



LOVING FAITH

When Love is All

Text: John 13:34-35

The Ultimate Goal of the Spiritual Journey

We have been exploring together throughout this Lenten Season the nature of the spiritual journey as Jesus defines it. Tonight we come to reflect on the ultimate stage of spiritual maturity, the one we might call "LOVING FAITH." When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment -- the highest and most important purpose of life -- is, this is what He said. Your ultimate aim should be to **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength... and to love your neighbor as yourselves"** (Mrk 12:28-31). In other words, make it your daily intention to move through life progressively surrendering yourself, absolutely and utterly, to the loving service of God and neighbor. Make this your goal.

All of the discovering, the nurturing and the acting that make up the early stages of the spiritual journey... All of the questioning, the crossing, and renewing of focus that mark the later part of our pilgrimage as followers of Jesus... Every step on the Christian pathway is aimed at developing in you and me a greater capacity to love God and people. Even if we have lost everything else -- and at the end everyone does -- we will have gained everything that really matters if God and our neighbors are moved to say: "Now, *this* was a life of *amazing love*."

So, I'll ask you again, as I did at the start of our series, is this your real goal, or have you settled for something less? Are you taking intentional steps on the path Jesus has marked out for us, or just hoping you might get someplace close by happenstance? For me, there is nothing more important in life than growing in my capacity to love like Jesus. But this is precisely why I so need to be here tonight. I need to take in the events of Good Friday for TWO reasons that, perhaps, you may relate to as well.

Am I a Loving Person?

The FIRST reason is because without Good Friday, I can easily get to thinking that I am already a "loving" person. I can get to believing that I'm pretty far along the spiritual journey and don't have much more growing to do. After all, I love my family. I love my friends. I love my church and country. I love people who *are* loving. I feel like I love God. I'm a loving person.

Now, of course, there *are* times when my family members really make me mad and I feel I *need* to waste them with my words or whack them in some way -- just to help them improve. Sometimes, my friends completely let me down and its only appropriate they get the cold shoulder; that's just justice. There are those days when people in my church or country act so stupidly; who could blame me for writing *them* off? And those ignoramuses who treat me poorly at work or on the highway? I'm sure I'll be forgiven



LOVING FAITH

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for wanting to flip them the blue bird of happiness once in awhile. Honestly, even *God* blows it now and then – like when he wouldn't take the cup of suffering from my lips or utterly forsook me in my hour of pain. Of course I backed off on my faith then. But, *those* times aside, I'm basically a loving person. In fact, I think this world would be a whole lot better if there were more loving people like me and you.

And then I come to Good Friday, and I find myself moved to think again. I see a Being whose natural estate it was to be clothed in glory now stripped of even a pauper's rags. I watch as the Head that conceived the entire Creation is punctured by a crown of thorns. I see One who is worshipped by legions of brilliant angels, now mocked, spit upon, and struck again and again by soldiers who can barely do third grade math (Mat 27:27-30).

I watch as they beat to a place of execution this Man who's only crime was to break the laws of a twisted religion by healing sick people and feeding hungry people on the Sabbath. They stretch His whip-ribbed back and limbs out upon a cross and pound rusty spikes through feet that had walked hundreds of miles to bring good news to the poor and hands that reached out in grace to lepers and children. They gamble for His clothes, while keeping watch lest He somehow escape, never dreaming that with a mere thought, He could take back His glory, summon a billion warriors to His aid, and turn Rome and every vain empire to vapor (Mat 27:31-39).

I see His cross raised now against the darkening sky and His wounded flesh sagging against the nails. I watch as blood flows down from ragged wounds and His throat clenches in spasms of thirst. I view this One who had once breathed life into man, now struggling to draw air into burning lungs. And I wait for Him to curse God and condemn His tormentors, because this is what I would do.

Love at Another Level

But the only rage comes from those around Him. Passers-by hurl insults at Him, mocking His promise to raise the temple in three days, but never dreaming that it was His own life that was the true dwelling place of God soon to be raised again (Mat 27:39-40). Israel's religious leaders join in the chorus of spite. They hate Him for telling stories of a God who cares for lost and imperfect people. They despise Him for unmasking their hypocrisy and self-serving religion. And blindly believing that they now have control again, they dare Him to prove His power by saving His own life, failing to see that it is by giving His own life that his true power – the true power of God is being unleashed (Mat 27:41-43).

On the cross next to Jesus, hangs a common criminal who now demands that Christ save him without any need for humility or repentance on his part. **"Aren't you the**



LOVING FAITH

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Christ?" he asks. "Isn't it Your *job* to meet MY needs," and I shudder as I recognize myself in this man's voice. **"Save yourself and us"** he demands (Luk 23:39). But, still, no words of condemnation, no promise of destruction, no justified retaliation of any kind flows from the Cross of Christ.

Instead, we hear this *flow of truth*: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"** (Mat 27:46)? "Are you there, Abba? The weight of this sin, the weight of this flesh... it is so dark and heavy that I can't feel your presence, Father." Oh, how **"I thirst,"** says Jesus (Jhn 19:28). But as poignant as these words are, it is the *flow of grace* from the Cross that amazes and humbles me the most. Surrounded by people who are actually delighting in His agony and cheering His death... Tormented by people with unholy hearts so curved in upon themselves that I'd likely pray for their consignment to a fiery hell, *Jesus* says: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"** (Luk 23:34).

Wracked by a level of pain that would certainly drive me to a delirious focus on only my own needs, the heart of *Jesus* stretches out to comfort Mary and His friend, John, by forging them into a new family. **"He said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to [John], 'Here is your mother'"** (Jhn 19:26-27). Tumbling toward a death so awful that, had it been me, I would have turned only in upon myself, *Jesus* instead turns His attention outward, seizing one more opportunity to draw a precious soul into God's kingdom. To the repentant thief, he declares: **"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise"** (Luk 23:43).

And then, with two last defining exclamations, Jesus shows us what it is to love God and neighbor absolutely and utterly. **"It is finished,"** he cries (Jhn 19:30). The Greek word John supplies is "tetelestai," and it literally means "debt paid," "mission accomplished," "job completed." In other words, I have finished the work for which you sent me, Father. I have surrendered myself as the full and final sacrifice needed to pay the price for their sin. I have shown them the height and depths of your redeeming love. I have made it possible for them to be *our* neighbors again.

And then, with his last words, Jesus declares His complete surrender to the love that moves through Him toward God and his complete surrender to the love of God that moves toward Him: **"Father,"** he says, **"into your hands I commit my spirit."** [And] **"when he had said this, he breathed his last** (Luk 23:46).

Receive the Amazing Grace of Christ

I said at the start that I *need* Good Friday – and for TWO reasons that, perhaps, you might just resonate with too. The FIRST is because without Good Friday, I can easily get to thinking that I am already a "loving" person – that I am worthy of salvation on



LOVING FAITH

When Love is All

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account of how good I am. But when I stand at the foot of Christ's Cross, I realize that I am not. I'm not in the same game, much less in the same league. I do not love like Jesus. I do not yet love God or neighbor with anything approaching that utter surrender and utter surrender and absolute service I meet in Him. *None* of us do. When Jesus says to His disciples: "**A new command I give you: Love one another... as I have loved you**" (Jhn 13:34-35), He really IS calling us to a NEW way of living. If we are truly honest, we have to confess it is a destination what most of us are still early on the journey toward.

But that, I think, is the SECOND reason that all of us need Good Friday. It is why we need to keep coming back to the Cross every year and often in-between. It is because Good Friday also reminds us that there is a love at work on our behalf that is, thankfully, much greater than any of us – a Love that keeps stretching out His arms toward us while we are still sinners (Romans 5:8). This Savior invites us into the life of God, to feed on His grace, to drink of His goodness, to be filled with His power – because without Him we would be lost.

So, here's His offer: If you would humbly accept your desperate need of His love... If you are ready to commit yourself to an ongoing, intentional journey with Him – maybe for the first time or, perhaps, all over again... then Jesus bids you come, come to this Table tonight. Come and receive His amazing love, take into yourself the life of Christ.

Amen.