

A Critical Quality of a Follower of Jesus Christ

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John 13.1 – 38

How can we distinguish who is a follower of Jesus Christ? If we relied on the Christian art of the fourth century which featured religious figures with halos over their heads, we would look for people with halos. Or if we quickly fast-forward ahead to a couple of decades ago when bumper stickers were a fad, we might look for ones with a fish or a dove or a cross and we might assume the driver of the vehicle was a Christian. Or perhaps we could look for people with a cross on a necklace, or who had a cross tattoo, or wore a “*What Would Jesus Do?*” bracelet? There is nothing wrong with religious symbols, but they have proven to be very unreliable revealing the beliefs of the person who wears or displays them.

Jesus pointed to a far more accurate quality to identify His followers. This is what He said:

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

Before delving into the details of this commandment, let me give an overview:

1. The nature of this love

Understanding the unique nature of the love Jesus talked about is very important. Much of the love we observe in the world is superficial, fickle, and self-serving. It is often very temporal and subjective.

The *love* Jesus referred to is evident from the word He used to describe it, *agápē*. It is a sacrificial, other-person focused type of *love* which concerns itself with what is in the best interest of another. It is characterized by commitment and is anything but superficial and shallow. It is a *love* which perseveres in the face of adversity and difficulty.

2. Jesus modelled and is the standard of this love

He directs us to love one another “*just as I have loved You.*” He is the standard to aspire to and has revealed what this *love* looks like by His actions. It was this *love* that motivated Him to come to earth to provide salvation to a lost and dying world. The ultimate display of His *love* happened only a matter of hours after He said this to His disciples when He voluntarily laid down His life as a sacrifice for sin at Calvary.

The example of Jesus is the grid to assess the quality of our *love*, that is what is particularly new about this commandment. Jesus’ statement to His disciples expanded on the commandment found in **Deuteronomy 6:5** (ESV) “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The Old Testament also directed people to love their neighbor, for example, **Leviticus 19:18** (ESV) “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” However, by the first century the Jewish leaders had come up with so many criteria to determine who qualified as one’s neighbor so as to render

the commandment essentially meaningless; Jesus corrected that when He stressed its importance.

Matthew 22:37–39 (ESV) ³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**

The love Jesus calls us to exercise in relationship to one another is to mirror our love for God.

3. It is possible for followers of Jesus to exercise this love

Jesus would not direct us to love one another and use Him as the model to follow if it wasn't possible to do so. Thus, it is incumbent on followers of Jesus to seek to fulfill His instruction by relying on Him to provide us with not only the initiative, but the means to effectively carry this out.

4. Practicing this love is observable by onlookers

Jesus said, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” The world is watching, and they observe how followers of Jesus relate to one another. The *watching world* will observe how those who profess to be Christians love each other. Christians loving one another should be so convincing that onlookers will have no doubt about their claim to be genuine followers of Jesus Christ.

It is possible for people to fake a relationship with the Lord by outwardly adhering to many commendable practices and holding to high moral standards while inwardly having a heart not surrendered to Jesus at all. However, it is much more difficult to exercise the *agápē* love Jesus was talking about without personally knowing Him.

An Expression of Humility

Let us now turn our attention to the events which happened earlier in the evening when Jesus told us to “*love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*” The Feast of the Passover was at hand and Jesus knew the time had come for His death and He was about to leave His disciples. This was His final evening with the twelve. He needed to prepare them for the events which would immediately unfold as well as the aftermath which followed. The disciples had not grasped what lay ahead and the nature of Jesus' Kingdom. That is apparent from an interchange among the disciples; it is not recorded in John's Gospel, but in **Luke 22:24–27** we learn the disciples had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. They viewed greatness through the same lens as the world which stood in sharp contrast to the relationships Jesus spoke about. By contrast it was critical for them, and for us, to embrace an indispensable attitude – *humility*. It was not modelled by the world in the first century, nor is it today. Jesus illustrated the quality of humility which was central to the *agápē* love His followers were to emulate.

John 13:1–5 (ESV) ¹Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.

⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

The nature of life in first century Israel made foot washing a common practice and provided a powerful teaching opportunity for Jesus. After walking in sandals on earthen roadways, people's feet became dirty. Hence, normally a servant would have washed the feet of those who gathered with Jesus for the *Passover* meal. Since no one had done so, Jesus used the occasion to demonstrate to His disciples that loving one another began with *humility* and with a willingness to serve others, without regard for one's position. Jesus took off His robes and dressed as a servant and one by one washed the feet of His disciples, including the feet of Judas.

Humility focuses on the needs of others and how they can be met. In doing so it does not discriminate among those needing attention. *Humility* is something which is best recognized when it is observed. The implicit emphasis on *humility* in Jesus' actions would have been unmistakable and would have left an indelible impression on the hearts of His disciples.

A Rejection of Forgiveness

There would be an exception though to embracing the essential quality of *humility* illustrated by Jesus. Contrary to the appearance Judas had carefully groomed and displayed to the other disciples, Judas was anything but *humble*. While Judas had spent some three years with Jesus, had listened to His teachings, had observed His care for multitudes, had witnessed countless miracles, had seen first-hand evidence authenticating Jesus' claim to be the Son of God and the long-awaited Messiah, Judas was not about to humble Himself to Jesus, but chose instead the path of unbelief. Over the course of time, Judas progressively entrenched his rejection of Jesus as he followed a path of treachery and deceit. It did not happen all at once, but rather than conquering each temptation he faced with the truth, Judas yielded to the devil's deceit. By the time Jesus' washed Judas' feet, Judas had become the devil's pawn and had arranged to betray Jesus.

Imagine if you were Jesus, knowing what was in the heart of Judas and the plan he already had in motion to betray Jesus – imagine taking the form of a servant to wash the feet of your betrayer. The other eleven perceived the obvious implications concerning the nature of the *love* Jesus spoke about, but it would be days later before they would understand the full extent of Jesus' love when He washed the feet of Judas. Jesus' actions underscored the scope of His love, but that same act also exposed the depth of depravity and the hardness of Judas' unbelieving heart. This was an opportunity for Judas to fall before Jesus in repentance and humility and seek His forgiveness – but it was an opportunity He dismissed.

After Jesus had completed washing His disciples' feet, He put on His normal attire and returned to the table where they had eaten. It is unlikely the scene looked anything like the one depicted in the famous 15th century painting of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci. It is much more likely the men reclined around the table, lying on their left side while propping themselves up on their elbow and with their feet extending outward from the table.

When they continued with the meal, Jesus prepared His disciples for what lay ahead so they would not be completely blindsided when Judas betrayed Him.

John 13:18b–19, 21b (ESV) But the Scripture will be fulfilled, "He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." ¹⁹I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

Except for Judas, none of the disciples had any idea who Jesus was referring to. Obviously, Judas had been successful in keeping his real identity concealed. Peter motioned to the disciple, likely John, who was reclining next to Jesus to ask Jesus who the traitor was. John leaned back against Jesus and asked Him, “*Lord, who is it?*” (13.25). Thus, you can conclude John was to the right of Jesus. Judas’ heart must have been racing as he thought he was about to be exposed. Rather than acknowledge his treachery and unbelief, Judas remained silent as Jesus replied.

John 13:26 (ESV) ²⁶Jesus 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.

Obviously the eleven did not understand Jesus’ words nor the significance of giving Judas the *morsel of bread*. They remained oblivious to the fact Judas was the traitor; he must have been very convincing in his relationship with Jesus. That would change in the coming hours as they witnessed Judas’ betrayal of Jesus in the Garden.

We gain some insight into the progressive manner used by satan to usurp control of a person. Judas may have begun his relationship with Jesus with the desire to discover Who Jesus was and he may have been intrigued with being part of this new group. He was likely a quick learner and had sufficient skills to be given the job of treasurer which gave him power and easy access to the cash to indulge himself amid this trusting group. As time passed, Judas justified his deceit and built a façade around himself. So much so that when Jesus confronted the religious leaders with their hypocrisy and deceit, Judas was unmoved and hardened his heart as he listened to satan’s whispers in his ear that he was right. Judas was an easy target for satan to persuade to betray Jesus. Given Judas’ weakness for money, satan prompted him to enquire from the Pharisees about arranging a place to arrest Jesus, all for a fee of course – 30 pieces of silver (Mat 27.3).

Luke 22:4–6 (ESV) ⁴He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. ⁵And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. ⁶So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.

Jesus dipped the morsel of bread into the sauce, and in His final act of grace offered it to Judas, who was likely next to Jesus, on His left, in the place of honor. Judas rejected his last opportunity to repent, and satan rejoiced as at last he was about to rid himself of Jesus, or so he thought. Little did satan know that he was about to seal his own eternal fate as the death of Jesus on the cross would render him a defeated foe.

The final step in satan’s control of Judas was precipitated by Judas not seizing this final opportunity to repent,

John 13:27 (ESV) Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.”

John 13:30 (ESV) So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Judas had surrendered himself to the devil’s agenda. And for the moment he thought he would profit from his treachery, but he would soon realize he had been played by satan; it would be too late though. John incorporated the association of darkness with evil and death as he pointed out

Judas stepped out from the light he had been in, into the darkness which would now enshroud him.

An Embedded Truth

Washing the disciples' feet wasn't only a demonstration of *humility* by Jesus, there was a deeper truth embedded in it. The interchange between Jesus and Peter uncovers it. When it was Peter's turn for Jesus to wash his feet, Peter protested and Jesus pointed out that while Peter did not fully understand what Jesus was doing, he would later (13.7). Peter remained unmoved in his refusal, to which Jesus replied, *"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."* (13:8). The deeper truth was that this pictured salvation which is often referred to as being cleansed. No one will be a part of the family of God who is not washed clean of his or her sin – Jesus is the only way one can enter. Peter impetuously reacted to Jesus by then demanding that Jesus wash him completely (13.9). However, Jesus corrected Peter's misunderstanding by pointing out, *"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you."* (13:10). In this reply, Jesus made it clear that the *one who has bathed*, referring to the one who has been made alive spiritually when he or she was saved, need not repeat that ever again. When a person is regenerated, they become a child of God, and no one will ever snatch him or her out of God's hand (10.28-29). However, even though a person's sins have been forgiven when they were saved, they do not become perfect but remain prone to sin due to their fallen nature and those sins continue to need to be addressed. In Jesus' remarks to Peter, He also referred to Judas – the one who was not clean, despite having washed his feet. Judas was not clean because he had not embraced Jesus as his Saviour.

Washing His disciples' feet pointed to the supreme act of love – Jesus laying down His life at the cross for their sins. That is the pinnacle of the kind of love He asks us to express to others. Later Jesus would tell His disciples, *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13, ESV).

It would be days later until the eleven disciples grasped a fuller understanding of Jesus' love for them.

An Example to Follow

Last Sunday I mentioned patterning our mindset after Jesus and for His attitude to permeate our choices and our relationship with others. Let me remind you of the pivotal passage in Philippians.

Philippians 2:3 – 8 (NIV84) ³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

The attitude and choices of Jesus Christ are the template we are to follow. It begins with *humility* – how we see ourselves in relationship to others. Are we willing to set aside our concerns and self-interest in favor of others? Jesus certainly did so for us. He wants His disciples to follow His example by doing likewise. The motivation for doing so is our love for our God and that same love is to be mirrored in our love for one another.

John 13:34 (ESV) ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

Critical to loving one another with *agápē love* is to be other-person focused. The pattern the world models for us is to be self-focused and to put ourselves first, but the pattern of Jesus is just the reverse – to concern ourselves with the interests and welfare of others. When Jesus washed His disciples' feet, He took the form of a servant and in so doing He gave us a snapshot of the attitude we need to duplicate. It is to be so compelling that we will stand out from the crowd and onlookers will take notice and conclude we are followers of Jesus Christ – not because of the beliefs we claim, but by how we relate to one another.

Love to Implement

The most comprehensive passage in the Bible on the type of love Jesus modelled and directs us to exercise is found in:

1 Corinthians 13:4–8 (ESV) ⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

A key focus of this *agápē love* is the needs of another person. Interestingly the description begins with the qualities of *patience* and *kindness*. It brings to mind being *patient* with those we disagree with or who fall short of our expectations but whom we nevertheless are to be *kind* to. But perhaps *love* is more fully understood by what it is not. It does not *envy* what others have – possessions, or abilities, or privileges. Nor does it *boast* about what it has – if love has anything to *boast* about, others will discover it on their own, we won't need to tell them. In the same light, love is *not arrogant* – it *doesn't lift itself up*. Love certainly is *not rude*, but treats others with respect, not just those who agree with us or affirm us, but even more so those who don't. Nor is love *insistent on its own way*, but within the boundary of Scripture is flexible enough to incorporate the way of another. When *love* doesn't get its own way, it does not become irritable and resentful against another, but accepts the outcome graciously. *Love* certainly does not delight when others choose poorly and suffer the consequences of their bad choices.

Love celebrates the truth and those who follow it. *Love* is willing to face hardship and to tenaciously pursue a positive outcome no matter what. *Love* is quite simply unwilling to give up. That is the kind of *love* Jesus loves us with! It is the kind of *love* that will survive and characterize eternity.

It is also the kind of *love* Jesus Christ commands His followers, you and me, to practice. It is not possible to fake this love for any length of time. It is sacrificial and demanding. It takes effort, it requires getting our eyes off ourselves and our concerns and concerning ourselves with what is best for others and then to do our part in helping bring that about.

Perhaps the most common place where Christians fail to love one another is when they disagree, or someone hurts or offends another. Disagreement and offending another are inevitable. The Church is comprised not of perfect people but of sinners saved by grace – people with feet of clay who are in the process of becoming righteous in practice, but who haven't arrived. Generally, the Church also includes people of differing backgrounds and experiences. Sometimes loving one another has some challenges.

Francis Schaeffer in his book *The Mark of the Christian*, identified two practical ways Christians can show love for one another. The first is to be “willing to apologize and seek forgiveness from those they have wronged.”¹ In my experience, most disagreements are not over points of doctrine but on lesser matters and ones that certainly are not hills worth dying on. The second practical way Schaeffer raised, is the flipside of the first – be willing to grant forgiveness to another. Having been forgiven by Jesus for our sins we should be ready to forgive others. Again, issues that need to be forgiven are frequently relatively minor. It may be careless words that were said or where someone inadvertently caused an offense. Some expect a person who has offended them to rewrite history or to change the unchangeable before they will forgive them. No one can change what has already happened; they can only take steps to bring closure to what has happened. People must always be willing to forgive others and to seek forgiveness from those they have offended.

Let me conclude by repeating Jesus’ command to us:

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

Loving one another is the means to identify followers of Jesus Christ.

They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEwb51LawAI&ab_channel=ConsiderTheWildflowers

¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, John 12 – 21* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 90.