

## **The Mark Of A True Christian** by Jeff Strite

John 13:34-35

OPEN: Several years ago there was an Olympics held in Seattle Washington. And the special event that was talked about for years afterward was the 100 yard dash. Lined up on the starting line were 9 contestants, waiting for the gun to go off. At the gun, they started their run... kind of. For this was the Special Olympics a competition for physically or mentally handicapped people. The nine young men and women were filled with excitement as they ran and laughed and raced to the finish line.

But one little boy stumbled on the asphalt.

He tumbled over a couple of times and fell on his face and lay there crying.

The other eight heard him and slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back - every one of them.

One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

And everyone in the stadium stood, and the applause went on for what seemed like forever.

APPLY: What had that audience seen that day?

They had seen love in action.

And it had such a powerful effect on them that they stood and applauded.

Jesus told His disciples: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35

In other words: if we show love by our actions the world will notice, they may even stand and applaud.

Now, this "loving one another" was not just some passing comment by Jesus. It became the royal law of the Kingdom. James 2:8 tells us "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

In fact, love was to become such a crucial part of who we are as Christians that Galatians 5 tells us it is THE MARK of the Spirit bearing fruit in our lives.

Galatians 5:22-23 declares "... the fruit of the Spirit is LOVE, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Notice... LOVE was the very first item on the list.

That was because love MUST be what we are known for as Christians.

The phrase "Love one another" shows up at least 14 or 15 times in the New Testament. As I looked over those passages, a question arose in my mind - how do I know if I'm truly being a loving Christian?

Then it occurred to me that I should look at some of the other "one another" passages and see what they say about loving.

ILLUS: One scholar noted that the phrase "one another" is used 58 times in the New Testament.

"Greet one another," "Bear with one another," and "Be devoted to one another" are but a few examples. It's the "one anothers" in the Bible that pull together the family of God.

So, let's consider some of these "one anothers"

Galatians 6:2 (for example) declares "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ".

- You can carry another's other's burdens by praying for them. Not just saying "I'll pray for you" but saying "let me pray for you right now." In saying that you're declaring that you intend on to pray for them NOW and that you intend for them to hear you as you carry their burden to the very throne of God.
- You can carry another's other's burdens by meeting a financial need of theirs. Just last week a man came into my office and asked for an envelope. "How many do you need?" I asked. "Just one" he replied. Then he told me of a man in the congregation who had a need for \$100 and he wanted to quietly pass this on to him.
- Or you can carry another's other's burdens by making food for them when they're shut-in (I referred to a couple of recent families that we had taken food to in times of sickness)

1 Thessalonians 5:11 says we can show love in another way: "... encourage one another and build each other up..."

- Encouragement is when you tell your Sunday School teacher what a great lesson they taught.
- Or tell someone how their faith or their actions have impressed you.
- Or sent them a letter telling them how much they mean to you. In my first congregation, I often visited one of their members who was in the Nursing Home. She had suffered a stroke and one side of her body was paralyzed. One day when I visited her, I found her writing a letter. "Who are you writing to", I asked. "To people in the church, I'm writing to encourage them."

Hebrews 10:24 tells us another way we can love each other - "... let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

- If you teach, or visit the nursing home or do some other form of ministry, you could find a way for others to come along side and share that ministry. Give them a chance to teach or visit with you.
- Trampas does that with our Champion Football ministry and the Food Finders ministry to the poor. He "spurs you on to love and good deeds" in those efforts. Or you could encourage him by stepping up and doing those deeds with him.

Thomas a' Kempis said it this way: "Whoever loves much, does much."

This can all be summed up by what we read in Romans 12:10 where we're told: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves." It's all about THEM (other Christians)... not about you.

ILLUS: It was the closing night of a summer VBS. The teacher of one of the classes had missed one night and hadn't encountered a boy who had come that night, but who was there that Friday. He only had one hand. It shook her a little... and she began to be afraid that the others might make fun of him. In fact, she was so distracted by this that when time came for the closing program she mechanically led the children onto the stage and told them "Now, let's all build our churches. Put your hands together now, here is the church, here is the steeple . . ."

Then suddenly, she was aware that she had done. The little boy couldn't build a "church" because he had only one hand.

After a moment of awkward silence, the little girl seated next to the boy with one hand held her hand up to his and said, "Here, let's build the church together."

That little girl understood the truth of Christian love. Christian love is when one believer reaches out to another believer to build Christ's church. God calls us to be devoted to one another... to honor one another above ourselves.

Now, that truth led me to another question: why did God's word put such an emphasis on this? Why stress the idea that we should "love one another?" Wouldn't you think it would be obvious that Christians ought to ALWAYS love one another. Isn't that what a church always is?

Well... no.

One individual said that Church is often like a bunch of porcupines getting together to

get warm.

They might get warm... but they can also get hurt.

Remember that passage out of Galatians we read earlier... about the fruit of the Spirit? Everybody likes those verses because they make us feel good. These are the things we're to be known for. These things make us feel warm and fuzzy inside.

But few people realize that set of verses was actually the end of something far less comforting. Paul began his little conversation with the Galatians just a few verses earlier:

"The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." Galatians 5:14-15

What's that tell us about the Christians in Galatia?

It tells us that those Christians were NOT loving to one another. No, they were biting and devouring each other.

Then Paul goes on to talk about activities that were the exact opposite of the fruit of the Spirit - something he calls "the works of the flesh". He warns the Galatians not to get involved with "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

Galatians 5:19-21

Then Paul says: "I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Galatians 5:21

Paul had warned them before!!!

Don't do this!

You will not inherit the kingdom.

Y'all gonna go to hell!

Now, that brought another question to my mind: why would so-called Christians do this? Why do church people end up biting and devouring one another like they did in Galatia? Why would they get into fights that end up with hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, etc.

Well, there is one reason.

It's described in Galatians 5:15-17 "If you keep on biting and devouring each other,

watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

You see, the reason some church goers do back biting and “devouring” of others is summed up in a three letter word: SIN!

It’s the desire to pass judgment on others.

It’s the desire to play God.

And that’s never a good idea.

As Romans 14:4 says “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

That’s what the Pharisees were good at. They loved to judge. They loved to play God. And the mark of a judgmental person who wants to sub for God is anger and hatred. In their mind, God relies heavily upon them to fix problems in the church (in fact, He asks their advice on many things). They believe they know better than everyone else what needs to be done to correct the wrongness in other’s lives... just like the Pharisees of old.

Well, we all know how the Pharisees came out.

So, how do we avoid becoming like them? Well, there are three principles that will guard us against the plague of Phariseeism that Jesus condemned:

1st – if we’re going to love one another, we need to start by realizing “all are sinners.”

“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” Romans 3:23

In other words: “we’re all kind of like that little boy who stumbled in that Special Olympics in Seattle. Everybody stumbles. Everyone falls short. Everyone can be criticized. Everyone can be condemned if (well) you and I decide to play God.

The person you or I would criticize is the servant of God. And only God has the right to pass an anger filled judgment upon them. And frankly, God is known for His ability to wait on the fallen to get up again.

ILLUS: Max Lucado put it this way:

“Can the sick mock the ill? Can the blind judge the deaf? In the same way, can the sinner condemn the sinner? Absolutely not!”

Lucado goes on to say, “Be careful! The Peter who denies Jesus at tonight’s fire may proclaim him with fire at tomorrow’s Pentecost. The Samson who is blind and weak today may use his final strength to level the pillars of godlessness. A stuttering shepherd in this generation may be the mighty Moses of the next.

Don't call Noah a fool, you may be asking him for a lift."  
(Aaron Burgess, sermoncentral.com)

The point is this: Christians who are struggling and falling short may need time to change. And you and I cannot always tell what God is planning. Thus, it's never good to play God and condemn others.

As one person pointed out: "Only God is in a position to look down on anyone."  
(Sarah Brown)

2ndly – we need to come to grips with the fact that God demands that we love one another.

What does that mean?

Well, what is the "love chapter" in Scripture? (I Corinthians 13)

That's right!

Now, was Corinth known as a loving church?

No. They were notorious for their selfish, self-righteous, judgmental spirit. It was to a congregation riddled with wannabe imitators of God that Paul had to tell what love was like – because obviously they didn't know.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." I Corinthians 13:4-8

Peter put it this way: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." 1 Peter 4:8

Proverbs 10:12 said it this way: "Hatred stirs up dissension, but love covers over all wrongs."

ILLUS: Have you ever been in a supermarket and seen a little kid in a shopping cart? Have you ever heard that little child scream and yell and throw a little hissy fit? And what did you think when you observed this little tirade?

Exactly. "Shut that kid up!" I don't want to hear your little brat assault my ears with their offensive cries.

Now, my kids aren't small enough anymore to put in a shopping cart, but when they were I would take them to the supermarket... and sometimes they'd throw a hissy fit.

Granted, I'd probably discipline them, but do you think I still loved them? Of course.

I didn't love the kid in someone else's shopping cart, but I loved the kids in mine. What was the difference? They were MY kids. My love for them covered a multitude of their sins (and ear piercing screams).

God is essentially telling us: when people in church throw a hissy fit... they are in YOUR shopping cart. They belong to you. They're your family. Let your love for them cover the multitude of their wrongs.

Hatred stirs up dissension. Hatred is the source of the backbiting and anger and self-righteousness that God condemns. But true love doesn't hate, it isn't angry and it doesn't back bite. Christian love covers all wrongs because that kind of love wants to fix what's broken... it has a love for the fallen.

Kind of like the simple childlike love those eight Special Olympic kids had when they turned back and picked up their fallen friend.

The whole objective in Christianity is pick up the fallen brothers and sisters in Christ It's to love our sisters and brothers even when they're not so lovely.

Even when a church has to disciple a member who's sinful and unrepentant it should do so reluctantly and in love.

That's why Jesus said this: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."  
Matthew 18:15

What's my objective in this? (to win my brother)

How do I win my brother over??? (I go to them)

This is how it works.

ILLUS: (I went down into the audience and stood beside someone I felt would "play along")

Let's say that Larry back there has offended me. What am I to do? Well, I go here to Ethel and I start saying "Ethel, could you believe what Larry did to me? Can you image how thoughtless he's been, how much he's hurt met" etc. etc. etc.

Is that the right way to go about this?

No, of course not.

But most people do exactly that. They talk to as many people as possible to get them on their side and build up their own little army of haters. That's not the action of a

“love one another” type of Christian. That’s what the Pharisees would have done.

So, what should I have done? I should have gone TO Larry and tried to win him over. Why? Because that’s what Jesus says we should do.

So, how many of you AGREE with Jesus on this?

How many of you believe that if we have a problem with a fellow Christian we should go to them and talk it through? (ask for a show of hands)

Me too.

That’s why every couple of years I ask you to do a vow. A vow is a very serious thing for a Christian to do. God says it angers Him for us to make a vow and then not follow through on it. So carefully consider this before you commit to it. I’m going to ask you to publicly make a vow that if you become offended by another Christian – one of the Elders, the preacher, a Sunday school teacher, the person in the pew beside you – you will go TO them and talk it out.

If you’re willing to make that vow, I want you to stand where you are. (Give them time to do this).

So, in order to love one another as Jesus tells us to

1. We need to realize we all fall down. We all fail. We all sin.
2. We need to realize that love means we must try to pick up our fallen brothers/sisters

And lastly, we need to trust God. If I’m going to love others and not judge them in self-righteousness then I have to wait on God to work on that person. I have to realize that God wants them to change and that He is working on them in ways I cannot see.

CLOSE: To illustrate this I want to close with a story Fred Craddock told about his father. I get the impression that his dad had been hurt by someone in the church years before. For years the church reached out to him to come back, but he always rejected their offers to go to church with one statement: "All they want is another name and another pledge" (meaning: they didn't care about him, all they wanted was his body and his money).

Year after year, an evangelist would visit the man during the Revival meetings trying to get him to come and he would repeat the same phrase as he dismissed them: "all they want is another name and another pledge."

That's what Craddock's father always said... all except one time.

Fred Craddock tells of how his father got cancer and finally had to go to the VA Hospital to receive proper care. Over a period of time, the once burly man wasted away to a

mere 78 pounds, and when Craddock made it home and visited him in his hospital room he was shocked by his father's frail appearance.

He was also shocked by the appearance of the room.

It was filled with flowers and cards.

As Craddock went about the room looking at the flowers and reading their cards he was struck by the fact that for the most part they came from the very members of the church that his father had for so long rejected.

His father motioned him to the bed, and because he could not speak due to the cancer, he weakly wrote these words on his notepad. Words from Hamlet: "Draw your breath in pain as you tell my story..."

"What's your story, dad?" Craddock asked.

Then his father wrote these three words "I Was Wrong."

That church loved Craddock's father. And because they loved him they gave God the room and the time to change the man's heart. All because they were committed to concept of loving one another.

But you cannot truly show that kind of love until you've laid hold of the love of Jesus for you.

INVITATION.