is a sacrifice.

The other goat, known as the scapegoat, portrays another truth. The priest places both of his hands on its forehead and confesses the sins of Israel. Then the goat is led out into the desert and turned loose. As it wanders away, never to be seen again, it symbolically takes the sins of Israel away with it. It is gone, and the people are reconciled to God. This goat is a substitute.

Both of these animals are pictures of what Christ would do for us. The cross became the upright altar, where the Lamb of God gave His life as a sacrifice for sin. And what the scapegoat symbolically portrayed for Israel – namely the removal of their sins – Jesus fulfilled in reality when He became our substitute. He was crucified outside the city gates on the hill of Calvary. And because of our identification with Jesus, our sins have been taken away completely. Two goats representing two truths – sacrifice and substitution. Both were fulfilled in Jesus when He died on the cross and made atonement for our sins.<sup>3</sup>

All the sacrifices that were required in the OT were a foreshadowing of the time when Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, would come and make the ultimate sacrifice once and for all time. On the cross of Calvary Jesus paid for the sins of His people by shedding of His blood. The sinless Son of God died the sinner’s death, and He sacrificed Himself so we could be reconciled to God, reconciled to ourselves, and reconciled to one another. That is what the *agape* love of God is all about.

“*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*” The question that Jesus’ words in John 15 leaves me with is this: “Am I willing to lay down my life and sacrifice myself – my wants, my needs, my agenda – for others out of my love for God the way Jesus did?” If not, why not? And what would it take for me to develop a greater capacity for this kind of sacrificial love for the people around me? How can I engage in the spiritual practice of love like Jesus did this week?

## **Conclusion.**

As I close, I want to share a story with you. Many years ago my family and I spent some time in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, on a vacation. The town makes two boasts – it claims to be the final resting place of Doc Holiday, the gun slinger,

and it also claims to be the largest natural hot water spring in the state. The water is so hot at Glenwood Springs that they have to cool it down to about 105 degrees.

Once you get in, it's delightful. But getting to the pool is the tricky part in the wintertime. You change in a warm dressing room, but then there is about a 50-foot dash through sub-freezing temperature to reach the steam-shrouded pool. Just as you prepare to open the door and brave the elements, there's a sign which advises wisely, "Don't forget your towel." That's a phrase that continues to haunt me as I think about this passage in John 13 and as I think about the spiritual practice of love.

"Don't forget your towel" as you go to your home and live with your family - love your wife, husband, children, and parents. "Don't forget your towel" as tomorrow you return to your place of work, or go to school, or play in the band. Ask yourself, "What can I do to serve these people? How can I be Christ to them?"

"Don't forget your towel" as you drive the streets of Winston-Salem, when you're stuck at a light or someone cuts you off in traffic. "Don't forget your towel" when you see the needs of the poor and think about how much God has given you. "Don't forget your towel wherever you go" and practice the spiritual discipline of love during this season of Lent and throughout the year. Jesus left us this example, and He urges us to follow it. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*, p. 293.

<sup>2</sup>John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 134ff.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from *Our Daily Bread*, March 29, 2001.