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The Greatest Mark of the Church

John 17:23b-26

Intro: Jesus has been laying out for us the specific characteristics that He says should characterize His church and as we saw last time, each of these distinguishing characteristics are associated with relationship. Each concerns the believer's relationship to some thing or someone. Joy reflects how we relate to ourselves. Holiness results from how we relate to God. Truth is associated with how we relate to the Bible. Mission is how we relate to the world. The last 2 marks deal with our relationship to the rest of God's children – unity and love. But, before we launch into our study of Love as a distinguishing characteristic of the church, I think it's important that we first look at what kind of love we are talking about here. The defining characteristic of this love is actually seen at the end of last week's text (23b).

23b- Often times, when we read through our Lord's teachings or prayers, there is so much information presented that we have a tendency to miss some of the more important truths. This is one of those times because; whether we recognize it or not, this is an amazing statement that Jesus makes, here at the end of His high-priestly prayer for us.

What Jesus is saying here is that God's love for His children is of the exact same nature, is given in the exact same measure and is exercised in the exact same fashion as His love for Jesus Christ. The word "as" is from the Greek *kathoēs*; meaning "just as" or "to the same degree that." Thus, we are taught that God loves those who belong to Jesus to the same degree and in the same way that He loves Jesus!

This statement is simply amazing if for no other reason than the fact that none of us loves like that. Truth be told, our love is actually quite partial. It's partial in our preference of our friends over those who aren't our friends. It's usually partial in our preference for our family over our friends, but not always. It may even be partial amongst our family members: you get along with some better than others. It happens; but not with God. He has no favorites. He doesn't love some of His children more than He loves the others. He loves us with the same love that He loves His own Son.

To truly understand the nature of God's love for us, we must learn what the Father's love for Jesus looks like. What is the scope of the Father's love for Jesus? 1) God's love is infinite. God is infinite; thus, He's infinite in this attribute as well as all the others. This means there are no limits on God's love. We have limits to our love, even though we sometimes try to pretend we don't. Can you even imagine any limits on the Father's love for Jesus? Of course not! He'd never have answered too many prayers; He'd never be too busy to respond to any request from Jesus. There are no limits on the Father's love for Jesus and there are no limits on His love for us. We can go to Him at any time with any need and know He stands as ready to help us as He did to help Jesus in Gethsemane. He is as close to us as He is to Jesus, whether or not we know it or feel it to be true.

2) God's love is eternal. This is not the same as being infinite. Infinite love is a love without limits. Eternal love is a love without end. Could the Father ever stop loving Jesus? Could the infinite affection that has existed between the 1st and 2nd Persons of the Godhead from eternity past up to this present time ever come to an end? Its inconceivable!

God's love for Jesus will not cease; thus, His love for us will not cease either. It will not cease because of changes in Him; He doesn't change; "I am the Lord, I do not change" ([Mal 3:6](#)). It won't cease because of changes in us because He has foreseen all change. Besides, God's already ordained that the overriding and prevailing change in our lives will be our conformity to the image of Jesus, not conformity to sin or this world ([Rom 8:29](#)). The consequence of this is that nothing, not even sin, can separate us from God's love.

3) God's love is perfect. His love for Jesus is perfect so His love for us is perfect too. We usually fail to grasp the full meaning of God's perfect love for us because we don't love perfectly. That's why marriages break up, friendships fall apart and children often rebel against their parents. It's not always because we stop loving, it's that we do not love well. It may be that there is more taking than giving or we're inconsistent in how we show our love. This is the nature of human love but it's not God's love. God loves perfectly with a love that always has our best interest at heart.

Does God so love? Are we truly the beneficiaries of this great love? What's the evidence? The cross of Jesus Christ!

We know that God loves us with the greatest of all loves because of the

supreme gift He gave of sending His Son to die for us at Calvary. We know God sent Jesus and the reason He sent Him was so that He might die for us. The knowledge of this undeniable love should encourage us even when our plans don't turn out as they should because "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28). This love also provides us with a great deal of security. God's love for us is something we can hang onto. No matter the circumstances, we should never doubt God's infinite, eternal, perfect love for His children.

As we've seen in the news the last few days, death is all around us. Of course, it's not the fact that people die that actually bothers us; it's really how they die that really affects the populace and excites the media. Some people die tragically, some die miserably, some die unexpectedly. While this is true and appears to be a lot more common in our day and age, what is also true is that none of these things can be said about a Christian when they die. Why is the Christian's experience of death so different from that of an unbeliever? It's not because the Christian is better. The difference is found in the fact that God has decreed the death of a Christian will be a triumph, not a tragedy.

We see this declared throughout Scripture. All the way back in Job's day, there was knowledge of the after-life. It was vague but clear enough to give comfort ([Job 19:25-27](#)). We see it all over Paul's writings when he tells us that "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord" ([2 Cor 5:8](#)). In Philippians he saw his death as a "gain" and was conflicted on whether he would rather remain on earth and minister to other believers or "depart and be with Christ, which is far better" ([Phil 1:23](#)). The triumph of the believer in death is mentioned often in Scripture but where does the Bible state it clearly and concisely? It's found in the verse we have now come to ([24](#)).

24 – This verse, along with a couple of others, gives the concept of being with Jesus after death its proper foundation and true emphasis. Its foundation is seen in that it's based on the express will of Father and Son. Its emphasis is seen in that this is the last petition of Jesus to the Father just before His crucifixion. The last thing He asks (last thing He wills) is that we might eventually be with Him where He will be after His death, resurrection and ascension.

Where is Jesus now? We know He is in heaven in the presence of the Father. This is where we shall be, if we have truly accepted Jesus as our Savior, if we are truly one of His disciples. We shall be with Jesus! This is what makes heaven real for us now and it's what makes it a comfort. This truth wasn't just stated by Jesus, it was also confirmed by Him, by His resurrection and ascension. It was confirmation that the price He paid for our sins was acceptable to the Father as a proper and just payment for the sins of mankind.

That we will be with Jesus is not the only comfort the believer has in death, there is also the truth that not only will we be with Him but we will be like Him (1 Jn 3:2). Finally, in that day, we will be like Him in respect to His character for all the sin, ignorance and nonsense that plague our lives here will be gone. We'll be like Him in love, holiness, truth, knowledge, wisdom, mercy and all His other moral attributes. We will also be like Him in respect to His body, for we'll receive a resurrected body similar to His own.

How do we know that Christians go to heaven when they die? Because of the price Jesus paid (1 Thess 5:9-10); because of the promise Jesus gave (14:1-6); because of the prayer Jesus prayed (24). The Father always answers the Son's prayers so we know that believers who die do go to heaven and do behold the glory of God.

25-26 – What is the greatest mark of the church? What's the one that holds the others together? What's the one that gives meaning to the others, the one the church can't be what God means it to be without? There's only one answer. The greatest mark of the church is love. Jesus has just spoken about joy, holiness, truth, mission and unity as essential marks of the church but now, He concludes with an emphasis on love.

Is love the greatest mark just because it comes at the end of the list? No, but let's see what happens if we take love out of all the other characteristics Jesus has mentioned. What do you get if you subtract love from joy? Without love, joy turns to hedonism. You have the exuberance of life and its many "pleasures" without the sanctifying joy found in relationship to Jesus Christ. Subtract love from holiness and you get self-righteousness, the kind that characterized the Pharisees of Christ's day. By all standards, the Pharisees lived very holy lives, but they didn't love others and were ready to

kill Jesus when He challenged their standards. They were hypocrites. Take love from truth, and you have a bitter orthodoxy, the kind of teaching that is right but that does not win anyone. Take love from mission, and you have imperialism. It is colonialism in church clothes. We've seen too much of that in church history. Take love from unity, and you'll soon have tyranny. You'll have a church with no compassion for people and no desire to involve the people in the decision-making process. It's no longer a church, it's just another business.

On the other hand, if love is added to the equation, what do you get? It produces all the other marks of the church. Love for God the Father lead to joy because we rejoice in God and in what He's done for us. Love for Jesus leads to holiness because we know we'll see Him one day and will be like him; thus "everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 Jn 3:3). Love for the Word of God leads to truth because if we love the Word, we'll study it and inevitably grow into a fuller appreciation of God's truth. Love for the world lead to mission because we have a message to take to the world. Love for other Christians leads us to unity because by love we discover that we're all bound together in that bundle of life that God's created within the Christian community.

What can we say about the love Jesus refers to here? 1) Its source is in God. We're not talking about the kind of love the world invents, aspires to or imagines but the love of God that's revealed in Jesus that we only come to know as we come to know God. This is clear from Jesus' triple use of "known" in vs25. He's saying that if we know God, we'll know God's nature as being characterized by love and, if we don't know love, we don't know God (1 Jn 4:7-8).

When Jesus says the world hasn't known God, He means that besides everything else, the world doesn't know God as a God of love. This was true of all other concepts of gods in that day. No Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Babylonian or any other pagan in Christ's day or in any of the centuries before, had ever thought of God's nature as being one of love. It's just not there. At best, God was thought to be impartial. But, Jesus inserted an entirely new idea into human history. He taught not only that God is loving, but also that He loves with an extraordinary love, entirely beyond all human imaginations. It's the love that sent Christ to die and draws a host of lost souls into a relationship with God.

2) It's revelation is in Jesus. This extraordinary love of God is seen in the OT, where God sets His love upon Israel even though there is nothing in the people of Israel that merits such love. This love is also revealed in the teachings of Jesus, where He regularly calls God Father; equating His love with a father's love. Yet, the best truth that God is a God of love is seen in the cross of Jesus Christ. This is what Jesus is looking forward to as He closes His prayer. What is He thinking of when He say, "I will declare it," meaning the name of God? If it were just past tense we could say He was referring to His previous teachings. But this is future tense? What's He thinking about? It must be the cross itself, where He would physically (and painfully) reveal the extent of God's love for us.

There's never been and will never be a greater demonstration of the love of God. If you won't have the Cross, if you refuse to see God speaking in love through Jesus, you'll never find a loving God anywhere. The God of the Bible is going to be a silent God for you. The universe is going to be an empty universe. History will be meaningless. It's only at the cross that you will ever find God in His true nature and learn that these other things have meaning.

One more thing: Jesus isn't just telling us where to find love; He also shows us where we can demonstrate this love ourselves. When Jesus prays for the Father's love be in them; He's saying God's love will be shown to us personally.

Why is this important? It's important because Jesus is about to leave this earth and if the world is ever going to witness the love of God for themselves, they'll only see it in the lives of those who truly follow Jesus. So, as He closes this prayer, Jesus prays that God's love will now to be in us, even as He is in us, and that the world would see it there. God's love must be a love in action.

How do we do this? How do we put God's love into practice? We show God's love by listening to others. People are hurting, other believers are hurting. The world doesn't want to hear about our problems unless we're willing to pay a couple of hundred dollars an hour to lie on a couch and spill our guts. No, God listens to us when we're in trouble and need guidance; we should be willing to listen to other. That's not all. We should also share with others. We should learn to share of ourselves. Most people don't

naturally enjoy that but this is how we as believers express the love of God. It's demonstrated in our service to others. The church isn't in the world to be served; she's in the world to serve so that the love of God in Christ might be increasingly known through the testimonies and loving acts of God's people

Joy, holiness, truth, mission, unity and love – these are the things that should distinguish our church and every other church in this world from the rest of the world. These are the characteristics that should set us apart from all the other organizations and gatherings of people in the world. They should characterize every aspect of our church life but to do that, they must begin to characterize each of our personal lives. It must begin in every heart before it can be seen on the street. Do you have His joy? Are you walking in holiness? Do you desire to know His truth? Have you accepted your mission? Do you walk in unity with the Lord and other believers? Do you reflect His love? This is what Jesus prayed for us as He was facing the cross. He knew He would live up to His end of the bargain. Are we?

If you as a Christian are eventually going to be with Jesus, why not spend time with Him now? If you're eventually going to be like Him in His moral character, why not strive to be like Him in your moral conduct today? 😊