



Sermon Growth Guide

November 19, 2023

InstaLove



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Insta - InstaLove

John 15:12-17

Key Verse: John 15:17

“This is my command: Love one another”

Big Idea: The faithful love of God for His wayward children is the source for loving one another.

Foundations

This brief passage is part of a much larger lesson from Jesus as He faces the cross. As you know, He used the image of the vine, its branches, and the fruit it should bear. He has comforted His disciples, who know something dreadful is coming soon. They aren't quite sure that it involves Jesus' death but at the same time, fear that is exactly what is coming.

They are anticipating the loss of a friend, a teacher, and most of all, the loss of their dream—the restoration of the Kingdom of God. Jesus comforts them with the promise of the Holy Spirit (chapter 14) and with commanding a way of living that will grow the Kingdom. That kingdom comes when we realize that living in union with Jesus will grow fruit just as a vine produce fruit as it draws sustenance from the vine.

This fruit is characterized by peace, joy, and love (which Paul also described in Galatians 5). When the Body of Christ grows that kind of fruit together, outposts of the Kingdom of God are established. As each of us and all of us together grow in love, we show the world where lasting love can be found—in Jesus, who loves us sacrificially.

Martin Luther says that these verses explain Jesus' earlier command: *This loving is the meaning of the words “that you should go and bear much fruit.” You need not go to Rome or Jerusalem, but to your neighbor.*

Understanding God's Word

Read together John 15:12-17.

Some resist Jesus' use of the word “command” when He speaks of love. The objection is that you can't command a feeling. It is either there or it isn't. How would you respond to such an objection? How does this passage define love?

G.K. Chesterton said that Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors and our enemies because they are often the same people. How does this passage let us know how and why we are to do what often seems impossible?

Applying God's Word

It is likely that John 15:13 is one of the most, if not the most well-known verse in this passage: *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* We hear often on Memorial Day as we honor those who gave all. But how will you lay down your life? What desires, ego-needs, or goals, would you lay down for the sake of others?

Witnessing God's Word

Many people have self-serving goals as they seek wealth, status, and power. Having these things is not wrong, in themselves, but they fail in the long-term. How can loving like Jesus bring hope?

InstaLove. Swipe left, or is it right? I don't know. There are apps out there to help people meet up for a date. I know wonderful marriages that started with online dating. Some apps are more well-meaning than others. You gotta meet somehow! But that's not InstaLove. There is no InstaLove. You might strike gold with love at first sight, but romantic fascination only turns into life-giving love with commitment over time. Love grows sweeter over time. So, we want to do something we haven't done for a few years. Let's celebrate long marriages. If you have been married for over forty years, or if your marriage lasted that long even if you lost your spouse, please stand. Okay, remain standing if its over fifty. Over sixty? Wow. We celebrate with you. As a pastor who has sat with many couples, I know no marriage makes it that long without weathering a storm or two. We celebrate God's gift of marriage that allows love to grow over time.

But that's not the only way love grows. In fact, our passage doesn't mention marriage at all; it talks about friends. "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) Love grows in marriage, it grows in friendships, it grows in the church, but it takes commitment over time. This is the vine passage. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches; remain in the vine." Love is a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."

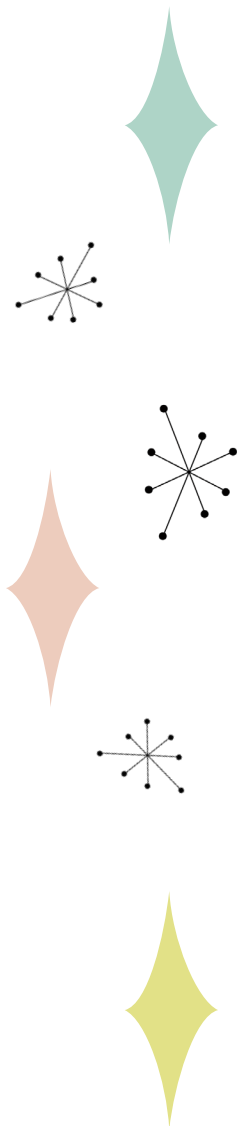
(John 15:9) Love matures over time. It isn't instant. The best things in life don't come in a hurry and can't be rushed.

Jesus says the best love is love that gives itself away. This is the love he calls us to; this is the love that will define the followers of Jesus; this is the love that will demonstrate the character of Jesus to the world: love that gives itself away. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Followers of a teacher or philosopher want a command.

Give us that defining rule, that mantra, that code to define this movement. Jesus says, "My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you." He is restating it. Earlier that night he issued a new command. We call this Maundy Thursday because Jesus issued a mandate: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35) Love is the command. Love is the rule. Love is what will show this world Jesus.

What kind of love? Love that gives itself away. "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:13) We quote that verse a lot around Veterans Day and Memorial Day. It can be one dramatic moment, one life-altering, or life-ending event where a person lays down his or her life in an instant. But it can also stretch out over time. Every time you make a sacrifice, every time you pick up the phone at the late hour and listen, every time you drive across town, every time you help your homebound grandparent get the groceries in or set up the wifi...there are so many ways to give yourself away. Every time you provide your family with a warm nutritious dinner when they have done nothing (I mean, nothing) to deserve it. We lay down our lives for one another.

Jesus calls us friends. "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15) There is an intimacy. If you are in Christ, you are adopted into the family of God. Jesus is not ashamed to call you brother or sister. You do not enter the house as a slave or servant; you are named a child of God. But this friendship has more to do with what was said above. Love is why we obey. "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love."



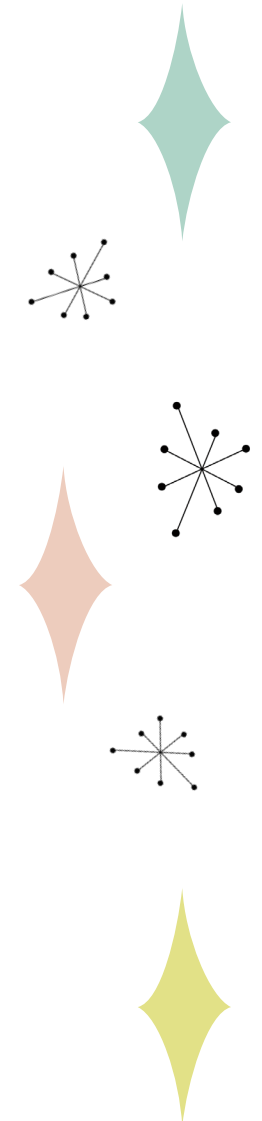
(John 15:10) A slave obeys out of fear. A servant obeys to get paid or to put in enough time to gain freedom from the master. We are not obeying God because we fear his retribution, or because we are trying to earn his benefits, or because we want to ultimately get away from him. We obey out of love. We serve out of devotion. We follow his commands out of trust. That's totally different. There is a virtuous cycle of love and obedience. When you follow his commands, you love him more because you find his commands are for your good. When you love him more, you want to serve and follow his commands. We do not cower before God and serve in hopes of gaining his love; his love pours into us until we are moved to serve him. Friends.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." (John 15:16) What is this about? Jesus is making the same point even more clearly. These are His final moments with His disciples, and He wants them to know and understand the basis of their relationship. So he reminds them, you didn't apply for this. You didn't seek me out and apply and wait for my acceptance letter. I chose you. Why is this so important? Have you ever tried to be friends with someone important, but then thought to yourself, "Why is he being so kind to me? I have no business being this guy's friend. Why is she giving me this much attention?" You wonder. What is this based on? Jesus wants it clear. He did not choose you because of your qualities or merits or actions. If he did, you would sit there wondering, "Does Jesus really know me? Does he know my motivations? Does he know the bad stuff I did? Will I be found out and rejected?" "You did not choose me as your friend," says Jesus, "I chose you as my friend." You have been saved by grace through faith, not on the basis of your works and deeds and qualities. "Our relationship rests on my firm and faithful resolve to make you my friend." Rest assured. Jesus' grace does not change. You are loved, accepted, saved by God.

That won't change. So, he wraps up, "This is my command: Love each other." (John 15:17) ...as you are now freed to do.

What does that look like? Do I really have to like everybody? And, as Jesus was asked once, who is my neighbor anyway? Who do I have to love? We are hindered in the English language by the way we use the same word, "love," to refer to all kinds of different things. C. S. Lewis made this problem famous years ago by writing a book called *The Four Loves*. There are at least four words used in Greek that we translate with the one word "love." There is *storge*, which is a kind of family love. It is a very durable, unassailable love. Even if you are in a fight with a relative, even if you are not talking, you are still family. Not even your silence can remove this love that exists between you. Then there is *philia*, an affection based on mutual affinity. This is love between friends. Then there is the word *eros*, a consuming passion so enraptured by the allure of its object it wants to swallow it up. But Jesus is talking about something else. It is the word, *agape*. This is love that gives itself away to the object of love. All the others were a way of getting something out of the person they love, but this kind of love doesn't get anything at all, or at least doesn't seek to, it doesn't need to. It is pure gift, pure giving away. It sees what it loves and wants that thing to prosper, to grow, to be lifted up, even at expense to itself. *Agape* love wants the life and wellbeing of what it loves and sacrifices for it from its own reserves.

I was in college when I first heard John Ortberg share this story and forgive me if you have heard it before. It's one of my favorites. John said when he was a kid his little sister had a rag doll named Pandy. Pandy was about what you'd expect in a rag doll belonging to a six-year-old: stained, missing an eye, an arm had been ripped off and sewn back, stuffing seeped out through loose seams and dog-chew holes. Not much to look at. But his sister loved Pandy, so Pandy was worth her weight in gold.



John recalls a family trip to Canada, ten hours by car. Halfway home there was a horrible discovery. Pandy was left behind. John thought, "Oh well. So long, Pandy. It's been a good run." No. Off the highway went the car, around the other way, all the way back to rescue Pandy. The doll, though intrinsically worthless, was worth ten extra hours driving. Why? Because his little sister made Pandy valuable by loving her. Her love made Pandy matter. You and I are that little rag doll. Agape is the love God has for us. It makes us more valuable than you could ever imagine. More valuable than the cross.

See the difference? Three loves take, one love gives. John later wrote to the churches, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." (1 John 3:16) This is love, not a fruity emotion full of warm fuzzies, a commitment to lay oneself down, to give yourself away, to want the good of the one you love over your own. That's what Jesus meant when he said, this is my command. This is the new commandment. This is a totally otherworldly kind of love. This is the love that will shock a world bent on its own gratification. This is shocking stuff. Radical stuff. Love that gives itself away? This is the love that will show the world Jesus.

So, how do we do it? Even my most altruistic attempts at love are laced with selfish motives. How do I escape from love as self-gratification, or as a transaction? This is a very strong gravity, the gravity of the ego. It is a very strong spell, and it will take very strong magic to break it. The command of Jesus does it. The greatest command. Love God; love neighbor. Augustine said, "Love God and do as you wish." Not do whatever you want. His point was that if you love God above all else, if you cultivate that love above all other loves, your other loves and desires will fall into order.

How do we do that? Come to worship. Gather with other believers in passionate resolve to declare and enact your love for God. We are not here to cultivate a love for First Pres, a love for Tim (God forbid), a love for Jamal or Chris. Heavens. This is an hour to express and practice your love for God above all else. If there is affection, let it be affection for Jesus. If there is applause, let it be applause for Jesus. If there is praise, let it rise to God alone. Your heart will be transformed as you put God first.

Love God. Love neighbor. The second is only truly possible in response to the first. Without first loving God, and being filled with his agape love, your attempts to love those around you will short circuit in your own selfish interests and hungers, your need for self-gratification from the other. How can I love you with a Pandy ragdoll love? A love that builds you up out of genuine self-sacrifice, a genuine escape from my self-interest? It's not possible until I believe I have all things in God, until I believe I have all the love I could possibly need in Christ. Then, only then, can I turn and love you as a gift. Haven't you ever given a gift, but inside your head you were thinking mostly of how good it would feel when the person receives it and reciprocates? You're not thinking of them. You're thinking of you. You're giving to you, not to them. Only God can make this possible. That's why God is made visible when it happens. Only God can do it.

How do you turn an enemy of God into a friend? How do you make an inherently self-interested person a vehicle for supernatural love of neighbor? Only God. Jesus became the enemy so we could be the friend. Jesus was despised so we could be loved and freed to love. Jesus absorbed all the selfish interests of the world, Romans, Greeks, Jews, all their selfish interests led to his death on the cross. He gave himself away radically, fully, so we could receive it all so we could be loved fully and fully love others.

