

77 – The Greatest Miracle

John 13: 31-28

They were in their final hours together. He would be arrested soon, and by nine o'clock in the morning He would be on the cross. So, Jesus devoted the time they had left to preparing His disciples for the future. Here were truths to which they would need to cling. Here were promises that would carry them through the trials they would face in the years ahead. He spoke of heaven, love, prayer, the Holy Spirit, obedience, persecution, and, of course, His return to set up the kingdom of God. And then He let them listen as He interceded for them before the Father. None of the topics He taught that evening is a surprise. All are foundational to discipleship. But what is surprising is the topic that He chose first. No sooner had He announced that He would be leaving them than He issued what He called a "new commandment," and said that their obedience to that command would be the single most important miracle that would cause people to believe in Him. Nothing they could do would be more effective. Indeed, He would empower them to do supernatural works that were even greater than those He had done (Jn 14:12), but those miracles wouldn't have the greatest impact, they wouldn't be the most important way of convincing the world that He was the Savior or that they were His disciples. That powerful witness would happen only when they obeyed the new commandment, only when they chose to love each other as deeply as He had loved them. Today, let's try to understand what that means, so we too can release the greatest miracle of all.

Preparing for His departure (Jn 13:33-38)

• DBS (Mon-Thurs)

The scandal

G. Campbell Morgan, one of the great preachers of a past generation, said this, "The measure in which Christian people fail to love each other is the measure in which the world does not believe in them or their Christianity" (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to John*, Fleming H. Revell Co., P.241).

Think of it, the scandal of Christianity is that Christians don't love each other. That's the main accusation that's used to discredit the claims of Jesus Christ. If He really is the Savior then why don't His people act differently than the world around them? Why are they so divided? Why are there so many denominations? Why do they separate from other Christians into cultural groups on Sunday morning? Where's the miracle that proves that their heart is different than ours? We don't see a change. We think they're just like us, only they refuse to admit it. They pretend to be something they're not.

Our society

Our society is divided, and dividing even more. It's splitting along lines wherever people are different. Selfless love is hard to find, except on occasion with our military, police, fire fighters, or medical community. So, in the midst of all this division, if a community of people gathers who are from very different backgrounds (languages, ethnicities, economic status, etc.), who radiate a warm joy at being together, who genuinely care for each other when there is trouble, and who are not merely outwardly "friendly" but truly welcoming when those who long for this love show up, that community will stand out like a light in the darkness. The world around them will be more than interested. They'll be fascinated. They'll begin to watch closely, and yes, with skepticism. They'll look for hypocrisy, hidden selfish motives, signs of pride and exclusion. But if the kind of love Jesus is talking about is really there, the honest ones will recognize its markers: unusual kindness, surprising generosity, remarkable patience, the investment of time in one another, a delight at being together, the capacity to absorb an offense and be reconciled, and a sincere interest in the well-being of someone outside one's immediate family.

The greatest miracle

Why is selfless love the greatest miracle? You would think the greatest miracle would be the power to walk on water or raise the dead. I think the answer is: because it's easier to heal someone's body than to change someone's heart. Power is impressive, but this love is holy. When it is present one can feel the warmth of heaven. It reaches to a place inside us that's deeper than our intellect. It satisfies a hunger in us to belong, it quenches a thirst to be part of a family, it feels like we're coming home, it's the aroma of heaven.

Notice: Jesus didn't command His followers to merely maintain a positive mental attitude toward one another. His new commandment is far more costly. It demands that we step into an intense level of relationship with others and allow God to teach us how to love them at a level beyond our natural abilities. He's calling us to enter into a miracle, a miracle so great that it will prove to a skeptical world that He is real and awaken the hope that He can work that same miracle inside of them. Yes, there are many who need a miracle in their finances, there are those who need healing, there are those who need to be released from demonic harassment. And on that same evening Jesus promised that we would be given the power to do those things. Those are wonderful miracles, and we desire as many as possible. But the miracle most humans desire above all others is the ability to love and be loved. People realize that their hearts have gone cold. They hate it, but they don't know what to do about it. Everyone around them has the same problem. They long, whether they know it or not, for the promise God gave thorough Ezekiel.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Eze 36:26).



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This is why when unbelievers encounter people who really love each other, and would gladly love them as well, deep, primal emotions begin to stir: hope that the love they're seeing is real, and fear that they'll discover it's not and be disappointed once more. Some may be confused by the fact that this miracle seems to come from Jesus, who is so controversial. They may wrestle with religious doubts or shame over past behavior. Inside them there may be a turmoil as their head argues with their heart. But the heart knows love when it sees it, and when it does a yearning ignites that draws people like a magnet.

It's a command

When Jesus commands us to do something He is appealing to our will. He's saying that we are able to do this particular thing if we choose to. And His command to love one another with the same depth of love with which He has loved us, He addressed to every one of us. He didn't say this only to those who have a warm outgoing personality. He didn't say this only to those who come from healthy loving families or have a high level of self-esteem. He said, "If you are My disciple, I want you to love My people the way I have loved you, and if you will obey Me, the world around you will know that there is something real taking place among you, and many will long to join you and will believe in Me" (paraphrase).

What's required?

In order to obey the new commandment each of us must make certain decisions and then take obedient steps forward. Here are several.

1) People: If we've been isolated we have to be willing to leave that safety and enter into relationships with people. Jesus expects us to live out our lives as a part of a community of believers where we live life together to such a degree that we know one another's needs and are personally involved in caring for one another.

In case any of His disciples missed His point the first time He issued this new commandment, Jesus repeated it that same evening. Listen.

"This is My commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you" (Jn 15:12-14).

2) Time: We must adjust our schedules until we can find the time to consistently gather with other believers. Ultimately, this becomes a matter of priorities. If we really believe He is asking us to do this, one way or another He will show us a way that will work for us.

3) Desire: We must desire to see this miracle take place. We must desire to obey our Lord's command. We must desire to love one another until the world marvels and lost people long to be part of God's family.

The new commandment

Why did Jesus call it a new commandment? What's new about it? Hasn't God always wanted His people to love each other? And why did He issue this command at the end of His years of discipling rather than at the beginning? I believe the answer is this: He was asking His disciples to love at a level deeper than was ever possible before. He was asking them to love like God loves. He was asking them to love like He loved them. And that required a miracle that would only be available after His cross and resurrection. He was looking forward to the era of the Spirit. He was talking about a love that could only happen after the Holy Spirit had removed "the heart of stone" and had given them a "heart of flesh" (Eze 36:26).

That miracle makes it possible for us to love at a new level. The Book of Acts lets us watch this transformation take place. Following the day of Pentecost frightened, weary believers suddenly became a bold community, one that not only survived in the midst of persecution but thrived in it. Believers gathered daily from house to house to study the apostles' teaching, to fellowship and eat together, and to pray (Ac 2:42). They sacrificially gave to provide for those who had been abandoned for their faith, and gladly welcomed new believers. No wonder Luke says, "... they had favor with all the people" (Ac 2:47). They were obeying the new commandment and the result was "... the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Ac 2:47). That same miracle, the greatest miracle of all, is available to us today. Jesus wants to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and when He comes He will place within us a heart full of love for the family of God.

Questions

1) Tell us one of the ways you live out the new commandment. Where do you have a relationship with people so deep that you know their needs and they know yours?

2) Think of a time when someone has loved you with this kind of selfless love. What was it that touched your heart?

3) Have you ever seen God's love draw someone to faith in Christ? Tell us what happened.