

JOHN 15:9-17  
LOVE AT ITS GREATEST

It is 2075; the world is full of robots who are running our lives; you can talk to them, give them commands and even carry on conversations with them. As part of that conversation, your house robot says "What is love?" Let's assume the conversation; work with me here! How do you answer that question? How do you describe what love is? "My love is like a red, red rose..."? – does that help? Poets celebrate love and tell us how good and sweet a quality it is, but also how fragile? The rose is also spiky, thorny – is that what love is? Or is it something that lasts forever, fragrant, beautiful and something to enjoy? But does that tell us what love is? We know that love is good; we know it when we see it; we know when it is not there! Maybe we shouldn't try to explain love, but simply show it to the people we meet! Maybe the best answer to our robot's question is found in the way we conduct ourselves with other people.

The Bible has one great idea about love: see Jesus! Do you want to know what love looks like – look at Jesus! The world needs good role models today, people to whom we can look up and admire them and want to be like them. Jesus is *the* role model above all, but there is a mood around that seems to be embarrassed by that; somehow to admire Jesus as a role model is tarnished by the idea that this is a religious thing – and therefore bad! Look at Jesus and see what love is; that's what we're going to do today; I'm not sure that we'll find the answer to the question "What is love?" but we will see love in Jesus and we will be challenged to see love in us.

Love is all through these verses from John 15 that we read! There are three stages in this love: "*As the...*" (John 15:9) "*Greater love...*" (John 15:13) "*Love each...*" (John 15:12) Stage one – the Father loves Jesus; stage two – Jesus loves us; stage three – we love one another. Jesus both receives and gives love; we both receive and give love; love comes from God.

"*As the...*" (John 15:9) Jesus is loved; the Father loves Jesus and the Father's love for Jesus shapes Jesus love for us. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Father declares to and of Jesus "*This is my Son, whom I love*" a declaration repeated later. This declaration comes at the start, before Jesus has done anything in ministry, so the Father declares His love for His Son right at the outset, come what may. We can only imagine how that felt for Jesus to hear these words from God, when His Father declares this love, but it must have made Him walk a little bit taller to have that sense of being loved and accepted by God. Was He inspired to serve because the Father loved Him like this? He is loved by God and that sense of being loved went with Him all way through His ministry.

Clearly this sense of being loved shaped His love for the world. "*Greater...*" (John 15:13) These words have become the clear explanation and declaration of what Jesus' love looks like. It is a love that makes sacrifices! These words were spoken a matter of hours before Jesus was arrested, the day maybe before He was crucified; so in trying to encourage His disciples to love one another, here we have their role-model, their inspiration, their Saviour. Jesus loved us and gave His life for us; He gave Himself that we might be saved, forgiven, reconciled with God and in doing that He gave us an example of what love looks like. The picture on the screen is a very famous picture of Christ on the cross painted by Salvador Dali; you can find it in Glasgow: if you look closely at the painting there appear to be no nails in Jesus' hands; so what holds Him to cross? The answer: His love for us. What took Christ to the cross? There are two answers: our sin because He died to save us; and His love because "*Greater...*" (John 15:13) Jesus is loved and Jesus loves.

We are loved: "*You are...*" (John 15:14) Some of you will want me to skip past this bit and just get on to the bit where we are to love because you want to give love, but you are not too sure of these three words "You are loved!" But we can't skip past this; we can only love one another in the right way when we realise that we are loved! Jesus calls us His friends and that is what

we are! “There is nobody so rich, so strong, so independent, so well off, so thoroughly provided for as the person of whom Christ says, “This is my friend.”” (JC Ryle) This is who we are; Jesus says of you “This is my friend!” Imagine walking with Jesus, a step behind of course, and He meets someone He knows and wants to introduce you to this person and Jesus says “this is ...; she is my friend!” How does that make you feel?

How many people in our world are walking wounded? Many people carry deep wounds in their spirit and have been so abused and exploited and violated that their scars make them feel totally unloved and even, in their own mind, totally unlovable. They consider that no-one could ever love them again because of what they have experienced. But Jesus calls us His friends! No matter who we are, no matter our history, no matter our faults and failings, we are His friends. We are people for whom Jesus cares, people He knows, people whose names and interests are on His heart and we are loved by Him so much that He gives us everything that we need and cares for us in the deepest way possible.... and He gave His life for us. This is who we are; we are loved; there are no exceptions! This comes from God!

*“My command...” (John 15:12)* “See how these Christians love one another” is an often-quoted line about the early church and the force of their love to draw people to Jesus! A more cynical comment was made: “the person who said “see how these Christians love one another” obviously never met any!” In fact, both of these are true: at times we meet people whose love for us and for the world is inspirational; we clearly see Jesus in them by the way they conduct themselves and by the way they treat us and we are inspired to love because we have met these people and seen love in them. But there are also times when we are hurt, bruised and damaged in the church by an astonishing lack of love in our fellow-Christians, who take every opportunity to gossip about us behind our back, who criticise us and in all sorts of ways take advantage of us; that lack of love has chased so many people away from the church, that it is almost a minor miracle that the church still exists!

Jesus commands us to love. It is not an option! We talked earlier about the things that connect us and so we discover that other people are just like us, they have the same history, the same passions and there is something there that makes us feel connected. Is that why we should love? Well, it helps, but the bottom line is this: Jesus commands us to love one another! Our love for one another is to be shaped by the way Jesus has loved us, so there is something sacrificial about it, giving ourselves to love others and while that may cost us, then we know what it cost Jesus to love us. Love is to last: this is not a fly-by-night enthusiasm for loving and caring for people that lasts only until tomorrow, but is to be a settled quality in our hearts. The world is crying out for people who love and care like this; what a difference we can make!

We have still not answered the question “What is love?” Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about love; if ever there was a church that needed to hear these words it was the Christians in Corinth. These are words about all sorts of relationships; they are words I almost always read at weddings. *“Love is...” (1 Corinthians 13:4ff)* Love is... what? A dream? A warm glow inside? Sharing a glass of wine by the fire-side? Here is a much more practical list of qualities: patience, kindness, generosity, humility – 15 qualities that we can put into practice every day when we meet people: with the people we meet in church, at home, in the street, in the shops, when out driving, on your bike; this is what we are to be like! We read that list and think “I’ll never do that!” It is daunting! Absolutely! This is the challenge we face; this is greatest, biggest, most valuable fruit of our faith, to love others as Jesus has loved us.

We have ended in the practical place where we feel comfortable to some extent. We know it is a huge challenge, but we’re happy with something to do even if we’re not sure that we do it very well. But why do it? Here’s the big thing about today: we are inspired to love others because we are loved! Jesus has been loved by the Father; Jesus loves us by giving His life on the cross. We are loved: He calls us His friends and nothing can take that away from us; we are loved because Jesus loves us, not because we are wonderfully lovable people! There

were two boys who grandad was in hospital; did they go to visit him? One of them did, but the other didn't. What made the difference? The one who visited his grandad had himself been in hospital and he knew how it felt and how it felt to be visited by his family; so he went to visit his grandad. We love one another because we are loved, warts and all! This is hard to grasp, that God should love us? Well, Jesus has given His life: "*greater...*" (*John 15:13*) and we are His friends; this God's love is for us. So "*Love each...*" (*John 15:12*)