

Listen: What did Jesus Say?

Betrayers, Lovers, Deniers

John 13:21-38

Mark Vroegop

²¹ After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. ³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” ³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times. (John 13:21-38)

Do you remember the key phrase from last week’s message? I hope so. I don’t know about you, but I sensed the Lord’s presence among us as we learned to “Watch Jesus. Go Low.”

The example of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, including Judas, was incredible to see in the text. I hope that stayed with you and made you love Jesus even more. But I also hope that you were able to feel the calling to “Go Low.”

If you weren’t here last week, “going low” means to follow Jesus’s example and command. He said, “I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:15). I told you that some of you were going to need that message last week. And I wonder how many of you found that to be true. Was there a specific opportunity you had to remind yourself to “Go low?”

I hope you'll remember that statement for a while. Because Christ-like humility is one of the essential heart-positions for the disciple of Jesus. The gospel creates humility. And it's hard to humiliate the humble.

Jesus intends for his disciples to be unusual people. Everything in the nature of humanity and in our culture goes the opposite direction. We want power, prestige, affirmation, accolades, to be awarded, to be served, to be coddled, and to have it never end. We want to win, to conquer, to achieve, and to be in control. That is the pull of our culture and our hearts.

Now don't hear me saying that your goal should be to finish last every time or that to be competitive is to be sinful. Everything I just mentioned isn't necessarily evil. But it is important to both see the strong pull of culture and humanity and to be careful about where those things could lead.

No one possessed more power, prestige, and "glory" than Jesus. But notice how he used it! Watch Jesus. Go low.

"Hot Mess" in the Upper Room

Our text today is glorious and messy. In John 13:21-38, we see all the trouble that surrounds Jesus during the last week of his life. After washing the disciples' feet and asking them if they understood what he did for them, the text says: "...Jesus was troubled in his spirit" (v. 21).

In that room, laying on small mats around a U-shaped table, were the men who would change the world. Over the next decade, they will take the gospel all over the known world. Nearly all of them will be executed. They will preach to thousands.

And yet, one of them is a betrayer; another is over-confident. If you walked into this scene in biblical history, you probably would not smell the aroma of global influence. But they did.

If Christ-like humility were to mark their hearts, what should mark their community? In other words, the disciples were far from perfect. They were a mess. Jesus was troubled. And yet he told them that there was one characteristic that would make the world marvel: **their love for one another**.

In the mess of discipleship, Jesus said "love each other." Last week was "Watch Jesus. Go Low." Consider this week to "Love my Church." Let me unpack this for you.

1. Troubling Betrayal

Our passage begins with John highlighting the humanity of Jesus. We remember how John opened this gospel by saying, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). But here we see it in full display. Despite his power and his glory, here is the Son of God, visibly distressed. John likely saw something about how Jesus looked that made him write this.

I hope that it is comforting to you. The Greek word that is used here is also used in regard to Herod when he heard the news about the birth of Jesus (Matt. 2:4), Zechariah when he met an angel before the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:12), and Jesus's response to the weeping at the tomb of Lazarus

(John 11:33). The word connects perceived bad events with negative emotions. You might think of this as non-sinful anxiety, fear, agitation, or being disturbed. Jesus felt that way. He was living in a broken world and sometimes he felt its brokenness.

That's important because sometimes I encounter believers who think that real Christians never feel anxious, struggle with fear, or feel troubled. But Jesus certainly did. The presence of fear or anxiety doesn't mean you are a sub-par Christian. Jesus was troubled. These were troubling times.

But there's a broader theme here. Next week we'll look at John 14 where Jesus says, "Let not your hearts be troubled..."(John 14:1). And at the end of this section, John says "And it was night" (13:30). John wants you to know that the dark clouds have rolled in.

I was telling someone that when we lived in Holland, the month of February was really hard. The sun hardly appeared. Winter felt like it was never going to end. People felt angry, discouraged, and on edge. I never liked to vote on things as a congregation during this time period. It felt dark.

Why am I talking about this? Well, because you are about to read a very dark moment in the life of the disciples. It is in this context that Jesus gives them one of the most important commands. More on this later, but just keep that in mind.

Imagine the scene: after an intimate dinner with Jesus washing the disciples' feet, we read these words: "Truly, truly I say to you, one of you will betray me" (v. 21). Imagine how that must have landed in the room. Mark's account of this moment records that they were sorrowful and began asking Jesus "Is it me?" (Mark 14:13)

John tells us that they were confused, so Peter motioned to John ("one of his disciples who Jesus loved...") to lean back and ask Jesus who it is (v. 23-25). Jesus answers in verse 26 as he passes a morsel of bread to Judas. But it appears that the disciples missed the moment. Judas was likely sitting to the left of Jesus, a place of honor, as Jesus passed the food to him.

It's sobering to consider that Jesus's act of love toward Judas didn't break him. Instead John identifies that this is the moment when Satan entered into him. We are not sure how he knew this. Perhaps Judas look different, or perhaps there was something definitive in how he responded to Jesus.

After this Jesus tells Judas "What you are going to do, do quickly" (v. 27). However, the disciples are not sure what is going on or why Jesus is talking to Judas like this. Now before you are too hard on them, how many times has something happened at a Thanksgiving meal that you had no idea about? Maybe your spouse or sibling picked up on it, and you were clueless. Perhaps that's what happened here.

Judas takes the bread, and he leaves to betray Jesus (v. 30). And it was night (v. 31). It's a troubling betrayal. But that's not the only thing that's troubling.

2. Troubling Predictions

With Judas gone, Jesus announces something important and disturbing. In verses 31-32 he identifies that the hour for his glorification has come. These verses are signaling that Jesus's mission is nearing its completion and that what will happen next will connect him to the glory of God. This is the purpose of Jesus's earthly life.

But then Jesus drops a bomb: ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' (John 13:33) This must have been deeply disturbing. They'd given up everything to follow him, and right when Jesus is going to be glorified, they are not able to come with him? This must have been deeply troubling.

Jesus is going to leave them. After all that they've been through, he's not going to be with them much longer.

Skip ahead to verse 36. We'll come back to verses 34-35 in a moment. Peter was reluctant to speak earlier, but now he asks Jesus a question: "Lord, where are you going?" (v. 36). Then Jesus tells Peter that their separation is only temporary. He can't follow Jesus now, but he will follow later (v. 36). Peter protests: "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!" (v. 37).

Don't miss the irony here. Peter's self-confidence is delusional. His enthusiasm for Jesus and his self-assurance combine to create an ironic moment. Jesus says, "Will you lay down your life for me?" (v. 38). Peter doesn't know what he's talking about, especially in light of the fact that Jesus is going to do just that in very short order.

And then Jesus levels his rebuke in the form of a prediction: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times" (v. 38). Imagine what that must have felt like. Peter is not going to stand strong; he's going to deny Jesus – not just once, or twice, but three times. It's a devastating prediction.

Now, it is important to remember that Peter, despite his lack of judgment, will be restored back to an intimate relationship with Jesus after his resurrection. There will be grace for Peter. That should be an encouragement for you as well. Jesus's disciples are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination.

But their lives have been changed by Jesus.

This scene in the upper room is deeply troubling. Jesus identifies that there's a betrayer in the mix. The disciples are uncertain as to who it is. Peter is told that he will deny Jesus three times. These are dark times. John even says, "And it was night."

All of this is the context in which one of the most important commands in the New Testament is given.

3. Essential Affection

In the midst of a the "hot mess" of the upper room, here is what Jesus says:

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

What Jesus commanded

This commandment represents what Jesus expects of his disciples while he is away. Jesus calls it a new commandment, but it isn't "new" as if this had never been said before. Loving God and loving your neighbor were vital parts of the Old Testament Law (see Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18). This is not new in that respect.

What's new is the reference to the example of Jesus: "...just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (v. 34). The example of Jesus is certainly in view here – not only what he did in washing their feet, but also what he will do by laying down his life (see John 15:13).

The example and sacrifice of Jesus will inaugurate a new way to live. His death and resurrection will set in motion the new covenant, the time when the Holy Spirit empowers people to keep the very essence of the law from their hearts (see Ezek. 36:24-26, Jer. 31:29-34). In other words, Jesus's death modeled how to live and made living differently possible. That's why Paul calls a series of behaviors like love, joy, peace, patience, etc. the fruit of the Spirit (see Gal. 5:22-24).

This idea of love is so important that John said the following in his letter called 1 John:

¹⁴ We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵ Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. ¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers (1 John 3:14–16).

But take note of something very important: it's not just that Christians are to be loving people in general. That's true. But John records that Jesus calls us to love the brothers. Jesus said, "love one another." Loving people who are outside of the church should certainly happen, but this command is uniquely focused on the internal culture of the community.

Or you could think of it as the church. Jesus is calling for love in the confines of the body of Christ. Jesus called his disciples to love one another as he loved them.

Why love matters

Then Jesus tells his disciples and us why love matters. He says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35). The loving relationship of the community will say something to the world. Jesus envisions a counter-cultural community when it comes to the body of Christ. He imagines the gathering of disciples to be a place that is remarkable to the world.

A loving community stands out. That has always been true, but I think it's even more true today. Do you sense that our culture is getting more and more angry? I read a fascinating article this week on the

increasing tribalism of our culture.¹ The article suggested that people are not so much rallying for a cause or a party they believe in as much as banding together against a common enemy. For instance, if you hate the Patriots and Tom Brady, you tend to believe that all the calls go their way. You also believe they cheat all the time. And you don't care how – you just want them to lose. But what's true in sports can be true in business, education, religion, and politics. Fear, anxiety, and anger seem to be in the air these days. Do you sense it? Add a little social media megaphone to mix, and you have a polarized, angry culture.

Part of the reason for this is that we are most comfortable when we are in groups of people who think and act in a similar manner. But when you live in a more largely populated area, add in rapid changes, and an incredible amount of changes – including information flow – you have a recipe for wanting to build tribal cocoons to feel safe again.

In other words, communities where people love one another and act like it have always been rare. But they are increasingly rare today.

What it looks like

So, what does love look like in the context of the church? It means that you see the value of loving your church. And by that, I mean more than just the activities of the church. It means that you love the people in the church. Further, it means that you come to church not just to receive, but also to love one another. In your greeting, your conversations, your questions, and in your engagement with people, you live out what it means to love people.

It means wearing a name tag so people can remember your name. Sitting in the same area to get to know others. Finding a Small Group, class, or Bible study where you can know other people and they can know you. Inviting someone out to lunch after service. Using your finances to bless someone when they are in need.

And it means responding to people in the church in a way that fits with love. When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, they were plagued with spiritual polarization and tribalism. He said this:

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:10–12).

In chapter 13, Paul identifies a series of characteristics of love. In the midst of a troubled and broken world with terrible, imperfect people, this is the life the Bible calls us to:

¹ <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/rethinking-polarization>. While I don't agree with everything in the article, its analysis of cultural polarization is helpful.

- Patient - a willingness to keep going with hard people
- Kind - a commitment to respond with more grace than deserved
- Not envious - doesn't wish for others to lose
- Not boasting - not verbally celebrating your success
- Not arrogant - not thinking that you are better or see everything clearly
- Not rude - not treating people in a way that punishes
- Not insisting on his own way - not being unreasonable and inflexible
- Not irritable - not having a quick fuse or easily offended
- Not resentful - not holding an internal grudge or keeping a list of wrongs
- Not rejoicing at wrongdoing - not delighting in the fall of others
- Rejoices in truth - celebrates what is right and true
- Bears all things - willing to personally absorb unfairness and mistreatment
- Believes all things - first step is one of grace, not suspicion
- Hopes all things - confident in God's ability to bring change
- Endures all things - takes the long view, doesn't quit

College Park, this is what our church is to be like. This is what I'm to be like. It's what you're to be like. We'll never love perfectly. We'll blow it a thousand times. But when we get it right – even in our brokenness – it says something not only powerful, but also attractive to the world.

Watch Jesus. Go low. Love your church.

That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

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