

LOVE TO THE END

John 13:1

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, June 28, 2009

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (Jn. 13:1).

John 13:1 stands at the very center of the teaching of John's Gospel. Not only does it begin the second half of the Gospel, but it looks both backward to what John has written and forward to what is yet to come. John's key statement is that "having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end."

For many Christians, the Gospel of John is the spiritual highpoint of the entire Bible, which is why John is often recommended as a first book to read for those new to Scripture. Within John, the chapters that present Jesus' final teaching to his disciples, his arrest, and his crucifixion are especially precious to believers' hearts. F. W. Krummacker describes the events of the second half of John in terms of the Israelite's entry into the temple sanctuary. First, there is the outer court, which describes Jesus' Last Supper teaching to the disciples; then comes the holy place, the outer room with its sacred objects, which Krummacker compares to the account of Jesus' arrest and trial; and finally we enter the holy of holies, the inner sanctum where God's glory dwelt, which he compares to John's account of the crucifixion of Jesus.¹

The first section of John's "Book of the Passion," presents material found nowhere else in the New Testament. It is now the night of the Passover feast, at which Jesus would celebrate his Last Supper with the disciples. This momentous evening, the eve of the cross, is

¹ F. W. Krummacker, *The Suffering Savior* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1856, reprint, 2004).

unfolded in John chapters 13 to 17. Chapter 13 relates Jesus' symbolic act of washing the disciples' feet. It is followed by a lengthy instruction dealing with Jesus' coming departure and God's provision in his absence, from the end of chapter 13 through chapter 16. Chapter 17 concludes the section with Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer," in which he commits his disciples into the care of the heavenly Father. In all of these events, Jesus was motivated by the knowledge "that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father" (Jn. 13:1). Of this matchless material, James Boice writes:

Nowhere in the entire Bible does the child of God feel that he is walking on more holy ground. For here, more than in many other portions of Scripture, he hears the voice of Jesus leading him into a greater understanding of his new place before the Father and consequently also of his new position in the world. These chapters contain teaching about heaven, the new commandment, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the mutual union of Christ with the disciples and the disciples with Christ, and prayer.²

CHRIST'S PARTICULAR LOVE FOR HIS OWN

One reason these chapters are precious to believers is that they highlight Jesus' particular love for "his own." This touches upon a truth emphasized throughout John's Gospel, that there is a people set apart by God the Father for his Son and that these elect people are the objects of a special and saving love. Not that Christ only loved his own. Christ's love for the whole world is strikingly revealed in John. But there is a difference between Christ's love for the world and his love for his own, just as there is a difference in a man's love for his bride compared to his love for others. Boice explains this difference: "God has done *some things for all men...* [but] on the other hand, God has done *all things for some men.*"³ It is Christ's all-saving love for those who are "his own" that is the concern of these chapters.

How did believers come to be Christ's own? The first answer is that Christ chose them. Jesus says in John 15:16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Charles Spurgeon comments: "A man may surely choose his own wife, and Christ chose his own spouse, he

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:995-996.

³ *Ibid.*, 998.

chose his own church; and while the Scripture stands, that doctrine can never be eradicated from it.”⁴ Having chosen us in his gracious love, Jesus made us his own by purchase, redeeming us from our sins through the blood of his cross. Therefore, Paul writes to believers: “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

A second answer is that believers are Christ’s own because we were given to him by the heavenly Father. Jesus said: “All that the Father gives me will come to me... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (Jn. 6:37, 39). This presents the biblical doctrine of election, which states that in eternity past God predestined particular people to be joined to his Son for their salvation and his glory. Paul writes that God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). Therefore, Jesus prays in his High Priestly Prayer: “Yours they were, and you gave them to me” (Jn. 17:6).

The first and second reasons why Christians are “Christ’s own” center on God the Son and God the Father. It makes sense that the third reason focuses on God the Spirit. We are Christ’s own because we were born again as children of God through the Holy Spirit. The effect of this is that we have taken Christ for our own and given ourselves to him, so that for us life holds no more glittering crown than to be called “Christ’s own”. Spurgeon exults:

The fact that you are truly Christ’s is the fountain of innumerable pleasures and blessings to your heart. Jesus calls us “his own” – his own sheep, his own disciples, his own friends, his own brethren, the members of his body. What a title for us to wear, “His own”!... Thus he distinguishes us from the rest of mankind, and sets us apart unto himself. “My name shall be named on them,” says he... surely, this is the highest honour that can be put upon us even in the last great day.⁵

Knowing that we are Christ’s own is even more glorious when we realize how great is the love of Christ for his own. This is the theme of these chapters: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Majesty in Misery*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), I:16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I:18.

The love of Christ for us is mirrored in the love he showed to his first disciples, despite their great unworthiness. Consider these men whom Christ loved! How often they had been foolish, wayward, and unbelieving! All this would be especially revealed in the hour of the cross. Yet, observes J. C. Ryle, “Knowing perfectly well that they were about to forsake Him shamefully in a very few hours, in full view of their approaching display of weakness and infirmity, our blessed Master did not cease to have loving thoughts of His disciples.” This tells us that we can look to the love of Christ despite our failures and sins. However we might fall short of our calling, believers are still Christ’s own and enjoy his unfailing love. How this ought to motivate us to please him in the manner of our lives.

Moreover, if there was ever a time when we might excuse Jesus for turning his thoughts away from his disciples and turning inward to his own problems, this was such a time. Spurgeon writes: “If you and I had to bear all that Christ had to suffer, it would engross our thoughts, we should not be able to think of anything else but that; but it did not engross our Lord’s thoughts. He still thought of ‘his own’.”⁶

What is closest to one’s heart is usually made apparent in the hour of his death. Some are preoccupied with their business affairs, so there is a rush to get affairs settled before dying. Some reveal their love for family and others for the fleeting pleasures of life. Likewise, Jesus revealed what is closest to his heart as his cross came near. It was his love for his own that dominated his thoughts and feelings, and “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Does this not prove that there is no greater blessing than to be called one of Christ’s own? While Christ has chosen his own, it is equally true that anyone who takes him for Lord and Savior is one of those chosen. If you will yield your faith to Jesus, then you may know the incomparable blessing of being loved as one of his own.

HAVING LOVED THEM

I said that John 13:1 stands at the very center of John’s Gospel. His key phrase, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved

⁶ Spurgeon, *Majesty in Misery*, 1:21.

them to the end,” looks both backwards and forwards on Jesus’ love. What, then, do we see if we look backwards from the cross on the love of Christ? How has he “loved his own”?

This quest will take us all the way back to the creation of the world. John’s Gospel began with a statement of Christ’s deity that deliberately reflected the creation account in Genesis One. John wrote: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (Jn. 1:1-3). Therefore, when Genesis 1 says that “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image’” (Gen. 1:26), Christ was that Word by which man came into being. We were made as spiritual beings capable of fellowship with our Creator and called to reflect his glory in the world. Boice writes: “He created us, not to a meaningless existence but to an existence that is the highest existence possible for any created object, namely, communion with the One who created it.”⁷ This is the fundamental dignity stamped onto every human soul, the result of Christ’s love for us in creation.

Following with John’s prologue, we see that Christ loved us in his incarnation. John writes, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). It was for love that Christ left the glories of heaven for the miseries of earth. And it was a mark of his love that he was born not in a palace amidst jewels and gold, but in the poverty of manger in the midst of the world in need. Krummacher writes: “He associated with sinners, that He might bear them eternally on His heart.”⁸

The particular love of Christ for his own was seen in the calling of his disciples. They came at his invitation: “Come and see” (Jn. 1:39). Matthew, the tax collector, was sitting in his sin when Jesus approached and called, “Follow me” (Mt. 9:9). Peter, James and John were tending their nets when Jesus promised them: “from now on you will be catching men” (Lk. 5:10). Every Christian can look to the same love that called us to faith with effectual grace. Jesus called us

⁷ Boice, *John*, 4:1003.

⁸ Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, 29-30.

not because of what we can give to him but because of what he can do for us and what he can make of us. “You were called to freedom, brothers,” wrote Paul (Gal. 5:13): freedom from worldliness, misery, bondage and sin. We were called to “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18), all by the love of Christ for his own.

Furthermore, Jesus loved his own by teaching and leading them during the three years of their discipleship. The Twelve could never have imagined the things they would hear from the loving lips of Jesus. How often had he called them aside for a special word of truth, or patiently borne with their questions and objections. “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,” Jesus told them, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). Likewise, Christians are taught the word of truth in the Scriptures by the ministry of Christ through his Spirit.

Had the disciples been told at the start the dangers and threats they would face in Jesus’ company, they probably would have fled in terror. But Jesus guided them through them all. Ever the good shepherd, he constantly brought them beside still waters, restored their burdened souls, and led them in paths of righteousness (Ps. 23:2-3). All for love! Every Christian can look back on the life of faith, with many joys and trials, and say of that same love: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1).

LOVE TO THE END

But now John turns to the future, and the immediate future facing Jesus and his disciples was as dark as could be. What would become of Christ’s own in this dreadful hour? What provision would there be for them in light of the cross? John answers, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

The expression “to the end” (Greek, *eis telos*) can be taken in a number of ways. It can mean that Jesus loved them perfectly or thoroughly, and that is certainly true, for Jesus was about to show the disciples the full extent of his love. But probably the best way to take this is by its temporal meaning. Jesus did not just love them up to this point, but he kept on loving them to the end.

First, Jesus loved his own to the end of his own life. Undoubtedly, this was John's major point of view, since this passage takes place in the shadow of the cross. If love for his own required Jesus to die for their sins, then he loved them to that end; the cross was indeed the fullest extent of his love. "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus explained, "that someone lays down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). Krummacher comments:

O how He loved them, when He took their sins with Him into judgment, and cast Himself into the fire which their transgressions had kindled! How He loved them, when His own blood did not seem to Him too dear a price to be paid for them, although it was they who were the transgressors; He loved them to the end; and to this day He loves them that are His in a similar manner!⁹

What should the love of Christ on the cross mean to us? An analogy is presented in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. It tells of a rescue operation after the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. The War Department learned that three out of four boys in a family named Ryan had died in battle on the same day. So the Army's top general ordered that the fourth son be rescued from behind German lines, where he parachuted. An elite squad of Army Rangers is assigned to find Private James Ryan. Their search leads to a bridge where German tanks are attacking, and the squad is destroyed as their quest finally succeeds. As the captain who saved him lies dying on the bridge, surrounded by the bodies of the men from his squad, he draws Ryan close and gasps, "Earn this. Earn it." The movie concludes with Ryan, as an old man, walking across a field of crosses, marking the graves of men who died for him. Falling to his knees at Captain Miller's grave, he says to the white plaster cross, "Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I've tried to live my life the best I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that at least in your eyes, I earned what all of you have done for me."

Of course, none of us could ever earn the death of God's own Son for our sins. Our forgiveness in Christ's blood is a free gift, received not by works but by simple faith alone. Yet it ought to open up a fountain of gratitude and love in our hearts. Every believer should turn to Christ's wooden cross and pray, "If you, with all your glory,

⁹ Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior*, 30.

died for me, I can live for you today.” We are called to live for him because he loved us to the end that was his cross, because he died for us.

But this expression, “he loved them to the end,” can be taken a second way. Jesus loved his disciples not only to the end of his life but also to the end of their lives. The striking of the shepherd on the cross would scatter the sheep; the disciples would cower in fear, Peter even denying Christ three times the night of his arrest. Yet far more would be demanded of them in years to come. They would be persecuted, afflicted, tempted and tried as they served their Master in the world. How could they even hope to endure, much less to conquer in faith? The answer is that the risen and ascended Christ would continue in his love to the end of their lives.

This is why the chapters to come focus heavily on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ would send to his own from heaven after his own departure. Indeed, Jesus himself would continue to disciple them – teaching, guiding, disciplining, and strengthening his own – through the ministry of the Spirit. And from his throne of authority and power in heaven, Jesus would intercede for his own with the Father. In John 17, Jesus prayed:

I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me... While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost... But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves... I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one... Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (Jn. 17:11-17).

Note the key expression, “in the world.” “The world” is mentioned fourteen times in Jesus’ prayer. The same expression, “in the world,” occurs in John 13:1: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Jesus knows that he has left us “in the world,” that is, in the midst of sin, darkness, misery, temptation, and affliction. Spurgeon writes: “The church of God... is nothing but a camp in the midst of heathendom.”¹⁰ In this world we will suffer losses and bear crosses. Like Lot living in Sodom and the Israelites

¹⁰ Spurgeon, *Majesty in Misery*, 22.

journeying through the barren desert, without the love of our Lord we would never make it through. But Jesus knows where we are – he knows what temptations bring us down, what doubts beset us, what furnaces try our faith – and he loves us to the very end of our lives, providing all that we need to continue unto salvation. He not only grants us the great privilege of prayer, but he prays with and for us, sending the Spirit to help us in our weakness.

That leads us to a third and final way to understand Jesus' love "to the end." He loves us to the very end of history, all the way to our eternity in glory. In Hebrew, the expression "to the end" means "forever." And Jesus' love for us abides forever. When this world has passed away, when God's enemies have been judged, and when the cosmos are renewed in the glory of the final reign of Christ, his love for his own will not have changed. Therefore, Paul could extol:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

What an encouragement this is for us to rely on Jesus' love now. Do you turn to Jesus' love with your joys and sorrows, with your wants and your needs? He who loved you to his own end on the cross has promised to love you to the very end. Do you realize that being saved by Christ means far more than going to heaven in the end – all-important though that is – but also of his love resting upon you him all through this present life? If you do not realize this, then it is no wonder that you struggle with spiritual weakness, that you feel dry and distant from the Lord, or that you fear to return to Christ when you falter or fall into sin. Yet his nail-scarred hands are held out to you even now, marked with eternal emblems of a sin-conquering love. More fundamental than our faith in Jesus and our will to live in obedience to him, is the unchanging, unending, unfailing love of Christ for his own. There is no one more devoted to your good, more sympathetic to your plight, or more interested in your heart than Jesus Christ, who loves his own to the end. Every one of his own should

therefore daily sing, “Jesus, lover of my soul / Let me to thy bosom fly.”¹¹

LOVE WORTH HAVING

The final words in our reflection on this glorious verse should therefore be directed to those who have not yet known the love of Jesus for his own. If Jesus loves like this, and if in his divine power and unending life he will always love his own to the very end, how can you afford not to receive this great and saving love? Can even parents or spouses, can children or friends, offer you a love that will save your soul and endure forever, to the very end of all things? Do you know a love that gladly accepts death in your place? Do you have a love that will even bear your sins before God, so that you may stand spotless in his holy presence, a love that will win you through to an eternity in heaven? In the end, without the love of Christ, you will be lost. But the day of God’s grace is still present, and today should be the day of your salvation through faith in the love of Jesus Christ. Then you will discover how much he has loved you, and how faithfully he will love you as one of his very own, to the very end.

¹¹ Charles Wesley, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” 1740.