

THE WAY OF LOVE

SERIES: THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE

By Danny Hall

In this message we've come to the last part of Jesus' introduction to the Upper Room Discourse in John 13. Jesus is portraying for the disciples in concrete form what true servant leadership is all about in the kingdom of God. He demonstrates it by washing their feet, and his teaching flows out of that act.

In this final section Jesus will give them a simple yet profound command that will bring together all the strands of what he is trying to get them to see and set up the teaching that will follow. This command is sandwiched between interactions he has with two of his disciples, Judas and Simon Peter. In all of this John paints a portrait of what Jesus calls us to be and do as the people of God.

Imagine taking a survey of people on the street. You ask them, "What do you think of when you hear the words 'evangelical Christian'?" You would certainly get a variety of responses, many of which might include reference to the religious right. I wonder, however, how often you would hear words like "love" or "grace." Now, sometimes evangelical Christians are badly characterized by the media, but in fact we have projected an image to the world that is anything but loving and gracious. We have been noted more often for what we are against than for what we are in favor of. How we are perceived in our world, while not conclusive, ought to be telling us something as we confront who we are as the people of God.

That is precisely the point that Jesus is trying to make to his disciples in the final moments he has with them. Let's read John 13:21-38:

When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one He was speaking. There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore gestured to him, and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking." He, leaning back thus on Jesus' breast, said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus therefore answered, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him." So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. And after the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Jesus therefore said to him, "What you do, do quickly." Now no one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him. For some were supposing, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to him, "Buy the things we have need of for the feast"; or else, that he should give something to the poor. And so after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night.

When therefore he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You shall seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, I now say to you also, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow Me now; but you shall follow later." Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for You." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for Me? Truly, Truly, I say to you, a cock shall not crow, until you deny Me three times."

We'll first examine the interactions Jesus has with Judas and Peter, and then come back to the command he gives between them. These two interactions are paradigms for some of the problems that you and I have in following Jesus' command. Let's begin with Judas.

The path of self-preservation

Jesus makes a pronouncement to the disciples that one of them is going to betray him, and there is this buzz of incredulity among them. "Who could do this?" "Is it I?" It strikes them at the core. They have been together with him for more than three years, walking, eating, teaching, and ministering side by side--and now Jesus declares that one of them is a traitor? You can imagine what a shock that would be. Peter is so anxious to know who it is that he gets John, who is closest to Jesus, to try to find out. Jesus tells John, "It's the one I give the morsel to." But somehow John himself doesn't comprehend it, because, as he writes later, no one understands what Jesus means when he says to Judas, "What you do, do quickly."

I take Judas as a prime example of someone caught in the seductive power of self-preservation. The more I've thought about this story, the more it seems as if Judas is the only disciple who really understands certain things at this point. The rest of the disciples are lost in their excitement about Jesus' becoming the king of national Israel. They are looking forward to the day when he will take his throne as predicted in the Old Testament, and they, his closest friends, will assume important and distinguished roles in his new kingdom. The fact that Judas is the treasurer of the group suggests that he may be the most educated or one of the sharpest men in the group. Somehow he has figured out that things aren't going as the others think they are going. The clouds are darkening, the opposition is rising; every step they take there is more hostility from the leaders. And while the Old-Testament prophecies speak of the Messiah as a ruler, and the rest of the disciples seem to think that Jesus is the one, Judas is beginning to think maybe it's not going to happen.

So he is starting to hedge his bets. He makes a pact with those who are trying to bring Jesus down, sells his soul to the devil, in order to cover himself. "If this movement we've got going with Jesus comes crashing down around us, where am I going to be?" He is driven by the need to protect himself. Judas commits what I think is one of the ultimate forms of blasphemy toward God, believing the lie that he knows better than God how to preserve his own life.

The irony is where Judas ends up. When he realizes the weight of the treachery that he has committed and all that has transpired because of it, he goes from a sense of needing to protect himself to despair and ultimately to suicide. John makes a pregnant statement: "And after receiving the morsel he went out immediately; and it was night." Certainly there is a sense in which under cover of darkness Judas commits these acts of treachery. But even more powerful is the metaphor of "the dark night of the soul" as he walks away from the one he has been following for three years, because he is convinced he has to do this for himself.

Judas is a paradigm for the temptation we have as believers to spend a lot of our energy trying to be safe in our faith. It manifests itself in all kinds of ways. At our men's retreat John Fischer taught from his new book, *Fearless Faith* (1). He drew a picture for us from his own experience as a Christian musician in the seventies, when the Christian music industry was born, and around that the Christian book industry and so on. He reminded us that some of all that has been driven by our desire to create a safe world for ourselves. He made reference to what has always been one of my pet peeves in the evangelical world, the *Christian Yellow Pages*. (If you have an ad in it for your business, I apologize; I don't want to disparage you.) When I first saw the *Christian Yellow Pages* fifteen or twenty years ago, all kinds of alarm bells went off in my head. It seemed to be about Christians' going only to Christian businesses, sending their children only to Christian schools, engaging only in Christian recreational programs, and so on. This Christian subculture developed on the basis of the notion of a big, bad world out there from which we will withdraw into a cocoon where we can live safely. This philosophy has allowed us to become so inbred and separated from the world that we don't even know how to reach it any longer.

In fact, as John Fischer pointed out to us, the very nature of faith is that it is dangerous. What was going to

happen to these disciples was indeed difficult. Some of them would die for their faith. But they were never going to be able to get where God wanted them to be by focusing on their own self-preservation.

If Judas is a paradigm of this seductive idea of self-preservation, Peter illustrates another principle.

The path of self-effort

I love Peter in this phase of his life because he's always putting it on the line and goofing up, so he's a lot like many of us. Peter is a picture of the futility of trusting in one's own weak abilities. I don't believe Peter even hears the new command Jesus gives the disciples to love one another. He is really upset by this statement Jesus has made that someone is going to betray him. He pokes John and says, "Find out who it is, find out who it is!" Jesus goes on to declare that he is going somewhere they can't go, and Peter thinks, "Now wait a minute! I know I'm not going to be the traitor!" So he digs in his heels in his firm conviction and says, "Jesus, I'm going with you all the way. No matter what you say, I'm telling you I'm going with you! I'll lay down my life for you!" Jesus very calmly looks at him and says, "Will you, Peter? Before the rooster crows, you are going to deny me three times."

Peter, in all of this buzz of worrying about who the traitor is and reaffirming his own ability to trust Jesus, is an example of another way that we live out our Christian lives. We try to pick ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps and say, "I am going to do it for God!" Every time we come to a frustrating end, we redouble our efforts and resolve, "This time I'm going to make it--I'm going to show up at church on time this Sunday. I'm going to put more money in the plate when it comes by. I'm going to be nicer to my boss." It's not that the things that we are resolving to do are evil, but this reflects a sense that the nature of following Christ is all about how much commitment and sheer will to go forward for God we can stir up in ourselves.

Peter's motives are noble; he does want to serve Jesus. But he hasn't learned about his own frailty and need for grace, and he doesn't yet fully understand what Jesus has come to do. In spite of all these efforts to serve Jesus, Peter will fall flat on his face in just a few hours. He whacks off someone's ear with a sword trying to defend Jesus, and a little later he runs cowering and lies to a girl who asks him if he knows Jesus. He goes from one extreme to the other, because at this point in Peter's life it's all just an act of his flesh. He doesn't understand that the call God places on us is to trust his grace and provision.

In the chapters immediately following this one, which we are going to study in subsequent messages, Jesus is going to start telling them about the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives. He is going to talk to them about trusting God's grace and God's leadership through the resources that he will place within them. But at this point Peter has no understanding of that.

So many of us order our Christian lives the way Peter does at this stage. We think that the key to Christian success is adding more things to do for God and somehow ratcheting up our will to follow him. We must come to understand our need for God's grace, and we must come to trust the resources Christ has put in us, the very presence of God living in and through us in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In between those pictures of Judas and Peter, Jesus gives the disciples some insight about what it means to be followers of his. Let's go back to the middle of this passage and look at the new command that he gives.

The command to love one another

After Judas departs to betray him, Jesus says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." The events that will lead to the glory of God, to the cross and resurrection, are being put in motion with Judas' leaving. He reminds them that he is getting ready to take on something that they cannot share with him as he looks toward the cross, which they do not yet understand.

So thinking about the fact that he is about to leave them and that they are going to have to carry on, what does he tell them to do? He says, “This is a new commandment I give you: love one another.” It’s interesting to me that he has been with them for more than three years now, and he calls this a new commandment. Do you think he has ever talked to them about love before? Certainly he has demonstrated it. He has given all kinds of teaching to introduce them to the true nature of the kingdom of God as a spiritual kingdom that he will head. He has tried to enlarge their theological understanding of who God is and what life is about. I think he calls this a new commandment because he is summarizing all of what he has been teaching. He is saying to them, “if there is anything you get out of what I have been teaching you, it should be this one thing, this new commandment: love one another.”

Notice what he says will happen: “By this all men will know that you are My disciples.” How will the kingdom of God be ushered in? Not by the sword, not by skillful ministry, not by our ability to construct kingdom life. People will know that we are disciples of Christ when we love one another. We are not going to be able to build the kingdom of God any other way.

The command to love is a reflection of God’s own heart. Our living in love with one another is a picture of God’s love and grace. We show those who are in the world that forgiveness is possible and real, that grace can be extended to them, that there is a God of love who cares deeply for them, by mirroring that love.

If the command to love establishes a community of people who are called on to reflect the character of God to the world, why don’t we see this more often?

I mentioned in the last message that when Ginger and I first arrived in Vienna, Austria as missionaries back in 1984, we knew only two couples, and those couples were at war with each other. We got dragged right into the middle of it. I wish that was the only difficult thing we had to face in that Christian community, where we lived for thirteen years.

Vienna is an eclectic cultural mix. Many international organizations are headquartered there, so there are many international businessmen, and almost every country around the world has a larger than normal diplomatic staff at its Viennese embassy. That was true of the U.S. embassy. Vienna is also one of the three permanent sites of the United Nations, so people from all over the world work there. Many of the people are posted in Vienna for only two to five years, so there is constant upheaval and change.

Moving to a different culture is very stressful. A lot of things associated with it are complicated, such as learning the language, and even learning something as easy as going to the bank. They have little ATM machines called *Bankomats* in Austria. There are no English translations, so you are afraid when you push the buttons that you are buying a car or something. One of the things we noticed was that usually it was the wives who took the brunt of the stress. Most of the families in the international community were there because of the husband’s job. So the men would go off to work every day, and the wives would have to figure out how to get kids in school and deal with the grocery shopping and the banking and so on.

We noticed that there was a general assumption in the international diplomatic community that this was not an easy thing. So when you moved into the city, there was a lot of support. Women who knew the ropes a little bit would take new women out to show them how to buy their groceries and all that kind of thing. That was true throughout the international community--except in the missionary community. Now there was some help and support there, but one of the things we saw was a lot of judgmentalism. In the diplomatic community, if you were struggling there would be understanding that things were hard. In the missionary community, if you were struggling people would say, “Buck up. You are out there serving Jesus, so trust God.” I heard people say, “Trust God,” so much I was sick of those two words. It was hard. If you didn’t learn the language quite as fast as someone else, or if you didn’t get immersed in the culture quite as deeply as they thought you ought to, there was this constant tenor of judgment. Ginger and I grew horribly tired of it after awhile.

One of the questions I am most frequently asked by students in the college ministry is, “Why are my non-Christian friends easier to get along with than my Christian friends?” Somewhere we’ve got it all wrong. We

are so busy doing things for God to accomplish our spiritual growth, and we are so insecure and self-protective spiritually, that grace and love are pushed out to the margins. This is exactly 180 degrees opposite of the command that Jesus gave to his disciples as he prepared to leave this earth: “Love one another, and by this all men will know that you are my disciples.” They are not going to know we are disciples because we have the most impressive buildings or the most talented music leaders or the best speakers. They are not going to know we are disciples because we somehow manage to garner political clout through our force of will. Most the time, as I said, we present ourselves by what we are *against* in our culture. We are not known as people of grace and love. But this is how Jesus says we are going to build the kingdom of God.

So if chapter 13 is an introduction to Jesus’ larger teaching of what it means to be true spiritual leaders, I suggest that following Jesus and becoming a spiritual leader begin with the simple command, “Love one another.” As leaders in God’s kingdom, we cannot be motivated by either self-protection or by confidence in our own flesh. We must reconsider our approach to living out our faith. We must not be afraid, but trusting. The calling to love one another defines for us what our attitude toward church ought to be. We are called to be totally committed to each other’s success. Coming to church is not about what we get out of it. It is about what we give to the body of Christ as we love one another.

We tend to define spiritual progress by things like discovering what our spiritual gifts are and using them. Now of course I am not against that idea. But if you take a close look not only at this command of Jesus, but even at the teachings of Paul, what you find is that the prevailing descriptions of what the community of faith should be are in the “one another” passages. There are ten or twelve of those in the New Testament. Look them up. Love one another, serve one another, honor one another, admonish one another, and so on. The church as a powerful witness to God’s grace is about how you and I treat one another in the family of God. It becomes the foundation of our message to the world. It gives us a place to grow strong in our faith, trusting in the resources God has placed within us, relying on one another for encouragement and prayer and support, and working side by side with one another. When we have all that, we can get out of this silly game of playing church, and walk out into our community and make a difference. That’s what Jesus wants his people to do.

Notes

(1) John Fischer, *Fearless Faith*, © 2002, Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, OR.

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4th Message

Danny Hall

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[Back to Index page](#)

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