

Identify Yourselves!

John 13:31-35

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A pastor was traveling by plane. He loved the Lord, and he enjoyed being in the presence of other Christians. So he was excited when he saw that the man sitting next to him on the plane was carrying a Bible.

"Are you a believer?" The pastor asked the man.

"Yes," said the man.

Well, the pastor had learned that you can't be too careful. He needed to ask a few more questions, just to be sure that the man was, in fact, a Christian.

"Virgin birth?" He asked.

"I accept it," came the reply from the man.

"Deity of Jesus?"

"No doubt."

"Death of Christ on the cross?"

"He died for all people."

The pastor thought to himself, "Could it be that I am face to face with a Christian?

Perhaps." Still, he continued his checklist, as he resumed his grilling of the man sitting next to him. "Status of man," the pastor demanded.

"Sinner in need of grace."

"Return of Christ?" asked the pastor.

"Imminent," replied the man without hesitation

"Bible?"

"Inspired. Infallible"

At this point, the pastor could feel his heart start to beat faster. Had he come across a kindred soul?! He continued his line of questioning: "Conservative or liberal?"

The man was also getting interested in the way the conversation was moving.

"Conservative."

"Denomination?" asked the pastor.

"Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention," said the man with tremendous pride.

The pastor couldn't believe his ears! That was his denomination, too!

"What branch of the denomination do you represent?" the pastor asked the man.

"Pre-millennial, post-tribulation, non-charismatic, King James Bible, one-cup communion,

immersion baptism – believers only.”

The pastor’s eyes started to well up with tears. He had only one other question to ask the man.

“Which hymnal—red 1954, or blue 1995?”

“Blue” came the response of the man.

At that, the pastor felt his neck stiffen up and the blood rush to his face. “Heretic!” he yelled to the man, and they didn’t speak another word for the rest of the flight.

Why is it that believers in Christ can have so much in common, yet still look for that one thing that will divide them or set them apart from the others? I find it interesting that Jesus didn’t tell his disciples that people would know who they were by the content of their faith, but by the way in which they related to one another—in particular, by the way in which they loved one another.

Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room. It was his last night with his disciples. The mood was heavy. Jesus had just identified Judas as the one who would betray him. Jesus knew that in a few hours he would be shackled in chains, and his friends would run away in fear. Jesus knew that the next day he would be tortured and would die an excruciating death. There is great meaning and truth to John’s description just prior to our verses this morning: And it was night.¹

Indeed, it was night, and the darkness was heavy. It is against the backdrop of darkness that Jesus gives his final instructions to his disciples: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”²

There are four things I want to say about Jesus’ teaching.

The first is that this is a command leveled directly at the Christian church. It’s not that love of all people isn’t important, because clearly it is, since all people bear the image of God. But in this case Jesus is addressing his followers, and he is telling us to love each other. The command to love one another is given directly to you and me and to all who are part of the church of Jesus Christ.

The second point I want to make this morning concerns the standard by which we are to measure our love for one another. Don’t you find it interesting that Jesus told his disciples he was giving a NEW command? What’s so new about the command to love each other? That command is as old as time itself.

But what is new is the standard by which we are to gauge our love. Previously, the standard was to love our neighbor as our selves. That is, we only owed it to one another to love others by the same degree or in the same manner by which we love ourselves. And if you were to look through this room, you would find dozens of different measures of love for self. But Jesus gives us a new standard to achieve in our love for one another—to love each other in the same way and to the same extent that he has loved us.

Twice on his final evening Jesus helps us understand the scope and the manner of the love he commands of us. The first time is in the instance before us today. Jesus had just washed his disciples’ feet as an act of servant devotion. He is telling us to love by serving one another. In addition, Judas has just left the room to make complete his betrayal of Jesus. It is against the backdrop of betrayal that Jesus

¹ John 13:30

² John 13:34-35

commands us to love one another—a love that is willing to forgive. And later on in the evening Jesus repeats the command, with the explanation that no one has greater love than the one who gives his life for his friends. Jesus gave his life for us.

Loving one another as we have been loved by Jesus means that we must be willing to serve one another, to forgive one another, to give of our selves for each other. More than an emotion or feeling, it is a way we act toward one another.

The third thing I want to expand upon in regard to this command is that, apart from loving each other in the body of Christ, the command does not qualify whom we are to love. That is, the command doesn't isolate only the nicer, more lovable people. We are not simply to love those who by their demeanor are easy to love. We are to love everyone in the church.

There's a small town in west Texas called Stanton. Stanton has as its marketing slogan, "Home to 3000 friendly people and a few old soreheads." You and I both know that in every church we are mostly friendly people, and a few old soreheads. When Jesus commands us to love one another, he's not telling us only to love the friendly ones; he's telling us we have to love the old soreheads, as well. Jesus doesn't qualify the command by limiting whom we are to love; we are simply to love one another.

If we are to love one another as Jesus has loved us, we must be willing to forgive, to put aside our grudges, to overcome our hurts. We are not to love with our fingers crossed. There are no loopholes in this command.

The fourth thing we need to recognize about what Jesus says in this command is that our identity as Jesus' disciples is at stake. It is our love for one another, in the same manner by which we have been loved by Christ, that tells the world who we are. It is not so much our position on the virgin birth that identifies us as followers of Christ, neither is it one's position on the doctrine of predestination that identifies us as followers of Christ, neither is it the kind of musical instruments we use in worship that identifies us as followers of Christ, neither is it a matter of wearing a cross necklace or putting a fish symbol on our car that identifies us as followers of Christ. As important as some of those things may be, they aren't what identify us as followers of Christ. No, it is whether or not we love our fellow Christians that identifies us as followers of Christ. It is the way we love one another in the church that tells the world we are Christ's disciples. The world will be able to identify true disciples of Jesus by our love for one another. As the song says so clearly and so simply: They'll know we are Christians by our love.

But what is at stake here is far greater than whether or not you or I are identified as disciples of Jesus Christ. For the truth is, not only will the world know we are Christians by our love, but the world will also know what kind of Christ we follow by the way we relate to one another. If we love one another as Jesus has loved us, then the world will come to know Jesus as one who is patient, and kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant; not irritable or resentful; not gleeful at wrongdoing, rather rejoicing in the truth. If we love one another as Jesus has loved us, then the world will come to know Jesus as one who bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.³

If, on the other hand, we relate to one another in some way other than love, then the world will see Jesus that way, as well. When the Christian church squabbles over doctrine, what kind of Jesus does the world see? When the Christian church argues over property, or music, or technology, or the color of the

³ See 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Jesus is the one who defines for us the standard of love

carpet, what kind of Jesus does the world see? When the Christian church engages in internal power struggles that spill out into the parking lot and beyond, what kind of Jesus does the world see?

I say this, not because in this church we're failing to love one another, because in fact I think we do a pretty good job of loving one another. But I want us to be reminded of what's at stake in the way we relate to one another, for how relate to one another says worlds about the Jesus we proclaim

In my involvement with the work of the Presbytery of New Harmony, I am on a team of elders and ministers who work with churches during times of disagreement and conflict. Sometimes we are able to guide the people and their ministers through the conflict with the result that the people show respect and concern for one another amidst their disagreements; in these cases I truly believe that Christ is glorified, for his people are being true to the ministry of reconciliation to which Christ calls us all.

But sometimes the people and their ministers refuse to play by the rules; they manipulate the process, and they use gossip and innuendo and untruths to drive a wedge right down the middle of the church. When churches act like this, I am deeply saddened on two fronts. The first is that this kind of conflict is painful, and many people in the church become unintended casualties. But the second thing that saddens me is that when this kind of conflict erupts, it is giving Jesus a black eye. What must the world think when they hear that the church is full of loving people, then they see these loving people assassinate one another's character and dignity?

They will know we are Christians by our love. But they'll also know our Christ by the way we love—or fail to love—one another.

There is an interesting passage in the Old Testament book of Zechariah, where it says that the day will come when people who have never had any connection to God will go up to God's people and take them by the collar and say: "Take us to meet your God." The idea is that by looking at God's people, those on the outside will be able to tell that something special is happening and they'll want to come and be a part of it. You see, whether we love each other or choose not to, that says a lot to the people on the outside.

Jesus said, Love one another as I have loved you. By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you love one another. May we obey and fulfill that command to the extent that those on the outside will look at us and say, "Take us to meet your God."

Amen.