

Community of Love

John 13:34, 35 & I John 4:7-11

Scripture

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34, 35, NIV)

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (I John 4:7-11, NIV)

Main Idea

Love one another is placed up front in this study of the "one-anothers" of Scripture because it is the central "one-another" from which all the others flow. It is in the gospel that we see the love of God most clearly and it is by the gospel that we are able to love like God Himself. This study's purpose is to lay the theological groundwork for the rest of the studies – to focus on the love of God in the gospel as the power that creates a new community of love.

Starters

- [For Family Groups] Share your "love" story. How did you meet? First date? Engagement story? Pick some aspect of your love story to share with the group.
- [For mixed/non-married Groups] Describe a time in your life when you most strongly felt the love of God for you.

Discussion

Q1: How can Jesus' command to "love one another" be a new command? Wasn't Jesus' own summary of the commands of the OT "Love God and love your neighbor" (Mark 12:28-31, Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18)?

A1: The gospel – that Jesus came, died and rose again for sinners – is what makes this a new command. All the commands of God are now seen in light of the gospel of his love. God's love is free to the loved (it comes to us without condition) and costly to the lover (it came to us only at a great price to God). This gospel reality transforms the way we approach God and others.

The love of God is demonstrated most clearly and most deeply in the cross of Jesus Christ. What is new about the command to love is that all our obedience to God's commands should now take on the pattern of the love He has demonstrated for us by coming and dying for us. It is important to note that the pouring out of God's love on his people is prior to their response to that love. The command is based on the prior experience of God's love. Jesus foreshadowed the new way that God would reveal the freeness and the costliness of his love when he washed the disciples' feet (this is the larger context of these verses). God in the flesh knelt down to serve a group of rag-tag followers who would later desert him. He knelt down in service, humbling himself to make them clean (sounds like the way Paul described the cross, Phil 2:5-11!).

Q2: Jesus says love one another as he loved us, so His love forms the pattern of what our love should like. How has Jesus loved us and what would it look like for us to love like Him in this community group? (Look at John 15:12, 13)

A2: Two possible answers to focus on (there are a number of helpful answers to this question):

1) Jesus' love for us is incarnational. God did not merely declare his love to us from afar or give us gifts of love from a distance; He came to us in the person of Jesus Christ – to love us, as one of us. He entered fully into our human experience in order that we might be brought back to God in love. For us this means we have to actually be in each other's lives. We have to share joy and pain together. We have to leave places of comfort and enter into each other's lives in ways that, at first, might make us uncomfortable.

2) Jesus' love for us is sacrificial. Jesus faced the terror of seeing the loving face of His Father turned upon him in anger and wrath on the cross. Upon the cross, Jesus was treated as cursed of God. These horrors were ours to face because of our sin, yet Jesus willingly took them upon himself so that we might be restored to God and know the love of the Father.

In a community group this means spending time together sharing our stories and lives is crucial. We can't get "in" to each other's lives without time spent together. This has implications for our schedules and time-management. This means opening up our hearts to experience the pain of another person. Loving sacrificially could mean giving of our monetary or material means to help those in need. It might mean loving people who, to us, are hard to love. You might want to talk about possible barriers we face in giving and in receiving this kind of sacrificial love.

Q3: According to the I John passage, "loving one another" is how our knowledge of God is expressed (4:7-8). So, why is it that our knowledge of God and His word often doesn't lead to our becoming more loving? How can we approach God and his word in this group in a way that doesn't promote just knowledge but love?

A3: I would recommend asking this question in two parts.

1) Often we pursue knowledge of God not for God Himself but for the things we believe God will give us. We often pursue knowledge of God for intellectual satisfaction, or emotional contentment, or moral/life guidance. All these pursuits are good (and they are ways God brings us back to Himself) but not if consistently pursued as ends in themselves. Knowing God is more than just knowing about God. When we pursue knowledge of God for God Himself, we discover the love of God transforms us into becoming loving people. It is in the pursuit of loving God and in loving our neighbor that all 3 of these needs are met.

2) A community group can help each other in this by refusing to stay "on the surface". Love is a matter of the heart and the heart is where God's word must go if our lives will be transformed. The group can refuse to be satisfied in just "getting the right answer" to questions and discussion items and going further into how God's word calls us to deep repentance, radical faith and genuine love.

Q4. If "love one another" is Jesus' central command and the way that people will come to see Jesus in us (Jn 13:34, 35), then community is essential to following Jesus. We all have to have "one-anothers" to love...Why would Jesus make being in community the most essential ingredient of our following Him and making him known?

A4: This is a key question for people seeing the necessity for community in our relationship with God. Really pursue people's thoughts on this one – why would God make it this way. We are often very privatized and individualized in our approach to our faith – this whole study is designed to challenge and change that!

There are a lot of possible and legitimate answers here as well. Some of the more important directions to take are:

God is a community: God has eternally existed as a community. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – 3 persons, 1 God. This mystery is beyond our complete understanding, but what is so exciting about this reality is that we see why God made us as social beings. It is a reflection of his own existence.

We were made for community: God hard-wired us to live in community. Adam was incomplete before the creation of Eve. Therefore we cannot find true joy and true purpose apart from living in community. Each one of us was made to experience the joy of being truly known and loved.

Also important is our tendency toward pride and the illusion of self-sufficiency (both of which turn us away from God). God not only requires humility and dependence upon him, he has 'wired' us to grow spiritually only when we are humble and dependent upon others.

Q5: Both of our passages make sure that we understand that God's love for us was prior to our love for him. This prior love is the basis for our love for one another (look at 1Jn 4:10, 11). How does it impact you to know that God loved you first? Why is this important?

A5: Because "God is love" we look to God first as we seek to understand and define love. God's prior love points us to the unconditional and gracious nature of true love. Because God's love precedes ours, we can make the amazing statement that, "We can't do anything to make God love us more and we can't do anything to make God love us less". He loves us just as He loves Jesus (Jn 17:23). We didn't earn God's initial love and we don't start earning God's love once we believe in Jesus.

This reality should impact us to love like God – graciously and without condition. We should freely give love to the undeserving and not require people meet our expectations or conform to our desires before extending love.

Spend time drawing out from the group what this might look like practically, in "everyday life".

Q6: What is it about being loved by God that frees us and empowers us to love other people? How can we as a community group help each other to experience this freedom?

A6: The love God has shown us in the gospel makes us secure, safe and confident. This freedom in our relationship with God can free us from depending up on the approval, acceptance and love of other people for our joy and security. We are then free to give and to sacrifice because we aren't looking for others to give us life we have found life in Christ.

A community group can seek to become a place based on the love of God. Because members can rest in God's gracious love and acceptance, failure is not seen as something to be denied. Members can be open and honest about their struggles without fear of judgment. As a group shares life and struggles they learn that they aren't supposed to fix each other's problems but love each other in the midst of them. Community groups based in the gospel, base their commitment to one another not in shared interests, not in whether we "click" with someone, etc but on the fact that we share in the love of God together.

Prayer

Share any obstacles you might have in knowing and experiencing the love God has for you (i.e., you didn't have a loving father, perfectionist tendencies, you have a low self-image). Pray that God might remove these obstacles and give us all a fresh experience of His love for us in Jesus.