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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Imperatives and Indicatives

John 15:9-17

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you and praise you for who you are. We thank you for the sea of crimson that saved each and everyone of us. Lord, we are just amazed and astounded that you would extend such grace to us. And Father, today is a day that we reserve to focus in on you and your work on the cross and what it is you've done not just on the cross but in our lives. And so this morning, I pray, I pray for the wisdom and grace we need to open up your book, to have your Holy Spirit accompany us and to grow in our understanding and amazement at what you've done for us. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this is the second Sunday of the month, not the first, we had New Year's on the 1st, so we are celebrating communion this Sunday. And Jesus the night before he died, he met with his disciples and he celebrated a Passover supper with them and Matthew 26 describes it. It says this: *Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had*

given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Jesus took bread and he took wine and he offered them up as symbols of his flesh and blood then he asked his disciples to eat the bread and drink the cup in order to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood. Then he asked them to repeat this remembrance of his sacrifice, this is what we refer to as the Lord's supper, and we celebrate it, we usually celebrate it once a month by meditating on what it is the Lord Jesus Christ did for us, by examining ourselves, by again asking God's Holy Spirit to convict us of sin, by confessing that sin and then by participating in the elements. John 6:53 says: So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Well, we've been following the life of Jesus in the book of John. We've made it so far to the 15th chapter and we spoke about that last month. It opens up with a lengthy story about the vine and the branches. And Jesus loved teaching in metaphors and this is a particular metaphor that has the entire Godhead represented. Let me just read to you from *John 15*, it says this, this is Jesus' words, he says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the*

vinedresser. Each branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

If you remember the last time I spoke about that fancy Latin term, it's called *sine qua non* which means "without which not." And I said that fruit bearing is such an essential part of what it means to be a Christian that it is a *sine qua non* for every believer. If you have no fruit in your life, it's because you are not a believer. And the fruit that we discussed was the fruit of the Spirit that is laid out in *Galatians 5:22* which says: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law.* And we pointed out that these are not just lovely qualities per se, I mean, there are many, many non-Christians who are patient and kind and gentle and self-controlled, but rather that this fruit of the Spirit is something that goes back directly to Christ. In other words we are talking about the love of Christ and the joy of Christ, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the meekness of Christ. It is all of Christ and God expects to see that fruit reproduced in our lives. Now every single child of God is going to bear that fruit in their lives, and they're going to

bear that fruit because God says we are literally a branch that is attached to a vine and the vine is Christ, and in that vine, we have a living water of the Holy Spirit flowing through us. So inevitably we are going to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And as I said the last time, the extent that you understand this metaphor of fruit bearing, this metaphor that Jesus is getting at, is also the extent that you're going to understand what your life is all about. I mean Jesus is the vine and we by faith are the branches. And bearing fruit, well, that's the reason why we're here. As Jesus put it in *John 15*, he says: *"My Father is glorified by this: That you produce much fruit and prove to be My disciples."*

Well, Jesus goes on to say in our text this morning, this is *John 15:9-17*, Jesus says: *"As my as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you. Remain in My love. If you keep My commands you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in His love. I have spoken these things to you so that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."* Well Jesus tells us to remain in his love and then he goes on to define just how that works in verse 10, and he says this, he says, *"If you keep My commands you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in His love."* Now, if you're a careful reader, perhaps you might have had just this little bit of

a red flag go up as you've read verse 10, because one thing we speak about all the time when we speak about the love of Christ is that it is a free gift. We speak about the fact that it is unearned, and I can picture somebody reading this verse this morning and saying isn't Jesus saying that you will remain in his love as long as you perform at a certain level, I mean, as long as you keep his commands. I mean, does this mean that as long as we are obedient we get to bask in Christ's love and as soon as we are disobedient, like some kind of angry parent, we find ourselves cut off. Well, if that's the case, then obviously the question becomes, all right, if this is the way it is, just -- just tell me, how disobedient must I be before I am cut off from the love of God? I mean is it a little bit of disobedience, a little bit of kind of stepping over the line or is it some wholesale type of gross offense or perhaps it's maybe an unwillingness to even consider the cost of obedience, is -- those are the things that put me outside of God's love? Well, the answer to that question is no, no, and no. See, God has made it abundantly clear that it is not anything that we do that causes us to earn or to un earn, for that matter, the love of Christ. I mean you got to understand, earning the love of Christ is impossible. It's absolutely impossible for us fallen sons of Adam because God says in Romans 5 that no works will ever justify us before him, and that's because everything that we do has attached to it the taint of our sin, the taint of the fall of Adam.

And the beauty of the gospel is that the very same God who declares our hopeless inability is the very same one who came down to give us his perfect ability. And if we just look at the lives of some of the great saints, we can see how obvious it is that we do not earn God's love in the first place. And if we don't earn it, then there's really no way we can un earn it. If you look at the apostle Paul, for instance, you know, when Christ began actively pursuing the apostle Paul, understand he was in the process of murdering Christians. And nobody was more flabbergasted at the love of Christ than Paul. This is what Paul said in *1 Corinthians 15*, he said: *For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an a apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.* Paul certainly proves the point that there's nothing that we can do to make us worthy of earning the love of Christ. And Peter, Peter demonstrates, well, there's nothing you can do to un earn it once you've received it. I mean we all know Peter denied Christ three times and we know that not after -- not once, not twice but the third time, he not only denied Christ but he denied it with a hardy bout of cursing towards the very God who had saved him. That didn't stop God from loving Peter. If you go to the first Easter morning, we have the women entering the tomb and they found an angel of God and the angel has a very special message there for them, but especially for Peter. It says in *Mark 16*, it

says: *And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."* That's a crucial distinction that the angel is making. He's calling him out even the day after he has denied Christ. So if you're going to name some kind of sins that are going to put you outside of God's love, you're going to have to come up with something considerably better than murder and outright betrayal, because neither of those sins put Paul and Peter outside of the love of God. And God makes that very plain in *Ephesians 2:8*, he says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* And he goes on to say in *Romans 3:20*: *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* Okay. Well, if that's so, then why would Jesus say "if?" *"If you keep My commands you will remain in My love."* I mean this is an if statement which is clearly conditional, you know, but the conditions are not just obedience, they are far more basic than that. In fact they go to the very heart of whether or not we are a child of God. And all of these statements that Jesus makes can

really go back to the statement that Jesus had made previously about those who really belong to him, those whom he referred to as "his sheep." If you remember when he spoke about that, he was engaged in a dialogue with the religious leaders and at this point they're completely fed up with him, and they think that he's just dodging, and he's not being flat out explaining who he was and what he says and so they say to him, they say, "Tell us, are you the Christ?" And *John 10:25* says this, it says: *Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep."*

Now Jesus is very matter of fact about telling them why they are not one of his own and it has nothing to do with obedience. It has everything to do with belief. See, all the miracles that Jesus did would amount to nothing and would move none of those who were not those among his sheep. And those who were not among his sheep are not there because they don't believe. Jesus goes on to make that crystally clear by saying in verse 27, he says: *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand."*

See, there's a reason why Jesus's statement, "*If you keep my commands you will remain in My love*" is not a demand for performance. It has to do with the difference between Jesus' indicative and imperative statements. Understand the difference between those and you will understand the difference between sheep and goats, between believers and non-believers. If you remember, if you go back to your elementary school days, you remember there's all different kinds of sentences and two of the different types of sentences are indicatives and imperatives. I hope you remember that back from those long, long, long forgotten days, we had to diagram sentences. Those are long gone. There are indicative sentences and imperative sentences, and indicative sentences merely point things out. They indicate. I mean, that's why they're indicative. Imperatives are commands. They tell you something you must do. And until you understand the difference between indicatives and the imperatives of the gospel, you're going to have a hard time understanding the mindset of Jesus. You'll be constantly asking yourself the questions that our text this morning seems to be indicating. I mean "*If you keep my commands you will remain in My love*" sounds like a conditional clause based on my willingness to keep Jesus's commands.

Now if you think in terms of imperatives, that is if you think in terms of commands, then you're going to see your Christian life as

a series of rules and regulations that you are commanded to follow. And you're going to wonder if you're doing them enough to be in the sheepfold. And you're going to be constantly wondering just what level of disobedience is necessary to push me out? If, however, you start thinking in terms of indicatives, well then you're operating on the same level that Christ is operating on. See, when Jesus says my sheep hear my voice, and they follow me, he's not issuing a command, he's not issuing an imperative, he is issuing an indicative. He's indicating something. He's indicating what sheep do. When Jesus speaks of his sheep, he's describing the type of person that has come through the process that we talk about all of the time that is described in *Ezekiel 36* which says this, it says -- God speaking, he says: *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."* Well, God is saying he's going to give you a brand new heart and put a brand new spirit within you if you are one of his sheep. And Ezekiel's describing the process. God takes the old heart out and the new heart that he puts in is a heart that is filled with his Holy Spirit. And that surgical operation results in a brand new creature who now has a very different constitution. *2 Corinthians 5* says: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed*

away; behold, the new has come. Now because the Holy Spirit is now inside them, this person now wants to walk in God's statutes. And Jesus says you must be born again, I mean, that's an imperative. But it can only be done by those that God has freely given the ability and the desire to. And Jesus calls those people his sheep. And he says my sheep, they hear my voice, and they follow me. What Jesus is he doing is he's indicating what sheep are like. You see what he's saying is this new default drive that the sheep has now carefully considers God's rules. These are now things that are part of what pleases and drives this new creature internally. They're now part of his constituent nature.

Now to put this in the indicative, loving God and loving God's word and wanting on a gut level to be obedient to it is now an indication, indicative, that you're one of these new creatures. And the problem is that we often think not in terms of indicatives but in terms of imperatives. You want to be one of Christ's sheep? Here's what you must do. That's an imperative. That's a command. And you see, you can force people on the outside to conform, you can force them to obey but you can never force them on the inside to want to obey. Jesus was constantly confronted with people who were willing to force the outside when the inside had no desire whatsoever. And when you get that, we have what we call religion. Jesus said this in *Matthew 15*, he said: "*These people honors me*

with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Now, much of the blame for that vain worship could be laid at the feet of the religious leaders who drove the people in terms of imperatives. I mean they had no shortage of religious commands, no shortage of rules that you had to comply with in order to be right with God. And not much has changed in 2,000 years. I mean we still have religion telling us what we have to do, the imperative as opposed to the indicative, which simply indicates what these new creatures do. New creatures in Christ obey Christ because they love Christ. They have a new heart that's been planted literally within them by God. Because of that new heart, obedience now comes naturally when it never did before. Listen to how Peter describes the opening chapter of his letter written to the church that's now under persecution. This is a church that's scattered all over the place and he's writing his introduction to the church, he says this in *1 Peter 1*, he says: *Peter, an a apostle of Jesus Christ: To the temporary residents dispersed in Pontius, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father and set apart by the Spirit for obedience and for sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ. May grace and peace be multiplied to you.* Now Peter says that these born again believers have been set apart by who? Well, by the Holy Spirit. And then he says what have they been set apart for? Well, Peter tells us flat

out, they've been set apart for obedience. Peter is saying that God places in his sheep a brand new desire, and that desire is to obey God's word. That drive is the desire to obey and it is now a part of the internal default mechanism that every child of God now possesses.

Just think of the creatures that God creates. He places within them individual drives suited to their natures. Think of a goose for a second. You know, geese are programmed and what are they -- they're programmed to fly south in the winter. And there's many different ways that we could look at how a goose relates to that arduous trip. You know, an imperative way of thinking as a goose, he's pacing back and forth and he's thinking how much energy is going to be involved, he's thinking about the risk, how cold it's going to be, how high he's got to fly, he's thinking of whether or not he can be in the front of the flock or the back of the flock, is he going to be attacked by anything as he goes? Is that how geese think? I mean, I can only guess but I think I know. I mean, I don't think those thoughts ever enter into a goose's mind. See, that's the imperative way of thinking. And I think a goose thinks on an indicative level. I think he operates like sheep do. And it's funny, Jesus spoke about sheep quite a bit. Both of them follow their instinct. And when the days get shorter and the weather gets colder, there's a drive within a goose that says,

"Let's go south." I mean, in fact I would go as far as to say that God designed geese so that being obedient to the drive to fly south is what gives it more pleasure than not. And that's why he goes. I mean I think he's up there flying and he's honking because the drive that God puts in them makes it so that's what he wants to do. And Jesus use sheep as an example of what he was trying to get at and it's basically the same thing. You see, born again believers in Christ have placed within them a brand new drive that makes obedience the new default drive that never existed before. So much so that God can say of his sheep: *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."* Again, an indicative. It's just indicating who they are. Are the sheep following the shepherd for any other reason than that they want to? I mean, is it not because that is their pleasure? Is it not because that is their desire? I mean you think there are sheep following the shepherd that say, "Dang, I really hate this. I mean, I'd much rather be doing something else. I'd much rather be wandering around or sitting doing nothing or because I have this imperative, I got to follow the shepherd. I guess I'll go follow him." You know, I tell you this much, scratch a religious person and that's exactly what you're going to find. You're going to find external compliance covering internal rebellion. And that's why God hates religion. I mean it's far more simple and far more reasonable to assume that sheep follow shepherds as indicatives simply because they hear

their Master's voice and they want to follow him.

And Jesus goes on to say that the decision, that incredibly important decision to become a sheep is one that's not made by the sheep; it's one made by the shepherd. Jesus says in verse 28: *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand."* We need to understand what this means because what God says it is I who make the sheep, and furthermore, if I make you one of my sheep, no one is going to be able to unmake you or snatch you out of my hand or out of my Father's hand as well. And when you start wondering whether or not you've been obedient enough, realize that that's not the right question. Realize that that is confusing imperatives and indicatives all over again. See, the question is not have I obeyed the commands enough to cross the threshold of becoming a sheep, it's much more simple than that. Question is: Am I one of his sheep? I mean, have you ever asked that question of yourself? Am I one of Christ's sheep?

As the elders begin distributing the bread, I want us also to consider the warning that God gives us about communion itself. God says this: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an*

unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. I repeat this warning every month. I say communion is extremely serious business and to enter into it in an unworthy manner is to court disaster. And I just plead with you if you are not absolutely confident that you are a child of the King, if you have sin issues that you know God is calling you to deal with, if you first need to be reconciled with your brother or your sister before you bring your sacrifice to the altar, then just pass the elements on. Nobody's going to laugh at you or think this is bizarre or strange. And on the other hand, I also point out that you can make the mistake of thinking that unless you are flawlessly perfect, you are unworthy to receive communion. That, too, is a mistake the enemy loves to have you make. Because being a child of God does not mean that we don't sin and it doesn't mean that we never fail. What it means is we recognize that the salvation that we've received is an unearned gift, a gift that no one is capable of earning by being good. I repeat the statement of Dane Ortlund. He says: "In the kingdom of God the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." You know, it also means that when we fail we are aware

that we've sinned because God's Spirit as I've been speaking about, God's Spirit is now inside of us, convicting us. And so we grieve and we grieve as children who have a Father who longs to forgive and cleanse us. God says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So being a child of the King doesn't mean that you are sinless. It means that when we sin, we understand we have an advocate, someone who speaks on our behalf before the Father. *1 John 2:1* says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* And because we have Jesus's righteousness and not our own, now we are free to eat from his table.

So the qualifications are this: If you love your Lord, if you are part of the body of Christ, don't deny yourself the privilege that Jesus purchased for you. You know, we say he lived the life that we were supposed to live and then he died the death we all deserved to die in our place so that we could be made worthy of heaven. And there is nothing more precious or important in all of creation than that fact and nothing more tragic than missing it. So this morning as we meditate, just ask yourself the simple question: Am I one of his sheep?

1 Corinthians the 11th chapter says this: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* So take, and eat.

I want us to understand something about the question we're asking ourselves this morning: Am I one of his sheep? Understand, this is not a question that bothers goats at all. You know, so much of the confusion that centers around much of Jesus's words stem from the fact that he's speaking to a very particular audience. He's often speaking to his sheep. When Jesus said, *"My sheep hear my voice,"* he was referring to these new creatures that have brand new hearts with brand new ears and brand new eyes, they can hear and see things that they could not see and hear before. And if God has given you ears to hear, then what Jesus says amounts to the truth. If he hasn't given you those ears, then what he says sounds like nonsense. *1 Corinthians 1:18* says: *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.* See, to those who are his sheep who have been given ears to hear and eyes to see, these commands of Christ, they're not viewed as imperatives any more than a goose sees his desire to fly south as an imperative. No, what Jesus asks of his sheep is this, he says this in verse 12, he says: *"This is My*

command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, that someone would lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you." Well, we have another one right here. Is this another conditional phrase? I mean, is Jesus saying we are Christ's friends as long as we do what he commands? I mean if you're thinking of imperatives, well, then sure, that's certainly what he seems to say. I mean, it's a command but it's not just a command, it's an impossible command. I mean Jesus is saying love one another not as good as you can, but as good as he can. That's flawlessly. I mean you and I are not capable of that. But if you look at the statement as an indicative, it fits perfectly. You see, Jesus is simply saying that those who belong to him, those who have this new heart, this new drive, new ears, new eyes, they've been given the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. They have a relationship with Christ that's not based on imperatives. Listen to how Jesus describes this. This is the very next verse. He says: *"I do not call you slaves any more, because a slave doesn't know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from My Father."* And what Jesus is saying is we're not slaves now. We are his friends. We are co-heirs with Christ. We are his brothers going about the task that he went about while he was on earth. And because we are now his friends, he can give us everything we need to know about where this world

came from, what this world is like right now, and where this world is heading. And all of that Jesus has made known to us. And finally, Jesus reiterates what's at the heart of our confidence that we are his children, and it's based on the fact that he chose us and not vice versa. I mean, anything I do, I know I have the power to undo. Anything he does has an ironclad guarantee. And Jesus makes that crystal clear in the next verse, verse 16, he said: *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you. I appointed you that you should go out and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you."*

So the question should never, never be have I done enough to cross this threshold of acceptance? Is my performance good enough to rate being one of his own? Well, there's no level of performance that could ever be acceptable to God because God's standard is flawless perfection. And we know that comes only through our relationship with Jesus Christ when he exchanges his perfect righteousness for our sin. And so the question we need to ask ourselves is not am I good enough, I mean, we should know by now *Romans 3:10: There is none good, no not one.* The question instead should be: Am I one of his? I mean, when he speaks, do I hear his voice? And when I hear his voice, do I want to follow him? I mean nobody hears and follows perfectly and nobody ever will this side

of eternity, but when God asks us to examine ourselves, he doesn't ask us to examine whether or not we've been flawless in our behavior. In fact he asks us instead if we sense the presence of Christ within us. Listen to what he says in *2 Corinthians 13*. He says: *Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you -- unless you fail the test.* That's the test. Do you recognize that Jesus is in you? Do you care about your relationship with him or are you convinced that you've said the sinner's prayer, that you've gone forward, that you've been baptized, that your salvation is secure because of what you did 25 years ago? And that's exactly what the lost do. And it is the lost who are going to hear the terrible words that Jesus uttered in *Matthew 7:33*. He said: *"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"* You got to understand, these are words that were uttered to people who were absolutely convinced they were on the inside, that they had followed the imperatives, they had done what was commanded externally while still rebelling internally. And you have to notice what Jesus did not say in this. He didn't say, "Depart from me, you failed the test for the threshold of obedience. Depart from me, you failed the behavioral status." It was far more basic than that. He says: *"I never knew you. Depart from me."*

So the question that we have to ask ourselves this morning is that basic. Do I know Him? And does He know me? And the one thing that I can give, the one assurance that I can give to anybody who is churning about this and is stressing out over this is the one aspect of those who never know him is they never know they don't care. These kind of questions just go right over their heads. They go in one ear and out the other. They don't connect. And the reason why they don't connect is because they don't have eyes to see and ears to hear or a heart with a Holy Spirit within it. So it's a good thing to be asking yourself and it's a thing that God calls us to do. Test yourselves, examine yourselves this morning. Will the elders begin distributing the cup.

1 Corinthians, the 11th chapter says this: *In the same manner He also took the cup after supper saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do as often as you drink it in remembrance of me."* So take, and drink.

This is our heads, heart and feet part where we try to have a practical application of what it means that we've just been speaking about. And we've been speaking about indicatives and imperatives, and I just look at the next section of the scripture that we're in, it's verse 17 which is a flat out imperative, Jesus's words, he says: *"These things I command you, so that you*

will love one another." Now if you're one of his sheep, loving others is a natural part of who you are, it's an indicative, if you will. But I'd like to challenge us about what Jesus is saying here because I think when you hear, he says, "Love one another," and I think people think in their mind, yeah, well, I love my parents, I love my kids, I love my friends, I love my neighbors. How about Jesus isn't talking about that at all. How about Jesus is absolutely dismissive of folks who think that that's what that means. I'm not saying that Jesus doesn't think it's important that you love your family and your children and your friends and your relatives, but he says in *Matthew 5:46*: *"If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"* What God is saying is that kind of love is expected. The pagans do that. Everybody does that. So what kind of love is he talking about here? He's talking about love that doesn't come easy, love that doesn't come naturally. If I was to be very practical, I would say Jesus is telling us that there's a power in his love unlike any other power that you've ever seen, and that's the power that he expects us as his representatives to exercise. You know, everyone of us were raised, we know how to fight, you know, if somebody hits you, you hit them back. I mean I have seven brothers and sisters, I know all about, I know how to fight. And what Jesus

is saying is I've given you a power way beyond the kind of -- of power that you're used to, and the power that you're used to is you fight power with power. He said, no, you fight power with love. You approach somebody who's got his hands up to duke it out with you and you give the love of Christ. I find this happens all the time. People say they don't know what to expect in terms of reaction. They say sometimes people are absolutely blown away, they're powerless, they don't know what to do. People are used to this. They know how to deal with this. They've been raised with this. That's what they've seen their entire lives. But when you come at this with the love of Christ, sometimes people respond even worse because they don't know what to do. They don't know how to respond to that. They're used to somebody giving back what they're giving out. And so when God tells us that we have to love one another, I don't think he's talking about the kind of love that everybody else loves. I think he's talking about the difficult love.

You know, I've had people approach me on numerous occasions with somebody, have you ever had somebody in your life that just he's got your number or she's got your number? There's something about you that gets under their skin. They just don't like you. They just -- they're out to make your life miserable. Anybody ever have that happen to them? When people approach me with that, I say in a

sense you are blessed. And one of the reasons why you're blessed is because you have what I call "a designated enemy." And we have specific instructions from Jesus as to what we are to do with designated enemies. What does God say? He says pray for your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. And so what I usually instruct people to do when they see this person just has come down on me like a ton of bricks, this person is so unjustly approaching me and is doing these terrible things, I say that's the person you need to be praying for for your own sake, for your own ability to apply this power, this love that God says. I mean, I think if you think in your own life -- what I'd like us to take away from this this morning is, first of all, an understanding of what it is that Jesus is after here. He's not addressing the love that we express 95, 99 percent of the time. I love my wife, I love my kids, I love my friends, I love my neighbors. He's not talking about that. He's talking about loving somebody you can't stand. He's talking about loving somebody who you fear, somebody who you would just rather see taken off the face of the planet.

Now, I suspect to some degree or other, doesn't have to be that extreme but there's somebody like that in every one of our lives, perhaps somebody right here in the church. What I would like us to do this morning is to just focus in on that person that you -- if you were God, he'd be gone. One of those kind of situations. If

you were God, she'd be off the planet. I want you to focus in on that person in particular and I want us to just take a moment to pray for that person. You may be praying through gritted teeth, and you may be saying why in the world would I be praying for somebody I want to see gone? Well, guess what? There's an imperative. There's a command. Love your enemies. We as his sheep, as the indicatives of those who simply understand and follow his voice understand that this is what we do. And God's not asking you to love that person with the love that you have within you. He's asking you to love that person with the power of the Holy Spirit that now resides in you. And so our assignment this morning is to think of somebody, could be here in the church, could be somebody in your neighborhood, somebody that you work with, somebody that you're associated with, somebody that you had something to do with in the past that is some kind of designated enemy and just take a moment to pray for them. And then to step it up to one other level, pray and ask God if there's some way that this person can come in your life, that you would have the ability to express the love of Christ to them, not because you want to but because you have to. And the reason why you have to is you're one of his sheep and this is what sheep do. And so I pray right now for each of us.

Father, I just lift up each individual in this building and I pray

for those who have a person, whether it's a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, somebody who they have just struggled with mightily for years perhaps, Lord, we just lift up that person right now. The person may be inside the kingdom, outside of the kingdom, may be just a miserable rotten person or somebody that you've just had misunderstandings with. But I pray, Lord, that you would right now use this opportunity to instruct us as to what it means to love others, to love others we don't want to love. And Lord, I pray right now for an opportunity for us each as we get into this new year to express that love. It may be bewildering, it may be hard, it may be difficult, but Lord, I pray we'd have opportunities that you would bring into our lives to demonstrate the incredible power that you want to place in our hands and that's the power to love one another. Father, give us the power and the grace and the courage to exercise that love, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.