



THE IRRESISTIBLE *Appeal of Love*

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A Heartfelt Plea to Love One Another

by Dr. Charles Swindoll

One of the men who mentored me, even years before I came to Dallas Seminary, helped me appreciate John 3:16 in a new way when he said, “Just take away ‘the world’ and put your name there.” The message of this great verse is that God so loved us that He gave Jesus to me and to you. And in giving us Jesus, God left us a model of what is meant by that kind of love.

How could we not return such love? It’s easy to love God because He is perfect and just and faithful. But it’s hard for us to love one another because we are not perfect or just, and we are often not faithful. We become envious and lose our temper. And there are times when we blow it, even with those to whom we expressed our love just a few days earlier.

Loving the Unlovely

It’s true that some people are harder to love than others, and we turn to Jesus for our example of how to love the unlovely, those who are hard to love. In Mark 10, we read that Jesus met a man whom most of us would not really care that much to be around. This man was rich, arrogant, and selfish. He came running up to Jesus to inquire how he could inherit eternal life, and when Jesus cited God’s commandments, the man said, “All these I have kept since I was a boy” (v. 20).

It’s interesting what the Bible says in the next verse: “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (v. 21). Jesus told this man what he lacked, but before He dealt with the man’s need, the Bible says that Jesus felt love for him. We must turn to Jesus for our example of how to love the unlovely, those who are hard to love.

These are often the kind of people who turn us off. I was behind such a person in traffic one day. This woman was gesturing at everybody who was cutting into her lane, and she became so angry that she flipped her cigarette against a new BMW that had pulled up next to her at the red light. I got close enough to her vehicle to read a little sign in the back window that said, “Well-behaved women rarely make history.”

I have to tell you that I was stung in my spirit. That woman would be a hard person for me to like, let alone love the way Jesus loved the rich man of Mark 10. She would be a tough person to know as a neighbor rearing a family of kids, if she is married. She would be tough to love. Yet of all the people filling the lanes of the street that morning, she probably needed love more than anybody else. Even so, everything within me didn’t feel a love for her. That’s why the words of Jesus are so revealing, so touching.

Loving Those Close to Us

In John 11, Jesus is not interacting with someone He has just met, but with dear and beloved friends. The Bible tells us in verse 5 how much He loved Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, all from Bethany. So, the sisters send word to Jesus about the serious illness of Lazarus. They connect with Him through a messenger and simply say, “Lord, the one you love is sick” (v. 3). They didn’t even call Lazarus by name. He was simply the one Jesus loved.

You’ll recall in this story that Lazarus died while Jesus remained behind where He was. He had a reason for the delay, of course, but what I want us to see here is the fact that Jesus loved this family. He loved them, even though in a rash moment Martha ran up to Jesus and, almost accusingly, said, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21), which wasn’t necessarily true. Jesus didn’t need to be there to keep Lazarus alive. But Martha was in grief, so He loved her in her grief.

Then when Jesus came to the place where Lazarus had been buried, He wept (v. 35). The Jews standing there witnessed Jesus’ weeping and said, “See how he loved him!” (v. 36). Let’s do the same today—see how much Jesus loved the people around Him.

Loving Others by Serving

In fact, we see Jesus' love again in the days preceding His crucifixion. Jesus was surrounded by His disciples, who are arguing over who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom. After three and-one-half years in the "Jesus seminary," these men are still bickering over who is going to be number one, who is going to sit on Jesus' right hand, and who is going to sit on His left. After three and-one-half years in the "Jesus seminary," His disciples still bickered over who was going to be number one. James and John even got their mother to show up so she could talk Jesus into letting her boys have those positions of honor (Matt. 20:20).

Now we come to the Upper Room, in Jesus' last hours before His death, as recorded in chapter 13 of John. He is about to serve the disciples the Passover as He institutes the Lord's Supper. But before we are even out of the first verse, we read, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love," or in other words, "He loved them until the end." Until the end, He loved them! Until the uttermost, under the extreme pressure of that moment, He loved them.

The following verses of John 13 describe how Jesus proved His love for them as He took a towel, a pitcher, and a basin of water and washed their feet. Most of us have never washed anybody else's feet as an act of love and service. If you ever do, you know you can never hold anything against the person whose feet you are washing. You just can't do it. And it's really great if you can look up into the person's eyes and say, "I love you."

After Jesus laid the towel aside and then reclined at the table with the disciples again, He said to them: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

If this is a new commandment, what was the old commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5). This command was riveted into their brains! Those Jewish men had heard those words since they had begun to grow up in their homes. But Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment. As I have loved you, love one another."

It would have been so easy for Jesus to say, “Now that I have washed your feet, I want you to wash My feet.” But He doesn’t say that. We’d stand in line to wash Jesus’ feet. But who wants to wash Peter’s feet? Read again Jesus’ command: “Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus loved His disciples by serving them, and He calls us to do the same.

The Christian’s Mark

What marks us as Christians is not any outward sign. After Jesus had given His new commandment, He said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Years ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *The Mark of a Christian*. I love that little book. My copy is dogeared. In it, Schaeffer calls love the “identifying badge” of the Christian.

What marks us as Christians is not the cross around our necks, the Bible we carry, the bumper sticker that says, “I’m not perfect, just forgiven,” or any other outward sign. Those are not our identifying marks. It is love. It is loving those who are hard to love. It is loving those outside the circle of our own group. It is loving people of all kinds, all the time, regardless. Love is our identifying mark.

In his magnificent letter to the Galatians, Paul announces our emancipation from the legalism of the Law. No one loves the freedom we have in Christ more than I do. No one preaches grace stronger than I do. But I also need the reminder of Galatians 5:13: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” Then when the apostle begins to list the beautiful fruit of the Holy Spirit, first on the vine is love (v. 22).

There is no way that you and I can know what’s in the hearts of the people we meet every day. John Schlatter writes of a young teenager named Mark who was walking home from school one day when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped, dropping all of the books he was carrying along with two sweaters, a baseball cap, a glove, and a small tape recorder. Mark knelt down and helped the boy pick up the scattered articles, and because they were going the same way, he helped carry part of the burden. As they walked along, Mark discovered that the other boy’s name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball, and history, and that he was having a lot of trouble with

his other subjects and had just broken up with his girlfriend. They arrived at Bill's home first, and Mark was invited in for a Coke, to watch some television, and to play some video games. The afternoon passed pleasantly with a few laughs and some small talk. They continued to see each other around campus and had lunch together a few times. Both boys graduated from middle school and ended up in the same high school, where they had brief contacts over the years.

Finally, their long-awaited senior year came. Just a few days before graduation, as they were having their picture taken dressed in cap and gown, Bill asked Mark if they could talk. Bill reminded him of the day years ago when they had first met.

"Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?" Bill asked. "Well, you see, I had cleaned out my locker because I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away my mother's sleeping pills, and I was going home to take my life. But after we spent some time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had killed myself, I would have missed all these times and so many others like them that would follow.

"So, you see, Mark, when you picked up my books that day, you did a lot more. You saved my life."

The Supremacy of Love

There is no way that you and I can know what's in the hearts of the people we meet every day. We don't know the desperation or the need that may be there. And we are all busy about our work. Believe me, I understand! I really do. But it is easy to pass by someone who has dropped their books, as it were.

We can't afford to do that, because every person needs love, and love is our identifying mark as Christians. I can't talk about love without getting to 1 Corinthians 13. Paul covers all the bases in very simple words. You're familiar with them; if you have been a Christian very long, your lips move along with the preacher when he reads, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (v. 1). I like the way Eugene Peterson renders this verse in *The Message*: "If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate."

Paul's call to unconditional love often reproves me. One of my favorite sections of Scripture that I read on occasion when I find myself reproved in moments like this is the simple statement of Jesus when He said to His own, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

We prove ourselves to be His disciples when we love even the least—meaning the kind of people who put signs in the back windows of their cars warning you about their bad attitude. The kind of people who don't give a rip about you. And those who because of physical or mental impairment can't keep up with everyone else. God bless every one of them. All of them need our love. So please, let us love one another.

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