

Loving & Protecting Each Other

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[0 : 0 0] So, if you would turn back with me, I'm going to be looking at both the passages that we read together from John 13 and also from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5.

And I hope you'll see how they're linked together. Because in many ways our theme, and I'll work my way into this, okay? So you'll begin to find out what we're saying and why I'm saying it in the context of the series that we're doing which is called Rooted and Living in Christ.

And there's been a card produced that gives some details of this whole philosophy of thinking, the idea behind it, Biblically, in terms of discipling and caring for one another.

And of the four that are on the card today, we're looking at loving and protecting each other, okay? So being busy, social media and Netflix, among other things, make working at friendship harder and harder in the society in which we live.

And these are very real challenges to us because they tend towards isolation. They tend towards insularity rather than looking out.

[1 : 2 3] Being busy, social media, which I'm always harping on about, and Netflix, which I sometimes harping on about, are only one thing.

There's something much worse than that for threatening, developing and deepening spiritual friendships. And that is bad theology.

So worse than all these other things, point the finger at all these other things. Just think about and look at ourselves and look at our understanding of God and of our understanding of who He is.

And recognize that bad theology is in our Christian lives much more likely to make us misunderstand the importance of growing and deepening spiritual relationships with one another.

It's just about, we can say, it's just about me and God. It's just about me and God. My friendship with Him. It's just about reading books and about knowing my Bible and coming to a deeper understanding of what's in the Bible.

[2 : 2 6] It's just about going to church. Now all of these things are good things, but they're kind of half truths. And sometimes the half truth is worse than the lie, isn't it?

Because all of these things that I've mentioned in terms of our spiritual priorities, all of these things you can do not just without friends, you can do them without Christ.

You don't need Christ to be at the center of your heart and life in order to read and to know the Bible and to go to church and to think about Him.

We don't need Jesus. And that is really what I want to focus on today is, again, this whole thing about being rooted, about remaining and about being part of Christ.

See friendship, which we're going to be looking at really, which is just another word for discipling one another, God's way. Friendship God's way isn't simply optional, or it's not simply life enhancing for us.

[3 : 35] It's life giving. It is related to our need for Jesus Christ in our lives, you know, which is not just the added extra for our lives.

It's what gives us life as believers. You know, if we don't have friendship vertically with the living God through Jesus Christ, which our sin keeps us from and only coming to know Christ as Savior enables us to have.

If we don't have friendship vertically and if therefore we don't have spiritual friendships horizontally with one another, we can't claim to be disciples of Jesus.

Well, everyone else we think we are, we can't claim to be disciples of Jesus. You're playing with fire if you don't see the need for a vertical relationship with God through Christ and the corresponding relationships with one another as believers.

We are in danger if we think that way, if we don't need these things. On that last great day of Jesus saying, depart from me, I never knew you.

[4 : 42] I never knew you. I didn't know you. There was no friendship there. There was no relationship. You knew about me. You went to church.

You had no time for me in your heart and in your life. I never knew you. This series is all about bearing fruit together, being disciples together.

And part of knowing Jesus is how we respond and relate to one another. And it's summed up in the commandment that we read in John chapter 50.

Well it's actually John 13. It's also in John 15. I think, yeah, I'll not put it up just now, but it's about loving one another. I'll give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you, so you love one another.

And that whole section in John chapter 13, right through to John 17, if you have time at day to go home and read it, it's really significant and it's all linked to this whole series in many ways without us using that section of Scripture, but it's hugely significant.

[5 : 50] And I want to talk about that, about loving one another as Christ's love does, and then I want to look at it practically from Thessalonians, okay?

So the first thing is, love one another as I have loved you, and that is really speaking again. It's about remaining in Christ. So the foundation of what we're saying is both coming to Jesus Christ, if you aren't a believer, you come by faith and trust in what Jesus Christ has done.

You come by faith and put your trust in Him, and then as Christians we're saved, but we're to remain in Him. That's really what we're saying. You know, if you don't have the root, you won't have the fruit, okay?

Pothy, memorable, keep it. If you don't have the root, you won't bear the fruit. And that's really what we've been looking at in the whole series, isn't it?

Rooted and sending the roots of your life out to Jesus Christ so that you will bear fruit and loving one another is central to that bearing fruit.

[6 : 53] So He's the source of our lives spiritually. How can we love one another, as we're told there, as Christ His love does, if we don't have Christ's love in our heart?

We don't understand Christ's love. See, we can't love like Christ if we don't know Christ, and the core of Christ's love is what?

It's self-denying love. Greater love as no man in this, He gives up His life for His friends. He gave up all His rights to die on the cross on our behalf.

It's a self-denial. He gave Himself. And that's the hardest thing for us to understand, because we are selfish by nature.

We're self-centered by nature. So His love changes everything. Luke 9 verse 24, sorry, I think that's the second one.

[7 : 53] Luke 9, 24, which says, catch us online. That's a different version. For whoever would save His life, will lose it. But whoever loses His life for my sake, will save it.

That's the gospel message, is that to know and to love Christ is to know that we lose our own autonomy, sinful autonomy, and self-reliance.

Always looking out for number one. We lose that when we come to Jesus Christ, because that reflects what He has done. We recognize that there's this great self-denial in the love that we show to others.

So we remain in Jesus Christ, and as we do so, it helps us to understand ourselves, because we are so complex.

And when we know ourselves better, we recognize that we absolutely need Jesus Christ in our hearts to rescue us, to forgive us, and to change us, because selfishness is so overwhelmingly powerful.

[8 : 55] Our self-centeredness and our desire to rule our own lives without God in Christ is so great, it needed God to come and break its deathly power by going to the cross in order to set us free.

So if I think, or if you think, for one moment that you can live for Jesus Christ as a Christian, without relying on Christ and His power and His strength and His transforming grace in our hearts, we are kidding ourselves, because selfishness is so great and so deep.

If we think we can live without remaining in Christ, we have no concept of what He's asking us to do, or the unattainable beauty of living by grace.

If we think we can make discipleship a self-service possibility, I can be a Christian, I can be a disciple without relying daily and being rooted in Jesus Christ.

That cannot be. Whatever it is we think we are, we are not being Christians, because Christians mean that we recognize that we need to love God and love others in the same way that Jesus loved us and we cannot do that in our own strength.

[10 : 14] It's a paradox. As a Christian, we know we're already living in Christ, we know that, but it means realizing daily that you're called to remain in Him, daily, hourly, consciously, His voice, His words, His prayer, dependent on Him, so that we can live our lives His way.

So that foundation has been there all along. You know, if we don't have the roots, we'll not bear the fruit. So as Christians, we're looking for that relationship, the underground bits of our lives, the bits that nobody sees, our soul and our very being that were rooted in Christ, that were sending our roots out towards the water, that great picture from the card, you know, that we've got.

It's a great picture. Keep it in your mind. And when we're rooted in Christ and remaining in Christ, then we're called to love others as He has loved us. You've seen that in John 13, and I think it comes up on the screen here as well.

John 13, 34, no, it doesn't come up on the screen there. Okay, but you know it because we've read it. And John, Jesus in that passage reads, it says it twice, if you remain, a new commandment I give to you, if you love me, you will love one another as I have loved you.

And then he goes on to say greater love as no man in this. And he calls it, that's the 11th commandment. It's a new commandment. And it's because it's a summary of the other 10.

[11 : 44] It's a summary of what it means to be renewed in Christ, image bearers. It was lost in the fall. That sin has broken it from us. And He's come to recreate it as we trust in Him, that we can love Him because He first loved us and we can love one another.

That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and he says in that passage, by this all people will know that you're my disciples. It's big stuff if you love one another.

In other words, he's equating discipleship, the core of being a disciple of Jesus with loving fellow disciples, loving one another. It's the primary, missional, evangelistic core of the New Testament church.

It's not interesting. It's not going out in the streets. It's not taking tracks anywhere. It's not even telling someone about Jesus that you've never met before, important and significant, all these things are.

It's as we love one another in community, the way Christ has loved us, then that is how people will know that we are followers of Jesus. That's the primary focus of being a follower of Jesus so that other people who don't know Jesus will be challenged by that and will be moved by that.

[13 : 05] Gospel growth and evangelism through the local church, through how we... It's the outward face of the local churches, how we react to one another because it shows the difference Jesus is making in our lives, rather than Jesus just being a ritual or some distant figure that's not really significant or important.

Because if he's a distant figure that's not really significant or important, then no one's really going to be interested or persuaded or changed by looking into who he is because he doesn't matter that much.

Now, the discipleship team who are looking at discipleship have chosen the Thessalonians passage for this particular sermon.

And that's great, I love when other people choose the passage for me, makes life much easier. And it's a great passage, the Thessalonians one, about loving and protecting each other.

It's just... It's such a huge area. You know, where do you start? Where do you finish? Well, all I want to do this morning in the time that's left of me is to provoke you towards Jesus Christ in a new way and challenge your concept of what spiritual friendship means.

[14 : 20] Because discipling one another is all about just genuine spiritual friendship. So one Thessalonians fact, and I'm only going to take one verse, okay? One verse. One verse.

And we urge you, brothers, brothers and sisters of the church, admonish the idol, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

So you could read the whole letter, there's lots more in it than just that one verse. There's just so much. But that one verse will help. This is what Christ in His living Word says, this is one way of expressing how much you love one another and your dependence on Jesus Christ to do that.

This is what it looks like to bear fruit. If your roots are in the right place, you'll bear fruit in this way towards one another. And so I guess one of the questions this morning is always, what kind of fruit am I bearing in my life, my Christian life?

What fruit am I bearing? And maybe not even, if you're not a Christian, how is my life bearing fruit? It's maybe a harder concept to put in place if you don't have that illustration with Jesus.

[15 : 27] So there's four things here, very briefly. War on the Idol says, in terms of spiritual friendship, this is what He's asking us to admonish or warn the idol.

And that is similar to a verse in Proverbs, chapter 27, which says, faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

So we recognize as believers that Christ has done all of these things in our lives. He's done all of these things as we look at our own lives in verse 14.

He's warned us when we're idol. He's encouraged us. He's helped us and He's patient with us. And this, warn the idol, what a great challenge to our self-centeredness.

I look at this and I see so much impossibility. How could I possibly do, how can I do this to a friend, to warn them about them being spiritually idol, indolent, lazy in their lives?

[16 : 37] How can I be discerning about that and not just judgmental? Will it not just be because I'm annoyed with them or what exactly does it mean? Is it just because I'm OCD and they're not, just so I feel better about myself when I correct other people, it's a really difficult question.

So I'm asking the question this morning of you in St. Columbus, and if you're a visitor today and there's quite a lot of people that are visiting today, do you have a spiritual friendship that is deep and honest and committed and loving enough that you'd be able to take a warning from them about being idol?

If you were being lazy in your spiritual life and someone spoke to you, I don't mean someone, just don't mean someone, I mean someone who's close enough to you. Do you have anyone who's close enough to you that you would respect?

You'd be wounded, faithful or the wounds of a friend, but would you be able to take that warning, that admonition, because your friendship with them was so secure and so deep and so meaningful and so humbly focused?

And because you knew that lovingly they found it really difficult to say it, but said it nonetheless. How many people do you have in your life that you'd be confident of having that done to you from?

[18 : 05] Without you taking the huff, who just, well, there's a person all about me, how dare they say that about idol? Ridiculous, I was up at seven o'clock. You know, that we would immediately be defensive.

Immediately we would look to defend ourselves rather than having a friendship that was so real that we could take admonition from it. But can I ask another question?

How many friends do you have that you would dare to say that to, knowing that they would take it well? Not only who would you receive it from, but who do you have a deep and meaningful spiritual friendship that is real and strong enough to be able to warn one another?

Well, that's a really, that's a searching question this morning about your and my understanding of what it means to be a Christian and what it means to love with the love of Jesus Christ, because that's what He's done for us.

If you think you can have that kind of friendship in St. Columba's or with your Christian friends, that you can do that kind of warning with in the right spirit, in the right way, with the right motives, without Christ's help, you're having a laugh.

[19 : 30] There is absolutely no way that we can do that without being rooted and dependent on Christ Jesus, because it's not natural for us. And our motives are so mixed and it needs to be done so humbly in our hearts.

So warn the idol, encourage the timid, the faint hearted, or the timid as it says there as well, or faint hearted as it says, timid in the NIV.

Encourage the timid. That's another mark of friendship, isn't it? The timid is small, souled, those who lack courage. That we come alongside them with comforting words and we help them by being sensitive and being supportive to them.

Not criticizing them, not finding fault with them, but wisely with discernment and with time recognizing the difference between those who need warned and those who need encouraged in their lives.

So often, isn't it we say the wrong things to people who need encouraged? They don't need to be beaten down, because they're timid, they're struggling in their faith, they're struggling to understand, and it's not one size fits all in the Christian life.

[20 : 40] Oh, just give them, bang, here. We deal with them differently. Encourage the timid. Help the weak is the third thing that we're encouraged to do here. Encourage the faint hearted at help the weak.

If the former maybe is about how we speak to one another, maybe helping the weak is more about practical support and help. With your time, with yourself, coming alongside them, those who are doubting or ill or have gone through sadness and difficulty and feel their faith is weak, we walk alongside them.

We are strong for people who are weak. We're courageous for those who are timid. Other people are courageous for us when we are timid and are strong for us when we are weak.

It's not one way, it works both ways. And then it finishes by saying, be patient with everyone. Love one another as Christ's love does, be patient with everyone.

That means, the word in the original is great there for patience, because it just means the opposite of being short tempered.

[21 : 55] Means long tempered. Just be long tempered with one another. It's so easy, isn't it? With our fellow Christians to be short tempered, lashing out and frustrated.

So different to the way Christ treats us in His long temperedness and in His patience. How patient is Jesus with us?

Isn't that great? How strong is He when we are weak? How courageous is He for us when we are timid?

And how honest was He when we are lazy and careless? And that is a picture, that's just one verse, one picture of what it means to love one another as Christ's love does in our church here in St. Columbus.

I'm just going to finish here with four quick assumptions that are implicit in this verse.

[22 : 58] Divine assumptions, okay? The first is that the church, the Christians, the body of Christ, the community of believers is a hospital for sinners. It's not a museum for saints, okay?

And that's the divine assumption here. We come at church because it's a place of healing. The apostle assumes, God assumes that we will be lazy and weak and timid and in need of patience.

And the church should be a place like that where people, all of us in our weakness and our fragility and our struggles can feel safe and secure.

We're not going to come at church on a Sunday and be surrounded by giants, by spiritual goliaths that we cower before and we think, I can't come to this place because I'm struggling.

Everyone seems so assured in their faith. And when I speak to anyone, they just tell me, buckle up or just, you know, chin up, keep it going.

[24 : 00] Nobody puts an arm around me, nobody speaks. The weak, the timid, the faint hearted, the patience, the honesty, the openness, the divine assumption is that the church is for sinners saved by grace, not a museum for saints.

And the great thing is that when we see Christ, we see victory and we see change and we see progress in Him. The second assumption is we are called to know others and to be known.

And the Christian church, it's a commitment. It's not just a place we dip in and out of and we have no real connection with.

It's not just an event that we go to. The community of believers, the local church is a place we're called to know others and to be known. That's sacrificial. It's costly.

It takes time. It means dying to self, which we read earlier on. And it takes a huge amount of effort, but it's effort that when we're rooted in Christ spiritually, we are able to do.

[25 : 14] And it's tough. Why? Because we're selfish. That's our core and our root position. We're selfish. And we find that difficult.

But it's this need to know and to be known in the church. And it's difficult on a Sunday morning, I know. But in our city groups, in our pastoral areas that we seek to know and be known, to know others, to take the time to be discerning enough to know the difference between the idol, the weak, the timid and those who need to be shown patience.

That takes time and energy and effort. But we can't know people quickly and in an uncommitted way. Not only know people, but maybe this is harder.

And this is harder in our cultural context to be known. Oh, we are you. Christ knows me. Christ knows me better than I know myself.

He knows my heart. Of course He does. But that's an excuse. Because He says not only are we to be known by Him, but we are to know by one another.

[26 : 22] That's much more challenging. It's easy to say we're known by Christ because Christ does know everything about better than we know ourselves. But by others, oh no, that's not for me. And sometimes fear and vulnerability, or because we've been let down, because it hasn't been a place of safety, or because we're proud.

And the challenge is that we are willing to be made known, to be known by others. We're willing to be vulnerable. We are willing to be strengthened by others, and to be encouraged by others, and to be shown patience by others, and to be forgiven by others.

And for us, that is impossibly beyond our comfort zone, and our cultural expectations, and our natural inclinations. But we are new creations.

We need to be both receivers and givers. We see therefore the third assumption that His Word is our authority.

This is one way as we show bearing fruit. It's not just an optional extra that we're throwing out for you to think about today. It's the challenge for us.

[27 : 32] He wants the level of our friendships to be different from just the kind of friendships that we're used to having in the world. It's deeper than that.

It's rooted in Jesus Christ, and it's recognizing the seeding need to shake our self-centeredness and our selfishness within it. It's that determination not just to have mates, to have pals.

Because you know, that's a perfectly natural and good thing to do. It's great to have pals and mates, and that's an important part of life, absolutely. But this is different, isn't it?

This is sacrificially committing to God's people who you probably wouldn't naturally be among, and loving and caring, and being with the weak and the vulnerable.

And those are not like you, not like me. But when we do so, it will change our world. I think it will change our world personally, and I think it will change this church.

[28 : 30] The more that we see this, I think more people will be willing to come in and be part of this church because they will see, and they will know it's a safe place for the questioning, the doubting, the vulnerable, the weak, the struggling.

And there will be an honesty in it which will give the parameters that people need in their lives. And no one has ever loved me enough to tell me where I'm going wrong.

And that is a great thing in a world which has no guidance in these areas. And that will be powerful as a means of sharing Jesus Christ.

I do believe that that's a powerful mission, a missional reality for us. So you love one another, the Eleventh Commandment, as I have loved you, by this all men will know that you're my disciples.

Because God will be happy to change the hearts of people who don't know Him. He'll be happy to bring them to this place because it will be a place where they'll not be broken and where they'll not be damaged or abused.

[29 : 41] But they will be loved imperfectly but graciously and will be accepted. And that is a huge thing in the world in which we live.

And that reflects what Jesus has done in our lives, unworthy, disinterested, sinful, hell-deserving.

Yet He was gone all the way to the cross in order to buy us back and to give us hope and life. That is the gospel message that this nation and this city and our colleagues and our family members and our friends utterly and desperately need because there is no other salvation and there's no other rescue and there's no other hope.

And as we live out and understand our own hearts and the beauty of Jesus Christ, it will change the way we look at ourselves, our friends in the church, or the church which we're apart, and the world in which we live.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us to see and know You better and understand You more clearly. A verse like the verse we've read, Lord, just makes us cry, impossible.

[30 : 58] I can't live like that. I can't love like that. I don't even want to love like that.

And yet Lord, that's great because it drives us to You because it should be impossible. And it is impossible without Christ's grace and Christ's transforming power in our hearts.

It's not something we can work up. It's not something we can tick boxes about. It's not something we can do grudgingly. It only comes when we are rooted in You and understand bit by bit more each day what it means to be united to You and how deep and great and sacrificial and loving and committed and impossible is Your love for us.

Maybe we'll be able to dwell a little bit about that as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Amen.