

THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

SERIES: PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

By Danny Hall

If we are honest, we have to admit that we can have many different motivations for serving God, even for going to church. Sometimes we just want to appear respectable. Sometimes we want to be noticed. If people give us a pat on the back, we feel proud of ourselves. Sometimes there are emotional holes in our lives that we are trying to fill up, and if we do something for God, then we feel better about ourselves. The truth is that we are frail and needy, so what motivates us is always in play.

In our study of the Upper Room Discourse, we've come now to a section in which Jesus speaks to the motivations of the disciples' hearts. For it is of absolute importance that their motivations be right. Consider for a moment the juxtaposition of Jesus' motives and those of his disciples. Jesus has left all of heaven's glory to become a man, and he is now on the eve of going to the cross, in the ultimate giving of himself. The disciples, on the other hand, have been totally self-absorbed at times. They have been excited about achieving greatness in God's kingdom. They couldn't wait for Jesus to get to the throne so they could enjoy positions of privilege. They have bickered among themselves over who would get to sit at his right hand. They've had all kinds of self-serving motives for following him. But Jesus has been demonstrating to them the true motivations and true focus of the kingdom of God.

We've seen as we worked our way through the Upper Room Discourse that Jesus undermined the disciples' ambition and self-centeredness through the humbling experience of his washing their feet at the Passover meal, before he began his teaching. We've seen him bring them to a point of vulnerability, of questioning themselves. We've seen him then establish their security in their eternal relationship with him and in the adequacy of his own ongoing presence with them through the Holy Spirit. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4735) we saw him promise, through the beautiful picture of the vine and the branches, that the Father who loved them would graciously continue to actively work in their lives to grow them up into the people he wanted them to be, into leaders in his kingdom and servants of all.

Jesus now continues to fill out the picture of the vine and the branches as he turns his focus to the essential motivating factor and the essential commission of the people of God in John 15:9-17. He mentioned in 15:1-8 that part of what happens when God does his work in us is that our lives bear more and more fruit, until they bear "much fruit." Now he begins to describe the epitome of that fruit: love. This is not love as humans understand it but love as God himself demonstrates to us, and then transfers from us to others. Let's read the text:

"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also 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. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you. This I command you, that you love one another."

Jesus wants to further refine the disciples' thinking about what it means to be leaders in his kingdom. He draws their attention to the love of God and how it affects the way they live out their faith. The starting point for effective leadership in God's kingdom is to rest in God's love.

Resting in God's love

Verse 9: "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love." This is an amazing, radical, incredible statement! The very love that holds the Godhead together, that is, the love that the Father has for the Son, is bestowed on us! That is something we can hardly get our minds and hearts around. The pure, immeasurable, indescribable love that exists in God himself as his very nature, has been given to us!

The command that flows out of this is to abide in this love, to rest in it, to live in it. The idea of abiding in something, as we talked about in the last message, is the idea of dwelling or living in it. It speaks of the vital connection that we have with Christ. The command is to maintain that vital connection, to keep resting in the love that God has for us.

Now, how do we do that? In verse 10 Jesus says, “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.” Our obedience flows out of this love connection to God, but it also sustains it. Obedience keeps us vitally connected through Christ to God. And resting in turn in that immeasurable, unspeakable love that he has for us, our hearts are tuned to obey him, to submit to his lordship in our lives, to follow him with our whole being. It’s a self-reinforcing cycle.

I want to clarify that we do not earn God’s love through our obedience. In the second half of this verse Jesus says, “Just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love.” We know that Jesus didn’t earn the Father’s love by keeping his commandments. Rather, keeping them was a demonstration of his reliance on the Father’s loving care for him. Obedience that flows out of love is a theme that keeps coming up over and over and over again in this teaching of Jesus. Our obedience demonstrates our vital connection to Christ’s love as Christ’s obedience demonstrates his vital connection with the Father.

Now, again, we have many different motivations for obeying God. We all understand this idea from various relational spheres—marriage, deep friendships, parent-child relationships. We all know what it feels like to do something for someone because if we don’t, we’re going to get nagged to death! Perhaps we do something for someone out of a sense of duty. Or we do something for someone because then maybe they will reciprocate by doing something for us. But what Jesus wants us to understand is that obedience to God flows out of unconditional surrender to him, out of love. And we even know what that feels like. There are times when we choose to do something for someone out of a completely open heart for them. That is the kind of motivation that Jesus is calling us to—a deep-seated love that reciprocates God’s love for us.

Jesus goes on to say that when we do that, something wonderful happens. Look at verse 11: “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” The result of this obedience-love connection is that the joy of Christ will be in us and our own joy will become full. We look for joy and peace and happiness in all kinds of things. Many experiences excite and entice us. But our hearts long for deep joy, a profound sense of satisfaction at the core of our being. Jesus says we aren’t going to find that in attaining some elevated position. We aren’t going to find it in some sense of accomplishment, even if it’s in the church. We are going to find that deep sense of joy and satisfaction when we obey Christ out of love, when our vital connection to him motivates us to live sacrificially for him and for others.

Now in the next section, verses 12-17, Jesus delineates for the disciples and for us the focus of kingdom living and the first real step of spiritual leadership, of expanding and building God’s kingdom. That is loving one another.

Loving one another

Verse 12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” He repeats this command in verse 17. This is the essence of being a follower of Jesus. Notice, he doesn’t suggest, “If you follow me, it would be really good if you all got along with each other.” No, to these disciples who have been bickering, sometimes suspicious of one another, even angry with one another, Jesus says, “Here is my *command* to you: love one another.”

Why is this so important? There are at least a couple of reasons. First of all, Christ is about to leave and go back to the Father, and he will then take up residence through the Spirit in his followers and in the community of faith that he is establishing. So in a real sense what the world will see of Jesus is the community of faith he is establishing and leaving behind. The church is the essential witness to the reality of Jesus in the world. It may not seem fair, but the truth of it is that there are many people out there who are making decisions about God by what they see in your life. That may be a dumb thing for them to do, but it is true, because the visible presence of Christ in our world is the church, his body. So what do they see? Do they see love?

Another reason this command to love one another is so important is that Jesus knows exactly what kind of world he is sending the disciples out into. In fact the verses that follow, which we’ll look at in the next message, are filled with

promises that when they follow him the world is going to oppose them. They will be persecuted. They will be kicked out of the synagogue, and they may have to give their lives for his sake. So how will they be able to live out their faith in that very hostile environment? They'll do that by loving one another in a community of faith, and out of that context of strength and growth and nurture and support, they will be able to fight the spiritual battles that they are called to engage in out in the world.

So the command to love one another is essential for the establishment and expansion of God's kingdom, both in being a witness to the world of the presence of Christ and his love among us, and in supplying the power to be a stable and growing community whose members seek to go out into the world and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus defines the nature of that love as total sacrifice. Verses 13-14: "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends, if you do what I command you." This supernatural love that is part of the very character of God is by its nature sacrificial. It offers all of itself to meet the need of its object. About the same time that John wrote this gospel, he wrote the letter of 1 John. It's very difficult to understand 1 John apart from the Upper Room Discourse. So much of John's words of encouragement to the church at large in 1 John are drawn directly out of what he learned from Jesus the night before he died. In 1 John 4:7-11 John says this:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation [atoning sacrifice] for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Reflecting back on this teaching of Jesus, John understands that the true nature of love is sacrifice. It is demonstrated in Christ's giving of his life for our sins. This is the ultimate example of what it means to love. So if we are to be followers of Christ and leaders in his kingdom, those who will expand his kingdom for his glory, we must be people who are willing to sacrifice ourselves for one another, to give ourselves wholly and completely for the good of those in the body of Christ, and by that to extend love out into our world.

This love flows from a new kind of relationship with Jesus.

Friends with Jesus, appointed by him

Notice how he describes it in verses 14-15: "You are My friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." The first aspect of this new relationship is that those of us who walk in obedience to Christ, whose lives are yielded to his lordship, who are abiding and resting in his love, are now called his friends. How marvelous and incredible! That friendship, Jesus says, is in a whole different category of relationship from slavery. The master says to his slave, "Go do this," and he simply does it without asking questions. As Jesus' friends, we are given commands, but he has disclosed to us the things he has heard from his Father.

There are a few television shows that I really like, and one of them is *West Wing*. In the immediate circle around the president, whenever there is a particularly sensitive piece of information or policy that one member has not yet been told about, there is a figure of speech the others use to let that person in on it. They say, "Are you ready to come inside?"

That's really what Jesus is saying to the disciples and to us. "Are you ready to come inside? I'm going to disclose to you all of what the Father has taught me. I'm going to expand your understanding of who God is, who I am, and what God is doing in the world." We are invited to be participants in the very building of the kingdom of God, because we are friends of Jesus. We have God's incredibly rich word, the revelation of who he is, and his Spirit opens our understanding. We come to know more and more about God, about who Christ is, and about how we fit into his kingdom. We are invited in as his friends.

Another aspect of this new relationship is that we are his chosen and appointed ones. Verse 16a: "You did not choose

Me, but I chose you, and appointed you. . . .” We have been invited, recruited, if you will, by Christ himself to be a part of what he is doing. God chooses us to be his followers and appoints us to work that matters in his kingdom.

We are therefore to bear fruit that remains. Jesus continues in verse 16b: “That you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you.” As the life of Christ continues to grow and blossom within us, that life of Christ will touch other lives. The grace and glory and love of Christ will be extended from person to person as Christ is formed in us and we live out our life of faith in him.

This is already the third time in this discourse that Jesus has said, “Whatever you ask of the Father in My name, he will give it to you.” Here he says it in the context of his commissioning us to go and bear fruit. What I think he means is this: When we are vitally connected to Christ, living in that love relationship, we obey him and choose to follow him. He appoints us as his friends and commissions us to go out in the world and serve him, as we love one another and represent Christ to this world. And when we are carrying out that commission, he will completely and fully supply every resource we need for what he has called us to do. This is reminiscent of the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:24: “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.” Jesus never calls us to a task that he does not give us the resources to fulfill. He explicitly promises that if we call on the Father in the moment of challenge as we live out our faith, seeking to trust him for the resources to obey him, he will supply them through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is going to give us more detail on that a little farther on in the discourse.

So the essential starting point for following Christ is to rest in his love. Out of the security of that love, we obey him, living out our calling as the people of God. Jesus invites us into his inner circle as his friends and commissions us. And his command to us in all of this, to demonstrate his presence in this world, is to love one another. Verse 17: “This I command you, that you love one another.”

What’s at stake here? The world is desperately hungry to see real love in action. People all around us are hurting. They are longing to figure out what life is all about. They need the kind of connections that touch them at the deepest part of their soul. The neediness of the world screams out all around us, and you and I have been called to demonstrate the wonderfully complete adequacy of Christ to meet the deepest needs as we exemplify his love one for another. The society in which we live is not very receptive to being argued into the kingdom of God, but it is very ready to see Jesus demonstrated in real life. And we have an incredible opportunity as the body of Christ to live out the glory of who Jesus is.

How do we apply this?

Overcoming obstacles to love

It isn’t easy. We must overcome the things that separate us, the cliques and comfort zones that we have within our church family. My guess is that there are probably many people in church whom you don’t know at all. And I’m embarrassed to say that it’s true of me. We are called to love each other sacrificially, giving up ourselves for each other. That requires of us a level of engagement with one another that we have not even begun to move toward in most cases.

In his fine book *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee, the pastor of Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas (1), lists three major hurdles in our society that we have to overcome to really be the kind of loving community that we need to be: individualism, isolation, and consumerism. These are huge parts of our culture that stand as obstacles to our being the body of Christ and loving one another.

The American ideal of individualism has run to the nth degree. It’s all about me, my rights, my success, my happiness. The drive to go after whatever I want has led to the breakdown of a sense of community.

In the midst of our rush to go after all that the world has to offer, we find ourselves more and more isolated. We move through a sea of faces; we pass people in the grocery store and at the bank and at work, but we can’t call them by name. Most of us don’t even know our neighbors. In the midst of crowds of people, there is a sense of loneliness and aloneness that permeates our culture. That too is an enormous barrier to having a sense of community.

And finally, we are so enamored with the material goods of this earth. Much of our time and energy are directed toward

consuming the latest things. That also is a barrier to our ability to relate and be the body of Christ.

I include myself in this. I have my “toys” that I like. I have my privacy that I want to protect. I have my individualistic goals that I want to meet. But the call of Christ, the compelling command that he gives us as the people who will expand and lead his kingdom, is this: we are to trust the resources that he promises and step out in faith, be men and women who will truly connect and engage and love one another, and thereby demonstrate to the world the incredible power and presence of Christ.

In the conclusion of *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee tells a story about his son that illustrates this principle:

“I have a son who was born without a left hand. One day in Sunday school the teacher was talking with the children about the church. To illustrate her point she folded her hands together and said, “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and see all the people.” She asked the class to do it along with her, obviously not thinking about my son’s inability to pull this exercise off. In the next moment it dawned on her that my son could not join in, but before she could do anything about it, the little boy next to my son, a friend of his from the time they were babies, reached out his left hand and said, ‘Let’s do it together.’ The two boys proceeded to join their hands together to make the church and the steeple. This hand exercise should never be done again by an individual, because the church is not a collection of individuals but the one body of Christ.” (2)

NOTES

(1) Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, © 2001, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI.

(2) Frazee, P. 242.

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John 15:9-17

8th Message

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