

Life Among the Branches

New Castle Bible Church

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Text: John 15:12-17

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have had the experience of looking for a new church. For some of you, it's been many years. For others, this may be your first time at New Castle... and you're currently looking. What do you look for? Maybe I can help you with that today.

This past week I was skimming through books and articles on this question. Each resource provided a list you should look for or that your church should have in place.

Since the time of the Reformation, preaching is very important. If you're looking for a church, you want it to be one that values preaching. Regularly celebrating the Lord's Supper and baptism are on most lists. A healthy church should have qualified leaders, solid biblical theology that undergird it, passion for evangelism.

I'm in agreement, but it's possible for a church to have all of these marks and *not* be healthy. The church in Corinth was not a healthy church, but this church had a great deal of vibrant activity (1 Cor 13).

First Corinthians 13:1-3 — “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels... if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith, so as to remove mountains... if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

This was a church so eager to practice their spiritual gifts, even proud of their gifts. Whatever the Corinthians had right, their church lacked Christlike love. A church without Christlike love is like multiplying by zero... you gain nothing.

So, do you just find a church that's loving? No. There are churches, and even cults, that love their own people well. Cults frequently have members who will sacrifice greatly for one another.

A church loves its own but cares little about evangelism (a narcissistic love).

We just want to love, and we're content to just love our own.

A church that loves its own but cares little about theology (a misguided or deceived love).

We just want to love you. We're not stogy old seminary professors.

A church that loves its own but cares little about sin (an impure love).

We just want to love. It's not our place to judge anyone.

Each of these have serious deficiencies in their love. A healthy church is marked by love, even known for its love, but healthy churches grow in the stream of God's love. The love that the Father has for the Son, the Son has for His people, and His people have that kind of love for one another. That kind of love...

Cares about theology, because it hungers to know God more and more.

Cares about purity, because it desires the holiness of God more and more.

Cares about evangelism, because it longs for others to hear about this God more and more.

The love that cascades from God through Christ to us isn't godless but utterly saturated and consumed with God. God's love for us transforms our love for each other.

I want to give financially, not because the church needs it, but because I want to love God with my treasures.

I want to serve in the nursery, not because no one else will do it, but because I want to love God with my time.

As I said last week, love loves to give for another's good. That's just a broad definition of love, but what is Christian love? What's a Christ-centered definition of love that cascades from the fountain of God Himself?

Love loves to give for God's glory. What glorifies God is never bad or harmful to others, but always good. God's glory is the North Star of Christian love. Loving others is the means for loving God. That's the kind of love that Jesus wants us to cultivate at New Castle. A healthy church is a God-centered church.

I believe the main point of our passage is that Jesus' Love Causes Us to Love One Another.

Because He chose us and made us His friends.

Verses 13-14: He made us His friends

Verses 15-17: He chose us to be His own.

We love like Jesus, because Jesus first loved us.

John 15:12-17: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

Our passage last week: John 15:1-11 is about a believer's relationship with Christ: Abide.
Our passage today is about a believer's relationship with other believers: Loved.
Our passage next week: John 15:18-16:4 is about a believer's relationship with the world: Persecuted.

Jesus tells us in verse 12 to "love one another as I have loved you," and He repeats this in verse 17. That's the bread, with verses 13-16 being the meat of the sandwich.

Love one another—that's the theme of these verses. But in order for us sinners to love each other in the way that God loves, He had to draw us close—so close as to become His friends.

I. Jesus Made Us His Friends

We love like Jesus, because Jesus made us His friends and taught us how to love. "You are my friends" is utterly astonishing.

Jesus was the disciples' teacher. As I said last week, the concept of discipleship was well known. Greek philosophers had their disciples, but so did Jewish rabbis.

Jewish children would study and memorize the Torah at the local synagogue under a rabbi. Those who did well progressed to secondary school where they would study the writings and the prophets and learn to interpret Scripture. The most outstanding students had memorized the entire Torah.

Those with this kind of aptitude often moved away to attach themselves to a well-known rabbi, a famous Jewish scholar. If the rabbi agreed, the student became his disciple or Talmid. The Talmid did everything with his new rabbi, often alongside his other disciples. It was an intense discipleship group literally doing life together, observing their rabbi.

Some of these students or disciples became Pharisees who then had their own disciples.

The Greek and the Jewish models of discipleship prized intellectual aptitude. The teacher wanted to train brilliant men who would make his teachings shine to the next generation. Though rabbis typically loved their disciples, it was a parent-child kind of relationship. Disciples were like children in some ways, like servants in others.

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus drew His disciples close enough to say, "No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends."

Friendship involves intimate knowledge. You can learn a lot about a person by observing them, even living in community with them each day... but that doesn't mean you are friends. I think we all know that a friend isn't someone you've added on Facebook, right? A friend is someone with whom you share your heart. You can share your heart... let down the walls, allow them to know you.

Jewish discipleship involved closeness, parent/child closeness in some ways, master/servant closeness in other ways. It didn't involve friendship, the master sharing his heart with his students.

Jesus had kept nothing back: “All that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” In other words, He let these men know the mind of God.

God extended His friendship from within the Trinity to this motley group of mostly uneducated men. Nothing special about them, and yet, Jesus invited them to know things that God had never shared with anyone else.

The Old Testament emphasizes distance and separation from God—namely at Mt. Sinai when the Law was given. Distance, not closeness, for He is a holy God and we are sinners.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, you will find that God only called Abraham and Moses His friend. Only two men, and He didn’t share everything with them. For instance...

Abraham didn’t know that the messiah would be a prophet or a king.
Moses didn’t know that the prophet like him would be God Himself.

And neither of these men, not even the all angels in heaven, knew that God would die to save His people.

No one, not even the angels who worship around God’s throne, knew a fraction of the things that Jesus shared with His disciples. And on the night He was betrayed, He drew them close to say...
You are My friends. I’ve made you My friends.

All this closeness to Jesus, and then it sounds like there’s a catch: “if you do what I command.”
Was Jesus saying: *You’re My friend, IF you do what I command.*
 You’re My friend, IF you’re a good enough disciple.

Wow. That’s pretty discouraging, but that’s not what He’s saying. The “if” isn’t conditional. It’s not a bad translation, just difficult to translate the correct idea. More accurately, verse 14 could read...
“You are My friend, since you [already] do what I command.” [State of being]
It’s obvious that you men are my disciples.

These men had regularly followed Jesus; regularly obeyed Him. The pattern of their lives showed they were truly His... and this was supposed to be encouraging!

If being Jesus’ friend depends upon me to be a good enough disciple, it’s hopeless. The good news isn’t that you can be God’s friend if you’re good enough. We are sinners beyond hope, but God sent His Son to bring us to Him.

How can I be brought to God? How can I become His friend? By believing in Jesus Christ. Turn from your sin and begin to follow Him today.

The Lord had shared His heart with these men. John 13:1 says, “having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end.” One of the most touching verses in all of John’s Gospel. John wrote these words some 50 years after this night. Fifty years had passed, but looking back he says that Jesus loved us. *Our Master loved us to the end or loved us to fullest extent possible.*

John 15:12-13 — “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

And that’s what Jesus was about to do—give His life. Our Lord’s life was not taken from Him by Roman soldiers, nor was He a victim of injustice. No, Jesus willingly laid down His life.

Within a few hours of these words, Jesus would be handed over to endure 6 corrupt trials on a sleepless night. He would be stripped, spit upon, beaten, flogged, condemned, and nailed to a cross.

Why did He do all this? So many ways to answer that question! Realize that friendship with God is possible only because Jesus died for you.

In order for us sinners to love God and love as God loves, Jesus had to draw us close and make us His friends. How does a holy God draw sinners close to Himself? By choosing some to be close.

Jesus could set the supreme example of love for us to follow, and we could mimic it in ways, but by choosing us and drawing us close, He conforms our hearts to His.

II. Jesus Chose Us to be His Own

John 15:16 —“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”

Rabbis didn’t choose their disciples, but that’s exactly what Jesus did. He chose each disciple who would sit at His feet, and they accepted the calling to do so. We’re about to delve into some deep theological waters here.

Jesus said He chose His disciples: “I chose you.” That’s they way it always works with Jesus. He chose His original disciples, and He chose all who ever became His disciples—including each believer here today.

This doctrine, called election, has been distorted and marred... but it’s become one of the most beautiful doctrines to me.

Much of the distaste is because the idea of lordship is distasteful to us. There was a time in history when most of the world was governed by monarchs—lords with absolute power, and the people didn’t choose them.

About 250 years ago, power started shifting to the people. You can see this shift by contrasting the First and Second Great Awakenings, one was before America became a nation; the other was right after. Major theological shift. The First Awakening emphasized God as Lord, His sovereignty in salvation. The Second Awakening emphasized man.

Over the past 250 years, as power shifted to the people, the people have emphasized personal choice. No one should have authority over me, unless I agree to it. I should be able to...

choose my leaders, choose my career, choose my religion, choose my destiny.

It hasn't stopped. Many believe I should be able to choose if I want to end a pregnancy, and a growing number say I should be able to choose my own gender.

Choice may be the highest virtue in American... and yet, Jesus declares He's no mere choice. We recoil at the idea... but if He's sovereign, He's not a choice; if He's a choice, He isn't sovereign.

Friends, if you are saved, it isn't because you in the deadness of your heart—your own sinful free will—one day decided to choose Jesus.

Jeremiah tells us the heart of man is deceitfully wicked. You and I were fast-bound in sin, and if you love the Living God it is only because He first loved you.

It is only because He graciously reached down to you, a sinner, and caused you to love Him. He turned your heart of stone to flesh, as Ezekiel tells us.

We “who were dead in our trespasses, [God] made alive” is how Ephesians states it. God did all the work, even drawing you to believe in Jesus.

Salvation is a gift, such that before the foundation of the world, a whole eternity before you and I were ever created, God had already declared, “You are MINE.”

And if you are His, you are His forever, “so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace” (Eph 2:7). Before Him and all the angels, God determined that you will be a trophy that showcases His grace forever.

But that's not fair, Shaun! No, it isn't fair—it's grace. It sounds like God is keeping billions of people out of heaven. Billions of people who would like to be saved, can't because God didn't choose them. God won't let them.

Election sounds like God is the bad guy, like God prevents people from being saved. Nothing could be so far from the truth.

Scripture tells us that we are “dead in sin.” This would indicate that there aren't billions of people clamoring to know God. The biblical picture isn't that everyone is running towards Heaven, that people are pretty good and want to get in but God keeps them out. No, they are sprinting towards Hell. All of us, at one time in our lives, were sprinting towards Hell.

We, like all the rest of the world, were sprinting towards our own destruction when God decided to draw us to Himself. Is it unfair that God didn't draw everyone? No. That fact that He drew anyone—and at the expense of His own Son—that's called grace.

Friends, Heaven isn't struggling with overpopulation. Heaven would have no population at all, but... *I chose you*. Election doesn't make evangelism pointless; it makes evangelism possible. And there's nothing that shatters my pride more than the fact that God's choice eternally preceded mine.

John 15:16 — "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide." *I chose you for a great purpose—that your fruit wouldn't rot, but endure.*

"I appointed you." The specific fruit in this context is love, love for one another.

I appointed each of you before you realized why—I appointed you to love one another.

This is what I want you to do: Love that "all people will know what you are my disciples."

When Jesus says this, He isn't saying go love more... and if we're the most loving people on the face of the earth, people will really know that we're Christians.

This interpretation completely misses the mark.

Jesus wasn't talking about a generic or a godless love. He's encouraging us to love one another in a way that's distinctly Christian: *Love in a way that makes it clear you belong to Me.*

We are to love one another in a way that places Jesus at the very center of our love.

If you're helping someone in the church load up a moving truck or clean up their yard waste, anyone can do this deed—Christian or not. Jesus would have do it with the attitude...

I want to clean up yard waste, because it's a means to loving God. It's an opportunity to love God.

If love for Christ is your aim, loving others becomes the means to that greater end. A distinctly Christian love loves God in order to love man. It's something Christ must produce in us. He does that by choosing you to be His own and drawing you near to be His friend.

God's love transforms our love from loving others as the end to loving others as the means to loving Him.

When we confuse the means with the end, our service to one another becomes need-based and man-centered.

We help each other because there's a need... and that wears you out chasing needs. Needs are endless, running to take care of this need and that need and need after need after need. It's man-centered and so exhausting.

It's much different when you view each act of service as an opportunity to love God. This gives you the freedom to say "yes" or "no" and it elevates the most menial kinds of service. If you can see taking out the trash as an opportunity to love God, then this menial chore takes on a value that transcends all the money in the world.

Nothing could be more valuable than loving God. Begin to view all of life as God giving you opportunities to love Him. How then will you love Him this week?

Love loves to give for another good, but a higher, more biblical definition is that...

“Love loves to give for the sake of God’s glory.”

Love loves to give for God’s glory. Anything that glorifies God will be good for others. If Christ has placed His love in your heart, serving one another becomes a means to loving Him.

I hope you can see this isn’t just playing with words, as if “all you need is love.” No, because for God to be honored, we need to love as Jesus loved.

Central to the marks of a healthy church is a God-centered love. May the world know New Castle specifically for this.

EXHORTATION

These past two weeks I have said much about fruit, specifically about love and the source of love being God Himself. Our God is an infinite fountain of love whose love flows in streams, even great rivers that swell unto oceans of love for us who believe.

We can love like God, even love God, only because the God of love first loved us. He chose us to be His own and drew us close enough to enjoy His love as friends.

May the world know New Castle specifically for this kind of love. That when unbelievers hear from us, visit our church, or receive help of some kind, it’s clear that we are a people who have been with Jesus.