

I have a portion of a letter to read to you:

Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and they don't hesitate to honor widows; and they rescue the orphans who are being abused. The one who has gives to the one who lacks, without bragging about it. And when they meet a stranger, they take him into their homes and rejoice over him as if he were a brother. . . . And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food themselves, they will fast two or three days just so they can have something to share with the one lacking food. They observe the teachings of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God has commanded them.

The date is around A.D. 133—a hundred years after Jesus died and rose. The letter was written to the Roman emperor Hadrian by a pagan philosopher who was trying to explain what Christianity was all about. Isn't it wonderful? What a powerful testimony those early Christians gave about the hope that was inside them! This was the thing above all other things (except, maybe, their willingness to die) that the unbelieving Greeks and Romans noticed about the Christians: "See how they love one another!"

Tonight, as we continue our series *Three Words of Truth*, we encounter such a simple, short phrase that summarizes what our entire life in Christ is all about: **Love one another**. The words come from the lips of our dear Savior Jesus, the Son of Man, who speaks them while sitting in the upper room just hours before his arrest, trial, beating, and crucifixion. But they are also the words of the Son of God, who is love. It is this Jesus who speaks these three short words so that we examine our hearts this Lenten season and turn to him in true repentance and faith. This is the word and will of God himself. For in Jesus, God . . .

1. came here to show us love.

2. leaves us here to live in love.

He came here to show us love. Whenever we read from the gospels and hear Jesus speak, we are confronted with this baffling question: What was the Son of God doing on earth? The Bible says that God lives in the bliss and glory of heaven, in unapproachable light; there is no sadness, there is no pain, there are no problems, there are no heartaches or heartbreaks. So why would he leave that and come here?

We hear the gospel lessons so often—a blessing! But in hearing them so much we often overlook this painfully obvious question. "Well, of course Jesus is here! Why wouldn't he be here?" Ah—but to ask that, to think that is to *not* understand at all who God is. He is the Holy One of Israel, the Alpha and Omega, the great I am. He is completely independent; he needs nothing for his happiness. Nor did he need to create the world to have some sense of fulfillment or purpose. Bottom line: He simply doesn't need us, much less to become one of us and to live among us for a time.

This Word of God confronts us with a kind of love we can barely begin to grasp. "For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven . . ." we confess in the Nicene Creed. But think about those words! They follow earlier words: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is. . . ." Knowing all things as God does from

eternity, he went ahead and created the world and its people—you and me—knowing full well that Adam would plunge the world into sin and death and that he himself would have to be the One to come and rescue it. And when sin and death came upon all—for all sinned in Adam—he didn't hesitate; God stood there in the garden and announced his rescue plan. He would send his own beloved Son to teach and heal, to comfort and instruct, to be despised and rejected. Nor would Jesus hesitate either, for by being the “man of sorrows” and the “sheep led to the slaughter” for the sins of the world, he would bring glory to his Father and have the joy of saving people for an eternity of happiness in his kingdom. I was lost; I was dead in transgressions and sins. I was born an object of God's wrath, not his pride and joy. Yet in his great mercy—mercy, because he was under no obligation to do so—he came and delivered us from sin, death, and hell.

“This is love,” John writes in another place, “not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). And St. Paul writes, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

But Christ also rose; you know that. And he told the disciples (really, a statement guaranteeing his victory) that he would indeed return to the Father, and soon. Because of the certainty of Jesus' victory, he told his disciples that night to trust in God with their troubled hearts. He told them to not be afraid, and he told them that all the sorrow they experience here—especially the sorrow over their sins—will be turned to joy.

This good news is for each of you as well. “Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven.” The Son of God has paid for them in his blood and has forgotten them all. They are irrelevant for where you go from here.

2. He leaves us here to live in love.

And where do we go? Forward—daily—in a new life in Christ; closer—daily—to following him to heaven.

But until Jesus calls us out of this world to follow him to the glory of the Father, he has left us here to do this: Love one another.

“A new command,” Jesus calls it. But was it really? No, not really. This has always been God's will: for us to love him with our hearts, souls, and minds and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. But here's the difference and what makes it “new”: no longer are we to love as we love ourselves but “as I have loved you.” That is the new standard and the new motivation that comes from understanding the gospel. There is no loving anyone or understanding what true love is apart from knowing what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

“As I have loved you . . .” As I have had true love for you—putting you first, loving you at all cost, doing what's best for you not me—“so you must love one another.” This is how our Savior beckons us, his children, to live. Our life of love is proof that the Spirit has worked thankful faith in our hearts. *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”*

It's amazing how children imitate their parents when they're small, isn't it? In fact, you can get them to imitate just about anything you are doing! They learn that way. They learn how to do things—tie a shoe, read a book. But they also learn other things that way, such as how to treat other people. They watch how Mom and Dad speak to each other, how Mom and Dad speak

about other people, and they imitate it. We parents kind of grimace when we hear that, don't we, because we know we aren't perfect role models for our children.

We also are weighed down by our old sinful nature that only knows "self love." Love for self consumed Judas. He couldn't stay; he left to watch out for himself, to do what was best for him. He didn't understand Jesus' love, even when Jesus lovingly washed his feet. His self love destroyed him, eternally.

And even in our lives as believers (unlike Judas), we struggle to love so freely, so lavishly as Jesus did. We live in the last days, when "*because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold*" (Matt 24:12). We limit our love. We put conditions on our love. We sometimes dictate the time and place and circumstances under which we are going to show love. And so often it's just "half-love": half genuinely given but the other half directed back at us so that we can feel good about ourselves, about what we've done. What heaven must be like, to live in perfect love! God forgive us.

And he does. The marvel of his love is that it is so . . . steady. Every day as we confess our sins and humbly hang our heads, he is right there to assure us that we are his dear, forgiven children. Every day he does not treat us as our sins deserve. Every day he deals with us in mercy and grace. Every day his love causes us to ask with the psalmist, happy yet amazed, "*How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?*" (Ps 116:12 NIV84).

Here is his answer, given by Jesus. Not a long list of ideas, commands, principles, guidelines, directives, mandates—no. Just these three simple words of truth: Love one another. Amen.