

## Love: The Badge Of Discipleship

How is the world to know that we are truly disciples of Christ and members of His body? Is it by the name we wear? Is it by having the right doctrine, organization, worship, etc.? It is certainly important to have all these things; but if we think that by these things alone we are truly the disciples of Jesus, that by these things alone the world will know we are Christ's disciples, then we are sadly mistaken!

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus identified a key mark of discipleship. When Jesus was speaking to His disciples in John 13:34-35 [ESV], He gave what He called *“a new commandment.”* He told them, <sup>34</sup>*“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. <sup>35</sup>By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

Love for one another is how people will know that we are truly the disciples of Jesus. Do we know what kind of love that is? How do we develop that kind of love? How do we demonstrate this love? This *“new commandment”* to *“love one another”* so that *“all people will know”* that we are His disciples was not entirely new. We know this because on another occasion Jesus said all the law and prophets were summed up in the twin commandments of *“You shall love the Lord your God”* and *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:28-33; see also Galatians 5:14).

In the original, there are two words that are translated *“new”* in English. The word here means new in quality. Love is not untaught nor unknown until this time but our Lord Jesus gave new qualities to it. We shall now examine these four new qualities to the old commandment to love so that we may build a Biblical community of Jesus' love.

**Agape**, the word used by Jesus in John 13:34-35 and translated as love, is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but one of the most common in the New Testament. Unlike our English word love, it never refers to romantic or sensual love, for which the Greek word **eros** is used, and which does not appear in the New Testament. Neither does **agape** refer to mere sentiment, a pleasant feeling or attraction to someone or something, a close friendship or brotherly attachment. In these situations the Greek word **philia** is used, as in the name Philadelphia, which literally means “city of brotherly love.”

There had always been the love of family, friends, etc., so it is obvious Jesus was speaking of something else. So we can see that this is not simply a command to love one another, but a command to love one another in a special way. Jesus is calling us to new and higher standard of love!

**Agape** love puts others before self. **Agape** love puts God's will before my own will. **Agape** love puts my brother's need before my own need. When we, by

decision, put another before self, we begin to give. **Agape** love is self-giving, it is love that demands something out of us, a love that is so concerned for others that it is consumed with giving rather than receiving.

Our Lord Jesus beautifully demonstrated this **agape** love in John 13 when He stooped to wash His disciples' feet. Mere human love is drawn towards that which is beautiful and attractive. Divine love does not act because it is attracted by the beauty of another. It does not act because a particular service has been rendered. Divine love acts because it sees the need of the other person; it sees the need because it always places another before oneself.

What kind of love does Jesus command? What Jesus demands is a sacrificial love. ***“Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”*** Our type of love that identifies as the Lord's own is a love patterned after Jesus' love for us. This is what makes it a new and higher standard of love!

The love Jesus had for us can be summarized in one word: **sacrificial**, as Jesus explained in John 15:13-15 [ESV]: ***13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.***

This theme of sacrificial love was carried forward by the apostles in their writings. John wrote in 1 John 3:16-18 [ESV], ***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. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*** And the Apostle Paul commanded in Ephesians 5:1-2 [ESV], ***1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***

Sacrificial love. It was this kind of love manifested by the first disciples of Jesus as was seen in the church in Jerusalem. ***44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*** (Acts 2:44-45 [ESV]) And a great manifestation of this sacrificial, **agape** love was demonstrated by the churches in Macedonia. ***1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints – 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.***

God Himself does not exist alone! In the mystery of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit there exists eternal fellowship between Each Person of the Godhead (Genesis 1:26). Nor did God intend for man to live alone. The Divine declaration, ***“It is not good for man to be alone”*** in Genesis 2:18, goes far beyond the need for a marriage partner. God created man in His Divine Image; He made him a social, relational creature. Man is not meant to be alone, but to have fellowship on a meaningful level with his fellowmen.

When Jesus commanded His disciples to ***“love one another,”*** the ***“one another”*** indicated that a new Christian community would be formed. It would be formed on the basis of the common spiritual root believers have in Christ. On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, this new community was born when the Spirit came and immersed everyone who believed in Jesus into the Body of Christ (Acts 2:38; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

The chosen generation of Israel, whom God called out of Egypt into the Promised Land, were divided into 12 tribes. These 12 tribes were further divided into extended families. For example, the tribe of Levi, whose males from one month old and upward numbered 7,500, were divided into three major extended families: the Gershonites, the Kohathites and the Merarites (Numbers 3:17-22). And they were even further sub-divided into families. The strength and warmth each family provided for individual Israelites became the social support of the extended families, which were the pillars of each tribe.

The early church in Jerusalem, whom God called out of spiritual darkness into His marvelous light, met all together in Solomon's porch (Acts 5:12) as well as from house to house (Acts 2:46 and Acts 5:42). There were large congregational meetings of this new community but there were also smaller meetings of this new community. A small group of six to twelve people meeting together informally in homes provides an ideal structure for effective fellowship, the exercise of each member's spiritual gifts to meet one another's needs in love. That is why home Bible studies are so effective.

In the new commandment, Jesus revealed a new consequence of love in the new community of believers. The ***agape*** love Jesus commanded for His followers is also a visible love. Remember, Jesus declared ***“By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*** The implication is that such love will be visible and observable. This means that it will be visible by everyone, not just by brethren! To be a visible love requires a love that extends beyond the four walls of the church building. It is a love that extends beyond the few hours we are assembled together each week. It is the ***agape*** love that can be observed by those of the world and in the world. In some way, the world needs to have the opportunity to observe the disciples of Jesus in action, in which their love that is patterned after Jesus' love can be seen. Being a “warm and friendly church” while assembled is commendable and it is on the

right track, but it alone does not fulfill the command to have a new, sacrificial, and visible love patterned after the love of Jesus! The **agape** love which Spirit-filled believers show towards one another will not only benefit the entire community but that community will make an undeniable statement to a watching world, whose lost and lonely citizens are searching for a place to belong and a place to be loved.

Christians are to judge whether or not people are true Christians by what they believe, their doctrine (1 John 2:20-23). But the unsaved world judges whether or not people are true Christians by the way they live – their love. Love in a community of Christians is the ultimate and most significant defense for the Christian faith. If we wish to manifest this kind of love in our lives, where do we begin?

When Jesus commanded us **“just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another,”** He set forth for all believers the criterion or example by which they could measure their own love for another believer. The *Gospel of Mark*, which recorded the Person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord as the Servant-King, set for us the example of a love that serves and a love that sacrifices. As an individual believer, I may not be able to do all that Jesus did but as a body of believers in a community, we are well able to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of the body! In order for spiritual gifts to be exercised for the common good of the body (1 Corinthians 12:7), we must exercise our spiritual gifts out of the love. A community of believers actively serving in their area of giftedness out of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the new commandment.

The command for us to be selflessly serving one another out of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ is not natural to our flesh. **Agape** love is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22; see also Romans 5:5). We do not have this love but the Spirit of God Who dwells within us is love (1 John 4:8) and He alone is well able to produce that love in our lives. When we humbly recognize that we will never be able, by ourselves, to love as Christ commanded, and we cast our entire dependence on God alone to help us, God enables us supernaturally by His Holy Spirit to love one another as we should. James writes in James 4:5-6 [ESV], **<sup>5</sup>Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us”? <sup>6</sup>But He gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”**

When Christ was on trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, He was questioned. The high priest did not ask Jesus of His doctrine and His disciples, he asked Him of His disciples and His doctrine (John 18:19). That is the thing that challenged the world – what they see in the disciples. The doctrine they will look at later. The church at Thessalonica was such a powerful witness for Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:8). The irrepressible attraction the Thessalonian church had

was the life of Christ, which they lived (1 Thessalonians 1:7). Paul wrote of the Thessalonians, saying in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 [ESV], ***<sup>9</sup>Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, <sup>10</sup>for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.***

The Thessalonians excelled in this ***agape*** love because they had been ***“taught by God to love one another.”*** Certainly God's own love for us teaches us how to love. Think of the Father's own sacrificial love for us in sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sins!

We learn from Jesus' own example of sacrifice which teaches the true meaning of ***agape*** love. The more we contemplate upon the example of Jesus' life and death, the more likely we will love like He did!

We are to be stirred up by our brethren. The Hebrews writer states in Hebrews 10:24-25 [ESV], ***<sup>24</sup>And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, <sup>25</sup>not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*** That is why it is so tragic when members willfully choose to not assemble with their brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps one reason why some do not love as they should is because they do not assemble like they should!

Through careful study of the Father's love for us, the Savior's love for us, and through frequent assembling where we stir up one another to love and good works, we can develop the kind of love by which those in the world will know we are His disciples.

Finally, a thought or two about ***agape*** love. This ***agape*** love is demonstrated in our assembly. When we are assembled and have guests, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our love for another. What do our guests see? Do they see Christians who are glad to see one another? Do they see Christians who are willing to take the time to visit with each other? Do they see Christians who even know each other's name? Our assemblies may be the only time some guests have the opportunity to see Christians interact. Do they see an evident love and concern for one another?

We often have the opportunity to be together in ways that others can see in the community. Perhaps some of us work with other Christians, or we have neighbors that are Christians. Or maybe we gather to visit, or do things together. What do those in the world see? Do they see an interaction that reveals a strong love and appreciation for one another? Do they see an interaction that shows a sincere interest in each other's well-being? Where differences exist between us does the world see a different way in which we handle these situations?

Christians will often sin against one another and offend one another. But will they see long-suffering and a quickness to forgive, even as Christ forgave us? Paul states,

**<sup>31</sup>Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. <sup>12</sup>Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup>bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. (Ephesians 4:31-32 [ESV]; Colossians 3:12-13 [ESV])**

Jesus has revealed a powerful tool to persuade the world that we are His disciples. Certainly we show our discipleship by faithfulness to His doctrine. In fact, in John 8:31-32 [ESV] Jesus said, **<sup>31</sup>"If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** But in a world that cares little for doctrinal distinctiveness, a Christ-like love for one another is how Jesus would have us convince the world!

How is your love for your brother in Christ? Is it a Christ-like, sacrificial love? Is it observable, meaning, do people see your brotherly love in our assemblies and community?

If you admit your love for your brethren needs work (and we all can improve), then look to God and Jesus as the ultimate teachers of what it means to love one another. Utilize opportunities to be with brethren which provides occasion to grow and display your love. This will serve to stir you to love and good works.

So remember, **<sup>34</sup>"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. <sup>35</sup>By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."**

Finally, let us do exactly what the Apostle John tells us in how we can exercise **agape** love:

**<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup>In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. <sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12 [ESV])**