

JOSH MOODY
JOHN 13-24
FOR YOU



John 13–21 For You
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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *John 13–24 For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 translation (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)
- ESV: English Standard Version
- AV: Authorized Version

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 13 – 21

As we come to this second volume of this expository guide to John's Gospel, it is good to remember the wonders of the story so far, and also see the glory of where we are going.

Where We Have Been

John is writing his **Gospel** to show us how faith in Jesus is, in John's words, the way to find life, and life to the full (John 10:10). He flagged the same theme right back at the beginning, in his prologue, the introduction to the Gospel: in him—that is, in Jesus, the Word **incarnate**—was life (1:4). Now, in this continued development of this theme, we will come across John's famous purpose statement (20:31): John says that he writes his Gospel so "that you may believe that Jesus is the **Messiah***, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

So John has this great, overarching theme, which we saw in the first expository guide covering chapters 1 – 12, and which is now going to be further developed. And that theme is that finding Jesus, through faith in him, is the way we find life, and life to the full.

This explains the much-quoted saying about John's Gospel: that it is shallow enough for a child to wade in and deep enough for an elephant to swim in (and, perhaps, for **theologians** to drown in. On the one hand, John is the perfect Gospel for someone who is at the beginning of their Christian life, or someone who is exploring the Christian faith for the first time. What John is trying to do is persuade us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him we find life. So here is that aspect of John's Gospel: it is for the newcomer, the starter, the person exploring the Christian faith. But then there is another part of John's Gospel (the "deeper" part, as it were) as well. And that is to explore what it means to have, and

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 161).

how to actually know and experience, this “life ... to the full” that Jesus holds out to those who come to him in faith. Therefore John’s Gospel is equally appropriate for the more mature Christian, including the disciple wanting to renew their faith—the person who feels stuck and wants to find new spiritual life. For both—the newcomer and the more mature Christian—John’s Gospel is designed to show us how to have this quality and eternal quantity of life—a life that comes through believing in, and committing to, Jesus.

The Book of Glory

Now, in this second volume, we come to the second part of John’s Gospel. It is important to see how the second half of John’s Gospel fits into that overall purpose. Often it is said that the first part of John’s Gospel is “the book of signs.” There are signs (miracles) that Jesus does that point to him as the Son of God. But now, in the second half, we come to “the book of glory.”

Now all is focused on Jesus’ glorification. The hour, or the time, has come for Jesus to be glorified (12:23), and that truth points us on to the following chapters—those that we are looking at in this volume. We are in Jerusalem with Jesus. It is the **Passover**. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (1:29), and that promise is now going to be fulfilled. The Passover lamb, which was the sacrifice through which God rescued his people from Egypt and brought them to himself to be his people, is now going to be fulfilled more gloriously in the Lamb of God, who will die and rise again from the dead to save from their sin those people who trust in Jesus, and bring them into his people.

Throughout these chapters, then, we are focused on the glory of Jesus, which—counterintuitively—comes through, and is most seen at, the cross—his death. We are going to be shown what life is like as the people of God, saved by the Lamb of God, who takes the sin of the world.

Follow along, then, as we come to the pinnacle of John’s Gospel—to the glory of Jesus—and as he calls us to follow him. It is not a

tragedy but a victory. Yet it is a victory that comes about through a most unlikely event: the sacrificial death of the hero of the story. We are being asked to believe and not doubt like Thomas (20:24-29, see pages 142-145)—to follow Jesus and trust him, and so find life to the full. We are going to be called to follow Jesus in order to have this life to the full that he offers his disciples through the victory of his sacrificial death and resurrection. And that following will, we will discover, involve sacrifice—dying to ourselves—for us as much as for Peter—as Jesus explains to Peter at the end of the Gospel.

There is a flavor of profound power and humble love throughout these pages that arrests the sensitive reader and moves us to tears and wonder that we have such a God as this. Read on and enter into the book of glory, fully focused upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

1. THE BASIN AND THE BETRAYER

Sometimes it seems as if everything is about power—even religion.

In fact, in many ways the main doctrine of our **postmodern** age is that because there is no such thing as absolute truth, all that is left is power. This is what was taught by mid-20th-century French philosophers like Jacques Derrida, and it has made its way through the universities and into the practical policies of many parts of the West. Everyone is part of some tribal group, or other: postmodernism asserts that because there is no ultimate truth, all that can happen is that different groups vie for positions of power and authority over other groups. And such attitudes can also impact even religion; some institutions and religious affiliations can get into empire-building and coalition-forming for no other greater reason than that these advance the interests of those in the center who are pulling the strings.

But Jesus is so different from all this: not only because (as he will say later in this second half of John's Gospel) he is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) but also because he is love. His love is extraordinary: not a pretend love but a real love, and a love that is revealed in the sacrificial, serving nature of his ultimate act of sacrifice, when he died on the cross.

The Time Has Come

John 13:1-17 is intended to teach us not only that Jesus served, and that we are meant to be serving people too, but also that Jesus' love is revealed in his serving actions, ultimately at the cross, and that our

love is also to be revealed in our service of others. Here is a powerful antidote to the power-obsessed nature of our age: washing feet.

Verse 1* begins with a time marker. This whole section from now until the cross is all now moving forward to that moment, and John reminds us of that once again by saying, “It was just before the Passover Festival.” His readers knew that Jesus had died on the cross at Passover, as do we today, and so our minds are turned away from the immediate to that event, which this event foreshadows. “Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.” All is under Jesus’ **sovereign** control; he knows everything, and he knows that his time, or literally his “hour”, has come.

Jesus’ foot-washing asks us: Is this how we love one another?

John now gives us his commentary on what is about to happen: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he...” and from here it could be translated as “now showed them that he loved them to the last.” The purpose of this foot-washing is to point us to the ultimate place where his love is shown: the end point of his love—the

cross. How were the disciples to understand why Jesus was going to die on the cross as they made their journey ever closer to Passover? Jesus takes off his outer clothing and picks up a basin and a towel, and teaches them the nature of salvation, of victory, of love, of sacrifice, and of service. This is a **metaphor**, a sign, pointing to the love of Jesus at the end, at the cross, and asking us: Is this how we love one another?

This episode took place during the preparation for the evening meal, and after “the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot” to betray Jesus (**v 2**). There are many possible explanations for Judas’ betrayal of his Lord. At a human level, we know it was at least partly done out of greed, as Judas was a thief (John 12:6); the

* All John verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

thirty pieces of silver that he was paid for betraying Jesus were too tempting for him. But there is another level too, a spiritual dynamic: the devil is at work. We should not see the devil behind every closet, or underneath every carpet, or as the prompting for all unpleasantness, but neither should we ignore his malevolent work. The devil is real. He is roaring around looking for someone to devour. We are to stand firm in our faith, resisting him, and he will flee from us (1 Peter 5:8-10; James 4:7).

The Lord Who Stoops to Serve

John **13:3** tells us something else that Jesus knew: that God the Father had put all things under his power, that he had come from God and that he was returning to God. Jesus was secure. He was not trying to prove himself. Sometimes helping does more harm than good because it is driven by the personal insecurity of those seeking to help rather than the needs of those who are supposedly being helped. But Jesus is not serving us to get something out of us; he is serving us because he is love. God the Father put all things under Jesus, not meaning that Jesus was less than God the Father but that in the **economy of the Trinity** there is a constant mutual loving and selfish collaboration: one God in three Persons.

Now comes the remarkable deed: “He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist” (**v 4**). Can you see the surprised looks as, in the middle of the meal, Jesus takes on the mantle of a servant? The disciples are reclining at table and Jesus adopts the posture and appearance of a menial, something like a shoeshine boy or scullery servant, and steps over the line from one being served to one serving.

And with all (we may assume) staring in wonder, Jesus begins to wash their feet (**v 5**). In ancient times, feet would get particularly dirty. People walked in sandals in streets covered with dung from animals and full of dust stirred up by wayfarers. Feet in those days would have got filthy. We should give significant reflection and

imagination to picturing those hands that flung the stars into outer space now grappling with the corns on the disciples' feet, wiping off the droppings of some goat, smearing out the filth, and then, when all is clean, studiously and carefully wiping the feet dry. Who is this who behaves in this way? What other religious leader has ever done this? There is no comparable story for Mohammed or Buddha. But this Jesus, this God, is the God of love. He has come to serve, and now he begins to show the full extent of his love.

Simon Peter, ever bold, and ever willing to address the elephant in the room, asks Jesus a question when it comes to his turn to have his feet washed by Jesus: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" (v 6). You should feel astonishment as you read it. *Are you really going to wash my feet? Are YOU going to wash MY feet?*

Jesus points to the meaning of this event—to show the full extent of his love—by replying in **verse 7**, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." When the disciples see Jesus die on the cross, and when the Spirit reveals to them the meaning of the cross, they will understand that they worship a crucified Messiah, a serving Lord, a loving and humble God.

But for now, Peter does not understand: "You shall never wash my feet" (v 8). Sometimes God does things that seem so outrageous to us that all we can do is, in prayer, protest. **Abraham** did when he heard of the coming destruction of Sodom. **David** did when he heard of the coming death of his child. **Paul** did with the "thorn in his flesh". Sometimes it's only after we have fervently protested to God that we come to understand why we should say yes to God after all. Peter objects to anything that might humiliate Jesus or undermine his dignity. He wants Jesus to be lifted up, not brought down to washing people's feet.

But then listen to Jesus' reply in the second half of the verse: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." How hard it is for sinners to learn to accept that they need a Savior! We will do anything—anything—rather than accept we need saving, just as the

leprous **Naaman** was so unwilling simply to wash in the Jordan River to be cleansed (2 Kings 5). Surely there is something complicated we must do. Surely the blessing of God is only received by carrying out some arduous task or profound truth. Surely we must work hard and prove ourselves to God. No—receiving God's blessing requires from us only the humility to allow Jesus to wash us. There is no other way to heaven but through the basin and the towel of Jesus' sacrifice for us. As D.A. Carson puts it:

Receiving God's blessing requires from us only the humility to allow Jesus to wash us.

"Unless the Lamb of God has taken away a person's sin, has washed that person, he or she can have no part with him."

(*John*, page 464)

Peter ups the ante. "Not just my feet," he replies (John **13:9**), "but my hands and my head as well!" Peter may have made many mistakes, but what sets him apart is his simple, clear, pure desire to please Jesus, come what may. Let us have that desire! If Jesus wants one thing of us, let us offer him all things!

Verse 10 is a little complicated but readily explicable. The point is that if you have come to Jesus by faith, repenting of your sins and receiving his Holy Spirit, then in a sense you have "had a bath." You have been **regenerated** and you are washed clean. In that case, all you need is, from time to time, to go to God and ask him for forgiveness for when you do still on occasion sin. We all sin; we are sinners. As the Anglican prayer book has it in its prayer before communion, "There is no health in us, but you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy." Or, as John put it in his first letter: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). So Christians do not anymore need a "bath"—they have been born

again by God's Spirit and are in Christ—but they do still need on occasion to receive forgiveness through repentance and confession of their sins to God. Have you sinned today? Confess your sins and receive Jesus' forgiveness!

Washing Feet Like our Master

Of course, Jesus also knew that among the disciples was Judas, and so he adds, "And you are clean, though not every one of you." As John comments in John **13:11**, Jesus "knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean." In other words, Judas had not been cleansed from his sins. He had not come to God in purity of heart to ask God for forgiveness in the sense of truly being in spirit one of Jesus' disciples. The presence of Judas in this text should be a warning to us: being outwardly present in a Christian meeting is not enough to guarantee our salvation. We must come to Jesus in repentance and faith personally. But the presence of Judas in this text is also an encouragement: even the presence of the betrayer could not derail Jesus' gospel plan. In fact, so completely sovereign is Jesus that Judas' betrayal is still woven into Jesus' plan of salvation: "He knew who was going to betray him."

And now Jesus explains what he has done. When he has finished washing feet, he puts his clothes back on and returns to his place (**v 12**). He asks the disciples whether they grasp the significance of what he has done: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" Evidently, they do not, for Jesus goes on to explain. It is reassuring to read of the disciples not understanding. If people so close to Jesus did not always grasp, or even often grasp, what he was doing, it is not surprising that we sometimes find it hard to understand too. Granted, we have God's Spirit, but be reassured if you cannot understand what Jesus is doing in your life—and ask him to speak to you through his word that you might gain a heart of wisdom, gradually and bit by bit.

By washing their feet, Jesus is not abandoning his authority. The disciples call him "Teacher" and "Lord", "and rightly so, for that is

what I am" (v 13) We should not interpret Jesus' love as weakness, or his service as sentimentality. He has all authority in heaven and on earth. His power is immeasurable. So why did Jesus do this act of foot washing? So that "you also should wash one another's feet" (v 14). Jesus is setting them an example to follow. He is showing them how God's authority and power (and therefore our Christian authority and power, such as it is) should be revealed in loving, humbling service: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (v 15).

Are we truly serving other people? You know whether you are really a servant when someone treats you like one. You are taken for granted. You do not get the credit for doing something important. You are forgotten. You are left with the menial tasks. You receive no praise. All these are hallmarks of serving—at home with the children, at work with the staff, with our neighbors and friends, and at school. How do you know whether something is really an act of service? Part of it indeed involves our attitude. A Christian in high office is to act as if they are of lowly estate. They are to serve the people they are called to lead: that is, they are to do what is genuinely in the best interest of others. But another test is this: you can tell whether some deed is truly the deed of serving when no one would do it if they were not a servant, or at least paid to do it, or have some strong other reason to do it. Doing the dishes, sweeping the floor—however high up you move in Christian leadership, make sure there is some space not only for an attitude of service as you lead but for an act of service itself. I was once told a story of John Stott, the great 20th-century minister and author, who was visiting some African bishops. They were astonished to find him cleaning the floor after the meeting they had attended had concluded. *Go, says Jesus, and do likewise.*

He then gives two motivations to act this way. First, "Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (v 16). In other words, being a servant establishes that we are in relationship with God. It gives us

assurance. We bear the master's image when we act like a servant. What an upside-down world is the kingdom of God!

Second, "now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (v 17). There is a weight that you bear when you are only interested in power, authority, or personal gain. Look at those who walk from their chauffeur-driven car to the financial institution where they work. Rarely, if ever, do they walk with a spring in their step or a smile on their face! How do you bear the weight of great responsibilities? Follow Jesus' example. Serve. That will be what ensures you are "blessed": happy, joyful, in a state of what Jesus declares is the right way to live even when you don't feel like it. Serving not only gives you assurance that you are a disciple of the serving Master; it also simply gives you true happiness. You enter into his blessing, even in the shadow of the cross.

Questions for reflection

1. Why do you think it is sometimes hard to "allow" Jesus to "wash" us? What particular species of pride prevents you from accepting your need to be saved?
2. In what ways could you act as Jesus did? Are there serving attitudes that you can ask God to help you develop? Are there particular areas of service, behind the scenes, where no one else notices, that you could volunteer for?
3. Many of us want to be "blessed." Is it possible that we are not as "blessed" as we would like to be, or could be, because we are not serving in the way that Jesus exemplified? What could we do to rectify that?

PART TWO

The Betrayer

When you are about to face the most demanding moment of your life, it would be good to know that your friends are going to stick by you. What must it have been like for Jesus to know that one of his friends was about to betray him, and that another—one of his very closest friends—was going to deny him?

If you have ever faced significant suffering, and had the pain of that suffering compounded not just by the insensitivity of your friends but by their downright disloyalty, you will find these verses especially meaningful. And for us all, they will lead us to wonder at the glory of God shown in such humility in such a Savior. Glory is at the heart of it all: this second section of John's Gospel is in some ways all about glory. But it is not the kind of glory we would expect. "Now the Son of Man is glorified" (13:31) comes right after the point when Judas determined to betray Jesus and right before Peter began the path to denying him. This is, surprisingly, God's glory!

Verse 18 tells us that even Judas' betrayal was part of God's sovereign plan: "This is to fulfill this passage of Scripture." The text quoted is from Psalm 41:9, but only the second half of the verse is specifically quoted. It is worth knowing the full quotation: "Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me." Evidently, Jesus thought of Judas, one of his disciples, in this light. How painful this must have been?! Have you ever had a "close friend" betray you? Be encouraged: Jesus can empathize, and therefore you can go to him for help (Hebrews 2:18).

Jesus tells his disciples about Judas (John 13:19) so that when the betrayal happens, they will believe that Jesus is who he says he is, "that I am who I am." Only God could predict such an event; even the betrayal was under God's control. **Verse 20** is one of those great truths which are scattered through John's Gospel, and which are introduced with the classic phrase that indicates a great truth is about to be uttered: "Very

truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.”

The logical connection, though, between this statement and the previous one is not immediately apparent. It seems that Jesus is saying of the other disciples, who will be sent by Jesus, that (in contrast to Judas) if people accept them, they will be accepting Jesus; and if people (through the disciples) accept Jesus, they will be accepting God the Father. In other words, as much as Judas by his actions has undermined the significance and importance of being a disciple of Jesus, Jesus now explicitly reaffirms that significance and importance, and tells the remaining disciples that that is to be made clear through them. Judas may be running in the other direction, but those who are sent out by Jesus have this astonishingly important role of representing Jesus and God. You may or may not be a pastor or a missionary, but if you are a Christian, then think of yourself in this light. If someone accepts you as you proclaim the gospel, they accept the Jesus who sends you, and they accept God the Father!

And it Was Night

Now Jesus is “troubled in spirit” (v 21). After all, he is human. Christians have tended to either overemphasize Jesus’ divinity or overemphasize Jesus’ humanity. But the truth is that both are to be maximized. This reality, that Judas was to betray him, troubled Jesus. Of course it did! Who would not be disturbed by knowing that a close friend was about to betray them? And so Jesus says again, this time more directly, what is about to happen: “Very truly I tell you” (again, this is an important statement), “one of you is going to betray me.” What must it have been like to be Judas and hear Jesus say that? Words fail to express the tragedy of the darkness of Judas’ heart at that moment.

The disciples want to know, naturally enough, who Jesus is talking about (v 22). One of them, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” is reclining next to Jesus (v 23). The phrase “the disciple whom Jesus loved”

almost certainly refers to John the author of the Gospel. John is not claiming that Jesus loved him more than he loved the others, but it may well be that John had an especially close friendship with Jesus. And he does not use his own name, as he is the author of the Gospel that is being written. John may not have been strongest disciple or the cleverest disciple, perhaps, but he does appear to have had this gift for intimacy: for friendship. His other writings reveal the same characteristic that this phrase suggests. At any rate, Peter, again forthright and strong, indicates to this disciple who is right next to Jesus that he should ask Jesus who he meant (**v 24**). So, leaning back against Jesus as he reclines next to him, in the way of Romans at dinner, John asks Jesus, “Lord, who is it?” (**v 25**).

Rather than directly replying, Jesus dodges the need to bluntly and explicitly name Judas (Judas presumably would have been manhandled by the other disciples if Jesus had done that, and the purpose of God would then not have been fulfilled through Judas’ betrayal); he says that it’s the one to whom he will give a piece of bread (**v 26**). He gives it to Judas. And as Judas took the bread, “Satan entered into him” (**v 27**).

These truths are mysterious. What does it mean for Satan to enter into someone? It at least means this: it can happen. In Judas’ case, Satan so took charge of his personality and his will that it could be said that Judas became clothes animated by Satan’s desires—a puppet on the devil’s strings. Do not play with evil things; there is a devil, and there are evil spirits. The occult, witchcraft, and Satan are not to be toyed with. The great tragedy in this scene is that, at least in principle, Judas could have repented up to this point. But now the die is cast and it is too late. There can come a moment when you so harden your heart to the truth of God that the course of your life is set. Be careful when you say no to Jesus and yes to evil. There may come a time when you can no longer say yes to Jesus.

Jesus tells Judas not to delay but to get on with it (**v 27**). Bad things do not become better by stretching them out. Pile the wood on the

martyr's fire and don't draw things out, for that could make everything worse. But why is **verse 28** true? "No one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him." Had they not heard Jesus' reply to John's question? Or did they think, since they were all eating bread with him, that the symbol of giving the bread to the betrayer meant that they were all in danger and should be careful to be loyal to Jesus? Presumably they did not yet realize that Judas was actually going to betray Jesus.

Verse 29 points out that Judas is the one who "had charge of the money". But the point here is simply that the disciples do not think Judas is going to do anything different than go and buy some provisions for Passover, or give some money to the poor. Then, in one of those touches of Spirit-inspired genius, John simply comments at the end of **verse 30**, "And it was night." The darkness, the night, indicates the spiritual darkness of Judas' deeds.

The Standard For Our Love

Even with Judas out of the way, there is still trouble with the disciples for Jesus. Though the others will not betray him, they will deny him. But this is all for God's glory: "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once" (**v 31-32**). The glory of God is shown nowhere more intensely than in the cross of Jesus. Is that where you think God is most glorified—in the sufferings and death of Jesus? We tend to be triumphalistic, and think that God's glory is shown most in successes. But instead his glory is shown most in sufferings? For him, as for his followers, his strength is shown in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:10).

"My children" (John **13:33**) is a phrase used by John himself in his letters for his readers (1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 5:21). Jesus has such great, enduring love for us. If you are fatherless or motherless, in Christ you can still find one who will be a parent to you, and be better than any human parent could ever be.

Jesus tells his disciples, indirectly again, that he is about to go the cross and that they cannot follow him there (John **13:33**). And then, in **verse 34**, he gives his great “new” command. In what sense is it “new”? The Old Testament also tells us to love our neighbor (Leviticus 19:18). Is Jesus newly emphasizing or newly stating God’s command to love others? Yes, but he is also and especially renewing it, as follows. Now a new covenant is being formed, around a new group of disciples, around the Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And so now this commandment is given to them in a special and new way: they are to love each other. They are the church, the community of God, the family of God. And they are to show that by the love they have for each other (John **13:35**). This new community is to be expressed by this new love—the love for each other that has been the mark of God’s people from the beginning is now given specifically to Christians as their special sign and distinguishing aspect. The second-century theologian Tertullian noted how the Christians being persecuted by the Roman Empire were seen to fulfil this command by the **pagans** who said of them, “Look how they love one another” (*The Apology of Tertullian*, 39.7).

We can have many different programs and initiatives and techniques. But the sheer love of Christians has won more converts than any marketing campaign ever achieved. Our love comes straight from God himself, and displaying it fulfils our special new commandment. “Love one another.” Love the annoying person next to you at church. Love the person who sings loudly and flat. Love the person whose breath smells. Love the person whose social dexterity is borderline weird. Love the person who sins, even when the sin is against you (without loving the sin; hate that). “Love one another.” In this sense, the reality of Christ is proved by the Christlike love of Christians (**v 1**).



The sheer love of Christians has won more converts than any marketing campaign ever achieved.

F.F. Bruce put it like this:

“The standard of the love which the disciples are to have one for another is the love which their Lord has lavished on them ... If the Christian fellowship is marked by such love ... then it will be recognized as the fellowship of Christ’s followers; it will bear the unmistakable stamp of his love. So Tertullian reports the pagans of his day ... as saying of Christians, ‘See how they love one another!’ And it was no merely superficial love that they spoke of, for they went on: ‘How ready they are to die for one another!’”

(The Gospel of John, page 294)

Is this what characterizes our churches today? Or are we more characterized by bickering over amendments to regulations and constitutions? Are our congregational meetings or parish councils marked by such love, or marked by a worldly suspicion of motives? Are we the kind of people of whom the non-Christians around us would say—be-grudgingly, even while disagreeing with what we believe—that those are people who love each other? If not, it is time for us to pray that **verses 34-35** would be the predominant attitude among our fellowships and churches. Rather than a new program or policy, it may be that the key missing ingredient in our attempts to win people to the cause of Christ is this: love.

Don’t Be Too Sure, Peter

Simon Peter comes back to practical matters straight away: “Lord, where are you going?” (**v 36**). Jesus replies in a repetition of the words he has spoken in **verse 33**. We learn slowly, often painfully slowly, and no more is that the case than when we are trying to grasp spiritual truths that are beyond our immediate physical senses. Read that book again. Listen to that sermon again. Pray that the truth would become clear to you. And if you are teaching, do not skip on quickly to new things but emphasize again and again, praying that all may grasp what it is that you want them to learn.

Ever eager, Peter pushes Jesus some more: “Lord, why can’t I follow

you now? I will lay down my life for you” (v 37). This is a good commitment. It is a good desire. It is good to desire to do what is right, even if the attainment of that desire is beyond our abilities at present. Peter’s heart is in the right place, even though he will not be able to follow through on his commitment.

Gently, then, Jesus asks Peter whether he is really being realistic: “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you,”—here comes another emphatic truth—“before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times” (v 38). Perhaps you have disowned Jesus at some point in your life. The pressure was on, and you denied that you were a Christian rather than face suffering and rejection, or even persecution. Jesus was not surprised by that, and you were not the first to do that. There is a way back to God. Peter found it, and you can too. Ask God to restore you and give you a new calling (and if you can’t wait to hear how the story in this regard continues, skip ahead in your Bible to the second half of John chapter 21, and read how Peter is reinstated despite his previous denials).

Questions for reflection

1. Can you trace God’s hand at work through your past to see how he has taken evil deeds, and even evil people, and used these for good?
2. Have you denied Jesus at some point in your Christian life? If this is still unresolved, take the time now to confess that to Jesus and ask him for his forgiveness.
3. Do you love other Christians as Jesus has loved you? Spend a moment praying for those people in your church who especially annoy you. Pray that God would help you to love them and give you an opportunity to love them in practical deeds of care and service.