

John 15:1-17

Calvary Love

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends – v. 13.

This section of John's gospel is referred to by some as the inner sanctuary. That's actually the title of a book on my shelf that deals with the section of John's gospel that begins back in chp. 13 and runs through chp. 16. The Inner Sanctuary – the idea behind such a title or theme is that this is Christ's most intimate discourse with His disciples.

The shadow of the cross looms large over Him during this discourse. He's very aware that His hour was upon Him. Before long He would be fervently praying in the garden of Gethsemane, pleading with His Father that if there was any way possible for the cup He was about to drink might pass from Him then let it pass while at the same time yielding to His Father's will in the matter.

In this intimate discourse Christ is placing a strong emphasis throughout these verses of chp. 15 on the importance of His disciples bearing fruit.

- *Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit (v. 2).*
- *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me (v. 4).*
- *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing (v. 5).*
- *Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples (v. 8).*
- *Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain (v. 16).*

You see the emphasis on bearing fruit, being purged in order to bring forth more fruit, the Father being glorified by much fruit. And this fruit is lasting fruit and apart from such fruit bearing a professing Christian becomes the kind of isolated branch that is gathered to be burned.

You undoubtedly saw also the very close connection between fruit bearing and abiding in Christ. That's pretty much the key to it. *As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. (v. 4).*

It's in close connection with the idea of abiding in Christ that Christ becomes even more intimate and personal with His disciples when you come to v. 9. Now, for the first time in the chapter, the topic shifts from *fruit bearing* and *abiding* to Christ's *love*. Notice what it says: *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love*. Underscore that word *continue*. It's the same word in the original Greek language as the word *abide*.

Verse 12 further reflects this shift of topics: Joh 15:12 *This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* And then v. 13 you might say brings the discourse to something of a climax especially to those readers of John's gospel that know that Christ is headed toward Calvary's cross. His disciples, at that time, still hadn't grasped the meaning or importance of the cross so here is a statement by Christ that probably has the capacity to grip our hearts more tightly than it would have gripped the hearts of the disciples at the time Christ said it. Look at what it says in v. 13: *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*

The disciples at that particular moment in time would have viewed such a statement as being perhaps somewhat philosophical and especially hypothetical. Christ would soon prove the meaning of it by laying down His life for His friends and so would come to pass the words that John wrote earlier in this gospel, words that are some of my favorite in this gospel when back in 13:1 he writes *Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.*

Here, most clearly, then, is that greater love. A love that would take Christ to Calvary's cross, a love that would lead to salvation which in turn would lead to unbroken favor and fellowship for time and for eternity with Christ Himself. Now when I think of the constant need of my own heart and what is quite often the constant need of Christians generally, I think of the need for my own heart to be stormed by Christ's love.

I was thinking of John Bunyan's other great work *The Holy War*. If you've never read *The Holy War* you should. It's been suggested that had John Bunyan never written *Pilgrim's Progress*, then *The Holy War* would have gained the same preeminence among great Christian classics. *The Holy War* is similar to *Pilgrim's Progress* in that both are allegories that depict Christian experience. But *The Holy War* is different in that it describes in great detail the initial conversion of a sinner to Christ. The allegory takes the form of a city – the city of Mansoul that is created by Prince Immanuel but stolen by Diabalos, the devil.

The story goes into great detail in depicting the strong resistance of the city to the gospel trumpet of Prince Immanuel but eventually the gate of the city is stormed – Ear Gate in particular is stormed by the trumpet blast that God so loved the City of Mansoul that He gave His only begotten Son to die for Mansoul. Now when I contemplate that theological allegory the thought that strikes me is that Christians very often need their hearts stormed again and again by the reality of what Christ calls that greater love.

And when it comes to abiding in Christ you could say that His discourse becomes even more personal and more specifically focused when He says at the end of v. 9 *continue (abide) ye in my love*. So much, you know, depends on that. Your fruitfulness depends on that; your obedience depends on that; your joy depends on that; your progress in sanctification and warfare against sin depends on that. *Continue ye in my love*. Abide in this greater love. Abide in Calvary love. This morning I want to hammer home this

exhortation to Abide in Christ's love – Abiding in the greater love, that's my theme; or abiding in Calvary love. Or to use simply the words of Christ Himself:

Continue Ye In My Love

How do you do that? What does that mean and how is that done? That's the question I want to attempt to answer this morning. *Continue Ye in My Love*. Let's think first of all that if you're going to continue in Christ's love –

I. You Must Know How to Measure that Love

Christ is using a comparative term when He says *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend*. I see three things in Christ's statement that clearly indicate the greatness of His love.

Would you notice that He says *Greater love hath no **man** than this*. Christ is speaking these words as a man. He's making reference to the realm of men. And the very fact that He's speaking as a man and making a statement that pertains to men shows us how condescending He is in His love. He condescended so low as to become a man. Phil. 2:6-8 *Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*

If He would represent us then He must become one of us. This was the obligation He faced. Priests, you see, must be taken from among men. Specific mention is made of High Priests in Heb 5:1 *For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things [pertaining] to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins*. Do you see the qualifications and functions of a high priest? He's taken from among men and he's ordained for men.

The author of Hebrews makes the humanity of Christ a point of strong emphasis and necessity. Heb 2:17 *Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto [his] brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things [pertaining] to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.*

Focus on that word *behoved* – that's a word that means *to owe* or *to be bound*. He was bound, in the covenant of redemption to be made like unto his brethren. And this obligation served a specific purpose – that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God. So this greater love that Christ speaks of in our text can be measured in its depth by noting the condescending depth of Christ to become a man.

But this love can also be measured in its height – the height to which Christ takes us in His love. Would you notice that He says *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*. How can you not read such a statement and be humbled in adoration and praise when you realize that Christ calls you His friend. *Ye are my friends*

He says in v. 14. *Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you* (v. 15). A man confides in his friends. A man doesn't hide from his friends what he's going to do. And does Christ confide in us by sharing with us what He's heard from His Father. We know what He's doing and we know what He's done and we know what He's going to do.

He's accomplished redemption and He's right now interceding for His friends in heaven and He will come again to redeem this world from the curse under which it groans. Don't you find such a statement incredible? – that Christ would refer to us as friends. We were rebels and we were sinners and we considered Christ to be anything but our friend in our lost and helpless condition.

Do you remember that time in David's life when he was fleeing from Saul? Saul was so jealous for the extension of his own dynasty that he would hunt David like an animal in order to kill him. And on the first of two occasions when David could have killed Saul instead he spared him. And when Saul realized what David could have done to him and how merciful he was to him since Saul was treating him as an enemy, he says to David in 1Sam. 24:17: *Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil. 18 And thou hast shewed this day how that thou hast dealt well with me: forasmuch as when the LORD had delivered me into thine hand, thou killedst me not. 19 For if a man find his enemy, will he let him go well away?*

Lift that scene into the spiritual realm and it speaks to our standing before God and before Christ. We were His enemies. We wanted nothing to do with Him. We shook our clenched fists toward Him and it was certainly in His power to find us and destroy us. There was no possible way for us to escape His presence. But instead He did not treat us as the enemies we were. He's treated us as friends. He's elevated us to a status that is far higher than anything we deserved. He's lifted us from being groveling worms in the dust and He's cleansed us and clothed us and adopted us and made us even more than friends. He's made us heirs, even joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. He's joined us to him in His death and burial and resurrection.

So we abide in His love when we measure it's greatness. We can see the depth of that greatness when we consider Christ becoming a man. We can see the height of that greatness when we consider the height to which that greatness takes us. It makes us friends with God. Most profoundly, of course, we are able to measure the extent of the greatness of that love by considering where it took Christ and to what extent He was willing to go to manifest that love.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. I'm sure you're familiar with the cross reference to this verse found in Rom. 5:7 For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Our text in John says that He laid down His life for His friends. Paul writes in Romans that He commended His love for us while we were yet sinners. Is it any wonder the Hymn writer could write: *Jesus! What a Friend for sinners! Jesus! Lover of my soul.*

It is certainly with reference to Calvary love that Paul could say to the saints at Ephesus that the love of God does indeed pass understanding. Paul's burden for the saints at Ephesus and the thing he prays for regarding them is *That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*

How do you abide in Christ's love, then? You must abide in that love by measuring that love – measuring it in all its dimensions, its breadth and length and depth and height. And when you strive to measure that which is beyond measure you will certainly conclude with regard to Christ that *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* But would you consider with me next that in order to abide in this greater love:

II. You Must Know How to Rest in It

I pointed out in my introduction how Christ begins this chapter with the admonition to abide in Him. *Abide in me, and I in you* He says in v. 4 *As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. 5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

In v. 7 this practice of abiding becomes more specific when Christ says *If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.* Do you see what the practice begins to look like now? If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, He says. And then in v. 9 the practice becomes even more focused: *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.*

Here, then, is the focal point of abiding in Christ – abide in His love. Obviously this means you must know His love, believe in His love, rest in His love, be confident of His love; bask in His love; exult in His love. And make His love the lens through which you see all His dealings with you as a follower of Christ.

It's interesting to note, isn't it, that the focus is on this particular attribute of Christ – His love. He doesn't say abide in my sovereignty. It doesn't even say abide in my holiness. His sovereignty and His holiness are both important to be sure. But the focal point of our abiding in Him pertains to His love. I don't think it would be improper to say that you should see His sovereignty through the lens of His love or see His omnipotence through the lens of His love or see His holiness through the lens of His love. Abiding in His love is that important.

Keep yourselves in the love of God, Jude writes in v. 21 *looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.* There's almost something frightful about that admonition isn't there? I'm to keep myself in the love of God? Does that mean I may fall

out of the love of God? Does that mean that the love of God vacillates and at times I'm in it when I manage to keep myself in it but at other times I may not be in it? I think you know that that's not at all the case. The love of God and the love of Christ is something that is constant and sure. How can it not be when it's based on Christ giving Himself to death for His friends?

No, the love of God is constant but don't you and I both know that your sense of that love is not as steadfast as the love itself. And your confidence in that love can wane when the devil seeks to sow seeds of doubt in your mind and the circumstances of life seem to run contrary to the notion of God's love.

How could God love you? – the devil whispers in your ear. You've failed too many times. Your faith is pathetically weak and your sins are many. How could God love you when the circumstances of life are screaming at you that He's displeased with you? That was basically the message of Job's friends to Job. John Calvin suggests that when Job's friends first set out to visit Job they had every intention of empathizing with Job and being sympathetic to Job but once they actually beheld him and saw that he was beyond recognition and how serious the matter was they changed their minds and decided that Job couldn't possibly be in the realm of God's loving favor.

So will it be the case with you when circumstances take place that you may not understand and your sense of your own sin and unworthiness are particularly acute. And it's in those times especially that the admonition applies to keep yourself in the love of God. And the way to do that, the way to abide in Christ's love is to plant yourself at the foot of the cross and fix your gaze on the very dying form of One who came Himself for you.

See from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Hear Him saying to you the same thing He said to doubting Thomas: *Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.* This is how you abide in His love. You take Him up on His invitation to behold His nail scarred hands. And you keep your gaze fixed on Him until the Holy Spirit burns the reality of His love into your heart and that love is shed abroad in your heart by that same Holy Spirit.

And then you rest in the assurance that comes from that greater love. And from that vantage point of rest you say with the hymn writer *I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me, that on the cross He shed His blood, from sin to set me free.*

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. How do you continue in that love? You must measure it and you must rest in it, resting in the confidence that no greater display of love could be conceived in the mind of God. And then finally:

III. You Must Emulate It

Christ sets a very high standard when it comes to love. He begins with the Father's love for Him. Notice again the words of v. 9 *As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.* How has the Father loved His Son? That's something to keep in mind, you know, each time you read the gospel of John. There are many references (more than 200) to statements that indicate the Father's love for His Son of the Son's love for His Father. Suffice it to say that the love bond between the Father and the Son was perfect, was eternal, and was incomprehensibly strong.

When you come to see that in your reading of John's gospel then it makes Christ's cry from the cross all the more humbling and amazing when He cries out in Mt. 27:46 *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* And what adds to the strength of the measure of God's love for you and me is that the answer to this question can be found in the most well known verse in the Bible *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Now Christ holds out that standard to those that abide in His love. Jn. 15:10 *If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.* Here is where love leads to obedience, the same obedience Christ rendered to His Father. This is far more than external compliance that the Pharisees reduced the law to. This is tantamount to loving God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, just like Christ loved His Father.

This is what makes love so challenging and seemingly unattainable. And this is what should keep us humble. What could you possibly lift to the Lord and say *Lord please take note of this deed I've performed. It was done with the same love with which your Father loved you and you loved me.* When I consider such a standard I find myself pleading the blood of Christ over everything I do and fail to do; over every word I speak or fail to speak; over every thought I harbor and over every driving motive.

And I thank Him for the word He gives in v. 3 *Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.* That word is the promise of salvation; that word is the gospel of free grace; that word speaks of His shed blood and that word provides the freedom to strive for the right thing in the right way.

And I would add that this high standard of love that Christ calls on His followers to emulate is applied to the way we're to love each other. Notice the words of v. 12 *This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.* What a high standard of love. And yet I think it would be fair to say that the impact of that standard of love certainly found lodging in John's heart for when he writes his first epistle he makes much of this very thing to the point of making it a test of the validity of a person's profession of faith:

1Jo 3:14 *We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not [his] brother abideth in death.*

1Jo 3:16 *Hereby perceive we the love [of God], because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down [our] lives for the brethren.*

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his brethren. That's the standard that governed Christ's love. It's the standard, now, that must govern your love and mine. How, then, do we abide in Christ's love?

You need to measure it – it's definitely a greater love, indeed the greatest love that the Creator of the world, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity would condescend so low as to become a man. It's certainly great in terms of the height to which it lifts us. It lifts from groveling sinful and defiled worms of the dust all the way to being called the sons of God. And this love is great to the extent in which Christ demonstrated. Jn. 13:1 *...having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.* He loved you all the way to Calvary's cross.

You need to rest in that love which is tantamount to saying that you need to believe in it at all times no matter what the world or the devil hurls at you. You need to plant yourself at the foot of the cross until that love burns so brightly in your heart that your zeal will be inspired to demonstrate your own love in the same way which is the love of the obedience of faith and the love of the brethren.

I said at the beginning of this message that the need we constantly face as believers is the need of having our hearts stormed by the greater love of Christ. May the Holy Spirit Himself apply the battering ram of God's Word and Christ's salvation to each and every heart so that our lives are transformed by the greater love of Christ.