

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:9-17)

Remain in Christ’s Love!

How long are you going to stay here? That unspoken question hung over the first five years that I served my last congregation. They had had four different pastors in the ten years before I came, and many people expected that I was only going to be around for a year or two. That didn’t change until I received and declined a call to serve another church five years after I got there. To be honest, there were times during the entire nine years I served that congregation when I thought about leaving. When things get difficult, it’s always easier to leave than to stay – and I’m not just talking about working in a church. In relationships, in jobs, in almost every area of our lives we have to fight the impulse to run away when things get hard or unpleasant – or just plain boring. There is a spiritual parallel. It’s easy to run away from Jesus. Even now that we know his love, it’s easy to put our faith in neutral and slip away from him. Or worse, to run away from him to pursue a lifestyle and a way of thinking that are totally opposite to everything the Bible teaches us. Today, Jesus calls us to stay. My friends, **remain in Christ’s love!**

I.

Jesus said, **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”** Jesus used a special Greek word for love. The Greeks understood that there are different kinds of love. I love ice cream. I love my wife. I love my children. I love my Lord. But love means something different in each case. The Greek word Jesus uses here is *agape*. It means a love that chooses to love. Most of the time, we love things that deserve to be loved. I love ice cream because it tastes good. I love my Lord because he has done so much for me. But *agape* means loving someone who may not deserve it because I choose to show real love. It’s the love we show an enemy who hurts us and then needs our help.

Agape love always does what is best for the one I love. It’s action just as much as it’s emotion. If I tell my wife that I love her and if I mean every word of it, if the earth moves under my feet when she walks into the room, but then I cheat on her or I lie to her or I beat her, have I loved her? No. *Agape* love always does what the person I love needs me to do for them. In fact, *agape* love is the love we show when we discipline our children. Because we love them, we run the risk that they’re going to be angry and sullen with us. We discipline them so that they will learn how to live a life that pleases God and keeps them out of jail.

Jesus showed us *agape* love. He chose to love us sinners, who deserve only God’s punishment. He did what was best for us when he died for us and then rose in our place. He did the hard thing that we needed when he called us sinners and then gave us the good news of forgiveness. Jesus said, **“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”** Now, there’s a profound mystery in these words. I don’t think that we can ever adequately describe the love the Father has for his Son, Jesus. Certainly, it is a love of choice, and yet, who is more deserving than Christ? It is a love that always does what is best for his Son, and yet, the Father sent his Son into this world to die for us. The love the Father showed Jesus was pure and faithful and perfect. That’s as much as we can say about it, except to say that the Father’s love came out in the love that Jesus showed us when he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born in a stable and raised as a carpenter’s son, when he preached and taught and endured the scorn of petty, little men so that we can hear the gospel, when he died for our sins and rose to give us life and then sent the Holy Spirit on his Church so that we carry the gospel forward. All that is the love Jesus had for us. All that shows us what the Father’s love is like, even if we cannot begin to comprehend how the Father and the Son express that love to each other.

Jesus told us to remain in that love. But how do we do that? He said: **“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”** When he says this, he does not mean that our good works earn God’s love. Rather, he’s talking about how faith works in real life. Faith is a gift from God. When God gives that faith, he gives a power that changes our lives. To remain in God’s love, that power needs to have free reign in our lives. What does that mean? Well, first of all, remaining in Jesus’ love means that we will hear the gospel so that Holy Spirit continues to work in our hearts to feed our faith. But it also means that our lives will be characterized by an attitude of faith. We resist sin because sin drags us away from God. We resist the Old Adam, the sinful nature that wants to gain control of our lives. Fighting him and living as God calls us to live because we are Christians keeps us in Christ’s love because we have to be focused on Jesus to do those things.

God rejoices to see us living our faith. He rejoices when we strive against temptation and evil, even though our efforts are never one hundred percent perfect. And you know what? God promises that we, too, will find joy in living for him. Maybe it seems like coming to church and avoiding sin is dull. But that’s your sinful nature talking. The believer in you loves to do what God commands. The more we live our faith, the more joy we find in living for God.

Jesus said, **“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”** So, we come back to love. Jesus’ command is love. Again, it’s that agape love. Lest we miss the point, Jesus zeroes in on the very heart of agape love. He died for us. That’s the greatest thing any of us could ever do for any other. Is there anyone that you would die for? I hope I never find out, but I’d like to think that if I had to, I would die for my wife and for my children. Jesus did die for me. He did show me that love and now he calls me and you to show that love for each other.

Does that mean that we should be looking for opportunities to literally die? Should we be down at the hospital begging them to take our hearts and our lungs and our livers and transplant them into someone else’s body? No. Certainly, if we have to sacrifice ourselves for another – by pushing them out of the way of a speeding car and getting hit in the process – that would be an example of the love Jesus is talking about. But the heart of the matter is the sacrifice. I lay down my life for my wife if I live my life to serve her good. If I spend all my time sitting in front of the TV and expecting her to wait on me, then I’m asking her to die – to sacrifice her life for me. But I should be sacrificing my life for her. And for my children. And for you. God calls us to give our lives to him and we do that by sacrificing those lives to serve each other.

What a wonderful world this would be if we all lived that way. But do you see the difficulty in God’s plan for our lives? Well, do you live that way? That’s the difficulty. It’s extremely difficult to sacrifice all that I am and all that I care about – to lay down my life – for someone who is as important to me as my wife is. If it’s hard to do all that for her, do you think it’s easy for me to do it for you? Do you think it’s easy to do it for a stranger? How many times have you done something rude and aggressive when you were driving because you wanted to get through the light or make the turn? So someone else had to wait or put on the brakes for your benefit. You made them sacrifice. If we can’t sacrifice ourselves when we drive, how are we going to lay down our lives day after day in all that we do? We sinners just can’t live as Christ did.

And that’s why it’s so important that he lived that way for us. He was perfect in our place – that was love because that’s what we needed. His love for us counts as our love for each other. He died to pay for all the ways that we fail to love each other. He wiped away every one of the times we demanded that other people sacrifice for us and refused to sacrifice for anyone else. He died and he paid for all the sin in our hearts and in our lives. Then he rose and he declared that it is all gone forever. That’s love. That love of God is the basis of our love for each other. Christ has come and made us new in the gospel of love. He has built into us that new man who rejoices to live in love. **Remain in Christ’s love. Love as he loved us.**

II.

Jesus told us that there is no greater love than laying down your life for your friends. Then he said: **“You are my friends if you do what I command.”** Now, he’s still not saying that we somehow earn his friendship. The very next verse says, **“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.”** Jesus would have every right to call us “servants” – the Bible does that quite often. And literally, the Greek word he uses means slaves. God owns us. But Jesus says that now, he calls us friends.

Jesus has changed our status. He has lifted us up from being nothing, and he has set us down next to him as peers. That is grace. It's God's undeserved love.

What's the difference between being a slave and a friend? Slaves just do what they're told. They don't get to engage their brains. They have no say in what's decided. If the master doesn't want to tell them what he's doing or why, that's his prerogative. But a friend is a person we open our heart to. If we ask a friend to be a part of a project, we explain what we're trying to do so that the friend understands our goals and our purposes. Jesus has opened his heart to us. He's told us all that God planned for us. He's allowed us to see the plan that began before the world was made. Now, we understand that God ruled the world and guided all things so that Jesus would be born. Jesus has taught us the goal of his life was: to live and die and rise again so that we will live with him forever. Jesus has promised us life with him at the moment we die and more important than that, Jesus has revealed to us the goal of our existence: a new life in a new world when we rise from the dead.

Jesus has chosen us to be his friends. That is the greatest grace of all. We didn't volunteer. No sinner could. But before the world was created, God chose us to have faith. In our lives, God fulfilled that choice when he sent the gospel to us and gave us faith. Now through that faith, God leads us to live a life that bears fruits of love. Jesus tells us our fruits will last. They will remain even when this world is over, because they are fruits of faith. God will recall them and reward them, even though you and I realize how imperfect those fruits really are.

All that is ours. Now Jesus reminds us what it means to live as his friends: **“This is my command: Love each other.”** To be a friend of Jesus means to live a new and holy life. The essence of that life is love for each other. It's laying down our lives to serve one another. It's putting the needs of the people around us ahead of our own wants and desires. It's choosing to love and serve each other, even if the people around us don't deserve it. Because that's what Jesus did for us. My friends, **Remain in Christ's love. Live as friends of Jesus.**

How long are you going to stay here – not here at church, but here in the love of Christ? You are already here. God chose you to be his own. He gave you faith and eternal life. Now he calls you to remain in his love. Love as Jesus has loved you. Live as friends of Jesus. Amen.