

Activate

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Preacher: Sam Low

[0:00] Good morning, my name is Sam and I'm on the ministry team here at St Paul's. Let me also endorse James' plug for his small group. He's a good leader and if you've never been in a small group, Sunday afternoons would be a good one to be a part of.

But let me pray and then we're going to open up that passage that was read for us and another one in John as well. Father God, we do thank you for the chance to gather this morning.

We thank you for the chance to open your word and reflect on what it means to love. God, we ask that you would enable us to recognise in ourselves definitions that we've held to that are not consistent with you, maybe practices that we have gotten in the habit of that don't reflect who you are and what you've done.

I pray that this morning the result of us gathering like this would be that our hearts are transformed, our minds are renewed and we are equipped by your spirit to live lives of love.

Amen. It may come as a surprise to you, it may come as a surprise to my wife, but once upon a time I was a hopeless romantic. As a teenager, there's no need to giggle, as a teenager I loved watching romantic movies.

[1:15] I loved soppy love stories. I would get very emotional in dramas and that sort of thing. I didn't mind crying when, you know, the pet died or whatever it was. I just, I had this very fanciful version of what I figured my romantic future would be.

I was, I would never tell anyone this at the time, but as a 16-year-old I would dream about being, you know, the male hero in the classic drama, rescuing the damsel in distress.

It's very strange. But that's kind of what I got fed that love was supposed to look like. My family was a little bit dysfunctional.

I've shared with you a bit before. I won't go into it too much right now. But my parents separated when I was 14. And even before that, my dad travelled a lot. So I didn't really have a picture of what love might look like in a family.

What, you know, kind of real love looked like when you had to deal with five kids and some of those kids being unhelpful and disobedient and that sort of stuff. So the only picture I had was what I saw in movies like Love Actually.

[2:20] And other equally helpful love stories. But the reality is that I'm probably not alone in this. You might not have a romantic definition of what love is like, but trying to work out what love is supposed to be is actually kind of difficult.

When you listen to the voices around you that are telling you what it's supposed to look like, whether it's what you saw modelled in your own mother and father, whether it's movies, whether it's books, whether it's media, whether it's whatever, it is actually difficult for us to pin down what love should be.

And so imagine the challenge when we as followers of Jesus are called to this extreme countercultural love, this love that loves enemies.

Imagine how much trouble we would have actually figuring out what that looks like. And so often we find ourselves qualifying the commands to love that we find in Scripture.

One of the great maxims that you hear around churches is, I have to love my enemies, but I don't have to like them. Now, I'm not going to go into whether that's right or wrong, but isn't it interesting that we like to qualify some of the really difficult instructions when it comes to the love that God has called us to?

[3:38] But the good news is we're actually not required to guess what love is like. We're not actually required to try and come up with our own path for how we might love.

We've been given a model and his name is Jesus. We are called to love like Jesus. We are called to emulate the love that he models for us, the pattern that he sets out.

And in God's word, we see picture after picture of what that love is in different circumstances, in different situations, with different people. We're dropping into John's gospel today, and John's gospel can kind of be chopped in half.

The first half is sometimes known as the book of Psalms, where Jesus is doing lots of things to prove who he is. And in this second half, which starts in John 13, it's almost like the story slows down.

So the first three years almost in entirety are in the first 12 chapters. And then this last bit, everything slows down. And there's a sentence in John chapter 13.

[4:44] If you've got John 15 open, turn back one page, because this sentence at the beginning of John 13 is very important. Verse 1, it says, It was just before the Passover feast.

So this is the video that we watched with the kids. We're about to slow down in Jesus' life in the second half of John's gospel.

He's about to really make it clear what his love looks like, because very shortly he's going to utter the very significant words, as I have loved you, so you must love one another.

This back end of John's gospel is focused in on what Jesus' love looks like. It is focused in on a very brief period in Jesus' life. Even though love has been on display the whole way through, what Jesus is focusing on now is the ultimate expression, the full extent of his love.

And so I want to look with you today at two scenes in particular. And the first one is chapter 13. It's the video that we watched. The time has come to show his love fully.

[6:07] A couple of months ago, Bailey, who is my son, he's three and a bit, developed some tinea on his toe. I think that's disgusting.

Just telling you. But as a dad, I don't get to choose what I do with that. I've got to look after him. And so we had a nightly routine that involved me putting on a rubber glove to make sure that I didn't touch that disgusting fungus, getting some antifungal cream and rubbing it on his toes, which he called tickling.

And so he would be helpful and flick around and put cream everywhere. But I found it kind of gross. It's not really the kind of job you want, but it's one of the jobs that you have to do as a dad.

In John 13, we see Jesus doing a job that probably would make some of us feel kind of similar. Maybe a little bit squeamish, a little bit grossed out, a little bit uncomfortable.

I mean, I think that the cartoon on the screen depicted it quite well. There would have been animal poo on their feet. Who knows what else?

[7:11] And so it's not really a job that the disciples were queuing up to do. You didn't see any of them tripping over themselves to be the most servant-hearted. And so instead, Jesus gets up and models something for them, demonstrates something for them.

And so in the story, you see Jesus on his knees, humbly washing their feet. Their teacher, their leader, the one they're following, assuming the lowly position and washing their feet.

And listen to what he says as he finishes in verse 12 of chapter 13. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

You can almost imagine how uncomfortable everyone would have been feeling at this point. Maybe enjoying the fact that they had nice clean feet now and they could have dinner, but their boss, if you like, their hero, had just done something that they were too proud to do themselves.

And he comes back and sits in his place. And there just would have been this awkwardness hanging in the air of, are we about to get in trouble? What does he say? Do you understand what I've done for you?

[8:31] You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. Jesus is about to be taken from them. Jesus is about to give his life up, and yet he models again, this is what love looks like if you are a follower of Jesus.

Love is costly and sacrificial and active. There's this incredible interaction in this chapter where Peter says, no, no, Jesus, you can't wash my feet. It almost reminds you of the scene when John is nervous about baptising Jesus.

But the issue for Peter here is, he doesn't want Jesus' love for him to cost Jesus. He doesn't want Jesus to have to do something disgusting in order to express his love for Peter.

[9:44] Why? Because if that's the kind of love that Jesus shows, it's also the kind of love that Jesus expects. One of the reasons that our culture and our world, and maybe even us, are so uncomfortable with a crucified saviour, a servant-hearted saviour, is because if that's who we follow, that demands a life of sacrifice, a life of service, a life of love, even for those who are difficult to love.

Love is costly and sacrificial and active. One of the things I've tried to instil in my son is that he is loved.

I'll try and remind him a lot, maybe even to the point where he's annoyed because he's just learnt how to say, I don't love you in return when he's sick of hearing it. But one of the things that I've taught him, one of the phrases is I say, Bailey, who does Daddy love?

He says, Daddy loves Bailey. And then I keep saying it, and then he just pushes me in the face or something because he's sick of me. But one of the challenges is those words are empty and even confusing and misleading if I don't follow through and actually love him.

When he's tired and a little bit unhelpful and a little bit complaining, how do I treat him then? Do I love him? Does Daddy love Bailey in that moment?

[11:16] Or is it just words that I speak when we're having fun in front of the TV or playing with toys? Real love requires more than words.

To quote a cheesy Christian pop band from the 80s, love is a verb. Love requires doing something. One of the challenges for us is that we are inherently lazy people.

It comes back to that thing of, yeah, I have to love my enemy, but I don't have to like them. Because what we do there is we create love to be this kind of vague sense of well-being that requires no action.

So I can love them as long as I don't have to talk to them, go near them, give anything to them, let them come anywhere near me, because that would be liking. We're minimalists.

We want to do just what is required. But that's not the kind of love that Jesus models. There is no line that Jesus is not willing to go below in order to love and serve his disciples and in order to love and serve us.

[12:28] Jesus models love that is costly, sacrificial and active. But also, and this is really important because I think we miss this sometimes, in this story here, Jesus models love for those who don't love him back.

Did you notice in the cartoon and more importantly in the scripture in John 13, whose feet does Jesus wash? His disciples. All of his disciples.

Even the feet of Judas, who is about to leave and betray him. I mean, it's one thing for Jesus to be willing to sit there and wash the grime off the feet of the 11 men who love him and will continue the mission after Jesus is gone.

But how could Jesus kneel there on the floor and wipe filth off the feet of the one who is about to sell him for silver?

The answer is in verse 3. Says that Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God.

[13:50] So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist. The thing that enabled him to serve both his friends and his betrayer was a confidence in his heavenly Father, was a trust in what God was about to do.

Remember that this is just a snapshot. This is a beginning of a section of the gospel that is unapologetically marching towards and pointing towards and focusing in on the cross. That's what this is about. The full extent of his love is not his willingness to wash poo. The full extent of his love is the willingness to suffer and die so that we might know forgiveness. How does Jesus hang on the cross and look us in the eye and pray for us while we scorn him and mock him? The answer is he trusts God.

One of the reasons that I find it really difficult to love the people who don't love me is because I think I'm better than them. When I was in Bible college I was having a conversation with another guy who was studying and I can't remember what the exact context was but I was basically having a go at someone.

[15:10] How frustrating they were, how annoying they were, how just unaware they were of how annoying they were. And he turned to me and he said that's really sad that you feel like that.

It's one of the gentlest but most pointed rebukes I've ever received. Because when we look at people and ask that question why should I have to love somebody who's like that? Why should I have to love the criminal? Why should I have to love the bully? Why should I have to love the person who has hurt me repeatedly? What we're saying is we've forgotten the gospel. We're saying there's something in me that makes me superior or better or more valuable but the gospel message is the opposite. The gospel message is that God looks at you and sees you as unworthy and even worthless but he loves you anyway.

The gospel causes us to be able to look at those who are painful difficult and a struggle and say they deserve love just like I did.

[16:27] They need love just like I did. One other barrier that I wanted to just flag with us when it comes to being loving like Christ is culture. I was thinking about this and chatting with some of the team even just this morning about what sort of things become part of our culture that actually become obstacles for us loving in the way that Jesus talks about here.

I want to give you two examples. One I can own for myself and another is an observation from a culture that I'm not a part of. Firstly, we are an achievement culture.

Sydney, Australia especially, we are an achievement culture. We love winners. Think about the way we flip on a sporting team when they start losing.

We love Bernard Tomek when he almost wins a tournament and we probably hate him the rest of the time. We love the Wallabies or the Socceroos or whatever team it is you're supporting. You love the Swans until about 12 hours ago. Sorry, that was a cheap shot. But we are an achievement culture. We love people who are impressive, who have skills, who have abilities.

[17:42] The problem is when that culture becomes part of what we do here. Because that's not how Jesus loves. And we're called to love like he did.

If we come to church and only honour and only respect the people who are impressive, the people who have done things, that's not how Jesus loves.

And his love, the gospel message of what he has done for unworthy people, is the love that he calls us to mark this community. We must be careful that love for one another is not defined by what we get back or how impressive or how love worthy the other person is, but is defined by the love that Jesus has shown, by the value that he has placed on every son and daughter that he has died for and forgiven.

The second one is, second example is that that comes particularly in Chinese or Asian cultures.

And I think this can be a strength and a weakness, but in Asian cultures it tends to be in a way that Anglo cultures are weak.

Chinese cultures respect and revere seniority. Age is a mark of wisdom and honour, and so younger Chinese people will respect and defer to their parents, their grandparents, their aunts, their uncles, to older people, whereas in Anglo culture, you know, there's no respect given, unfortunately, to a fault.

[19:19] But the challenge is when that defines our relationships here as well. When, because you are older than me, you know better.

Now, you might, but age is not the point. The thing that defines us as a community is that we are all unworthy and powerless apart from Jesus.

The thing that blocks love in this community is holding on to things that are part of the way the world works at the expense of what the gospel has done. The gospel has drawn people who have no right to be in close relationship together by the same grace of Jesus Christ.

Culture does not define what it looks like to love. The gospel says that a 90-year-old Chinese man can choose to serve a five-year-old Chinese child.

The gospel says that the person who is skillful enough to lead every ministry we do can choose to serve the person who has just arrived and has absolutely nothing tangible to offer.

[20:38] The love that we are called to replicate is the love of Jesus. love that's costly, sacrificial, active, and even for or especially for those who don't give it back.

At the end of chapter 13 Jesus words like this in verse 34 he says a new command I give you love one another as I have loved you so you must love one another.

The bit that's new as I have loved you. There's always been the command for the people of God to care for one another to look after one another but now we're getting clearer definition as I have loved you.

Not just in this foot washing although that's part of it but we are marching towards the cross now sacrificially, costly, actively, even for our enemies.

and verse 35 by this all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. The gospel message that we want to take to the world, the message that there is hope and forgiveness on offer for even the darkest heart is made clearer, is even proclaimed by our love that is like Jesus, our love for one another and our service of one another.

[22:10] We are called to love like Jesus but the great news is that we're called to love like Jesus because we've been loved by Jesus. As I have loved you.

See it's not just a model that Jesus gives us, it's actually the means for our love. It's the thing that empowers our love. It's the thing that enables our love. The model that we are given in Christ is also the thing that achieves love in his community.

When I was just starting out in ministry I had a boss who would often ask me the question, what is your sanctified daydream? Which was his way of asking, what do you think God wants you to do in ministry?

And I was young and I was enthusiastic and I would unashamedly respond every time with, I see myself preaching to thousands of people. Now I honestly believe I did that out of a somewhat pure heart.

I'm a sinner like you so part of it was probably just the desire to be on stage in front of thousands of people but deep down I really just want as many people as possible to hear about the love of Jesus. That's what I would dream about, that's what I would always look forward to.

[23:25] But one of the things that I've had to learn through my Christian life is that having a big vision like that, and it's a good vision, our church has a big vision as well, is that it will never be achieved by me trying really hard.

It will never be achieved by a certain skill set or a certain individual. This is where this stuff gets really practical. If we're going to love like Jesus in a way that draws people in, in a way that preaches the gospel, in a way that sees lives transformed by the hope and forgiveness that is on offer, loving like Jesus is possible because we've been loved by Jesus.

And then now in John 15, flip back there if you went to John 13, John 15, verse 4, remain in me and I will remain in you.

No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. love like Jesus, love by Jesus, love in Jesus. Our hearts desire as a church, and I'm sure for many of you, the thing that drives you is fruit.

[25:04] You want more to know Jesus. It's like we talked about last week. You have a heart that is desperate for lost people to know the joy that you know, to know the incredible, unconditional love of a heavenly

father, to know the hope of heaven.

It is a big vision. That's the fruit talked about here. Lives transformed. It's the fruit of our own lives lived out in love, and it's important for us to dream.

It's important for us to have that heart to do big things for God. In fact, it's even almost required in chapter 15. But what's the command in this chapter?

It's a chapter about vines and branches and fruit and love and all this stuff. What's the command?

It's not to bear fruit. The command in John 15 is that first word in verse 4.

Remain. That's the instruction. Now, we get evidence of what that remaining will look like. In verse 7, it says, if you remain in me and my words remain in you, we need to be Bible-saturated people.

[26:22] That's what it means to live in the love of God. Not so that we'll have knowledge, but when we sit in God's word, we hear his voice, we get encouragement, we get assurance, we get reminded that his love is unconditional, that his love is powerful, that his love is effective.

Again, in verse 7, if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you. Jump down to verse 16.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Prayer.

Absolutely call is prayer. Remaining in the love of Jesus is about depending on him for everything.

That's what God's love does, is it takes weak and powerless, unimpressive people and adopts them as dearly loved sons and daughters and empowers them to do incredible things for God's glory and God's purpose.

Prayer is the evidence that we understand it's only by him, only by his love. As a preacher, I often get nervous when I get to the end of a sermon preparation and the application that I'm walking towards is read the Bible and pray because, you know, someone's going to tell me afterwards, we know.

[27:52] We've heard that before. That can't be the only point. But what if it's so key that we just need to hear it again? Just one more time.

Remaining in God's love means hearing his voice, means being actively dependent on him in everything and for everything.

I mean, we're told there in no uncertain words in verse 5, apart from him, you can do nothing. You need him to wake in the morning. You need his strength to achieve anything, let alone this Christ-like love that he's called us to, this love for enemies, this service of one another, even when we annoy each other.

Remaining in Christ is about having his power at work in us. That's what the whole vine image is.

The life that comes from the vine flowing through the branches to produce the fruit.

We're just a conduit of his power and his love and his hope. But the incredible thing is, is he pours out good things to us along the way. Verse 11, I've told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

[29:14] Loving each other can be a joy, even when it's sacrificial and costly. Verse 15, I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I've called you friends for everything that I learned from my father I've made known to you. We're not the hired helpers. We're partners.

We're co-heirs with Christ. We are friends on his mission. Remain. That's the command. That's the instruction.

verse 12 in chapter 15 echoes chapter 13. It says, my command is this, love each other as I have loved you. Verse 17 finishes, this is my command, love each other.

But this passage is about remaining. It's about vines and fruit. So why add those two commands to love? love? If the instruction is that we must remain in Christ, why do we end up there with the command to love again?

[30:22] Well, because it's the key. Loving like Jesus is made possible because we have been loved by Jesus. And it's empowered when we remain in Jesus.

The key in this passage in John 15, and this is how we need to understand John 13, this is how we need to understand the gospel, this is how we need to understand every aspect of being a Christian

and following Jesus.

The key is not our love. It's his love for us. As he loved, so we must love.

And his love is not just a fuzzy feeling. It's not just, oh, isn't it nice that God thinks I'm special. God's love is effective. God's love is doing something.

It's achieving an outcome. It's working. God's love is a love that he has put in you that is transforming your heart. It's enabling you to see that annoying person as someone that God loves and someone who you can love too.

[31:32] It's enabling you to bear fruit, to speak the gospel in such a way that people might come to know the love and forgiveness of Christ that they don't deserve but that they desperately want.

The key is not our love, it's God's love and that's why remaining is the command. That's why remaining is the instruction because growing is the key to serving.

Being in Christ and knowing his love for you, apart from anything you would ever do, is the key to being released to serve joyfully. and without burden and lovingly, even when it costs, remain, dwell, soak, live in Jesus.

In his forgiveness, in his love, in his purpose, in his hope, hope, so that we can bear fruit, so that we can love like he did, so that we can serve, so that we can transform the world with his hope.

Let me leave you with these last two verses. Jesus says, you did not choose me, but I chose you, and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

[33:04] This is my command, love each other. Let's pray. Father God, please help us this morning, and not just this morning, but every day, to feel the weight of your love.

Help us to remember again the power of your love to reach out to a lost person like us, the sufficiency of your love to wash us clean by the blood of Jesus.

The completeness of your love that is working in us to prepare us for heaven, for eternity with you.

And in the security of your love, may we be energized and empowered to show that same love to our brothers and sisters, and to the world around us, and to our enemies.

May we proclaim the gospel through active, costly, sacrificial love. love, enable us to trust you and to be so confident in your goodness that we can gladly bear the cost ourselves so that we might show love to those in need.

father, may we remain in you. May we soak in your word, listen to your promises, hear your voice, cry out to you in prayer, in such a way that your power and your love and your hope flows through us and produces fruit.

[34:40] father, we have a big vision as a church. We don't just want to be a group of people who meets together. We want to be your tool for your purposes.

We want to be used to see the world transformed, to see people drawn into your kingdom from darkness to light, from death to life. So please, God, work in us, change us, equip us, empower us to love like Jesus did.

Amen.