

## **The Image of the Invisible God: Friends**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

February 9, 2025 AM Sermon

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John 15:9-17

A few months before I started college, I took a 45-minute drive with a friend to visit a farmer's market. We tried the samples, looked at the jewelry and art, and generally enjoyed seeing what there was to see. I don't remember anything I bought that day. But I do remember what I carried home with me: a sheet of Bible verses and a crisis of faith.

In the market, I had met a man who was approaching people and trying to persuade them of his spiritual convictions. And when I was willing to talk, or maybe more accurately, listen, he gave me a list of verses in the Bible that seemed to disprove some central Christian convictions about Jesus. Here's one I still remember: "Jesus cannot be one with God. See Mark 10:18." What's Mark 10:18, you ask? That's a passage where a man runs up to Jesus and says, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good - except God alone." The man in the market pointed to this verse in Mark and others like it (John 14:1 - "You believe in God; believe also in me") to contend that Jesus wasn't, in the words of our series, the Image of the Invisible God. He wasn't, after all, God Incarnate. There it was in the Bible. In black and white. If in Mark 10:18 Jesus was saying that only God could be good, well, then the logical conclusion was that Jesus wasn't one with God. My 18-year-old mind and heart did not have a good answer for this logic problem.

I didn't know yet that individual passages need to be read through the lens of all of Scripture, that harder-to-understand passages become clearer when taken in their contexts, and in relationship to other related scripture passages. And so a lot of lonely prayer and reading and wrestling followed, clearly, ultimately, with some resolution. What I wish I would have thought of, what I wish I would have done, what I hope others of you WILL do, is bring these questions that arise to someone you can trust to talk about it. I had Christian parents and youth leaders. I could have asked somebody. But it didn't occur to me. I think I was afraid to name the doubts, afraid of what they would seem to be saying about my faith. I wish I would have known then what I know now. How we read this precious book matters. The Christian tradition and witness over history help us hear it well in the present. And voicing questions and doubts with trustworthy people defuses their fearful power to isolate us and help us come to a better understanding of the Bible.

Have you ever encountered Scriptures that challenge your overall understanding who God is? I think that parts of the beautiful and deeply reassuring passage we just read can also be confusing. They can make us wonder if the love of God revealed in Jesus is conditional. Take a verse like John 15:10: "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love." Huh. If you keep my commands, then you'll be in my love? That could sound like Jesus', and by extension the Father's, love comes to us with qualifiers. That maybe if we're good enough, Jesus will love us; or that we can somehow earn God's love by our good behavior.

Lifted out of its story and typed on a sheet like the one I got in the market that day, this verse could make someone think that loyalty to Jesus is the price we pay to get a good relationship with God. We do nice things for God, he does nice things for us, and somehow we get along in God's good graces. Or worse, that if they're not able to keep Jesus commands 100% perfectly, it's a sign that God has cut them out of his love. So what do you think? Is the love that Jesus is offering his disciples in these verses conditioned on their obedience? Is it some kind of transaction that allows them to earn God's love in return for their loyalty? Some of you are getting twitchy with these questions, and I'm getting twitchy raising them. Because these questions of merit or earning God's love are exactly the opposite of what Christians believe. It's not what is preached or modeled when we speak about the love of God the Father, fully grounded in God's own initiative, God's own goodness, God's own grace.

Thinking that God's love is offered on condition of our demonstrations of obedience, or that we could somehow earn it, actually makes God's love too small and too cheap. What God's love for humanity really asks of God is so much bigger than anything we could offer in exchange. Sinful people trying to save themselves would be like drowning people working on a life raft in the middle of the ocean when the search and rescue boat pulls up and lets down a lifeline. We could never build a boat that would even somehow meet God halfway. So what we could never do, God does for us in Jesus. The most famous verse in the Bible is from earlier in this same book, John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

In his perfectly obedient human life, Jesus freely fulfills his call to love us to the end by his death. He obliterates the power of sin to control us. He offers us righteousness to cover us from the inside out, inviting us to approach a perfectly holy and perfectly loving God without being destroyed in our coming. This love freely offered for us at great cost is not based on what we do. It is based on what God in Christ has already done; make friends out of enemies.

In his commentary on this passage, Frederick Dale Bruner writes, "When we believe that Jesus has already "done" everything necessary to put us into a right relation with the Lord, then we can relax a bit and believe that our wanting to keep Jesus' commands is a workable way our faith in Jesus can express itself outwardly in love; that the Lord will take this wanting and make it a keeping of sorts." So no, thankfully. Jesus doesn't expect obedience as a precondition for offering his love. He anticipates that the disciples, the friends even, who receive his love will be transformed by God's extravagant love in their lives. He takes our wanting and makes it a keeping of sorts. By remaining in life-giving contact with him, they will want to do the kinds of things he is commanding; loving each other as he has loved them (verse 12). And they will find grace for their failures as they remain connected to him.

You are my friends if, or when, you do what I command, Jesus says. The obedience is the evidence, not the condition, of Jesus' friendship. The disciples' willingness to be Christ- and cross-shaped people in the world is shown in the love they share. That is his command. To love him, and to love the people around them, and to spread self-giving love in his name. This passage has worked on me this week as I've wrestled with what following Jesus' example of sacrificial love given human limits and circumstances looks like. I trust the Spirit to trouble you a little with it too, in ways as varied as we are. "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." It's lovely when you think that this is a picture of what Jesus will shortly do for those he has called and chosen and appointed to bear fruit that will remain. It takes on another layer of prayerful attention when you realize the call is repeated in the "other" John 3:16 - \*First\* John 3:16: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."

Norovirus visited our home late this week, which means I won't shake your hands at the door today. It made me remember when our family was at the mercy, literally, of friends who took care of us when norovirus visited while we were at their house. They calmly and lovingly cleaned up. Provided a new shirt. Sent us on our way before the next wave of sickness came. They never told me if they also got sick after that. Their secrecy was also a form of sacrificial and dignity-offering love. I thank God for their gentle care. I believe Jesus when he says he sees this kind of thing as something done for him.

So I wondered, does inhabiting some amount of personal risk or inconvenience where we're called to help in these ordinary but inconvenient ways train us for other, steeper expenditures of self-sacrificing love in the name of Jesus? I trust and hope that it does.

All this thinking about mundane illnesses and loving sacrifice made me think about personal boundaries. We generally regard boundaries to protect our mental or physical health as wise. I think this can be a healthy response to historically outsized expectations, a sense of superhuman sacrifice in the name of following Jesus' sacrificial example. I think we've learned that you can't offer what you don't have. And that humans can demand sacrifice from others that they're not willing to match themselves. Burnout and compassion fatigue can happen. So we're humble when we remember we're not Jesus and we can't save the world, and to acknowledge that we can't sacrifice ourselves every day if we want to live to see another day to

serve. But I also think we can overcorrect on this. It's possible for us to think first about our healthy boundaries and second about this simple, difficult, grace-filled call to sacrifice for each other. It doesn't take much insistence about our boundaries to edge out the gentle voice of the Spirit of God, as that Spirit does sometimes call us to get a little more uncomfortable for the sake of loving someone else well. I think boundaries are important. I just think we should consider our boundaries in the light of Jesus' call rather than the other way around.

The command to reflect Jesus' sacrificial love in the world is simple, but not easy. It speaks to us in a time that is as dynamic and divided as any in my lifetime, whether in family, church, or country. That's deeply unsettling and stressful. It is so easy to forget to nurture and prioritize our life-giving connection with the True Vine Rachel read about. To remember we serve a God who showed the full extent of his love not by asserting his power for his own advantage, but instead to assert his power in his self-sacrificing death. A death that was for friends and enemies alike. This is the God who tells his followers to lay down their lives for their friends.

When you look at whatever you think is wrong in life, or wrong in the world around you, you might find yourself tempted to wholly disconnect from the challenges and the tensions; or to kick into activity to such a degree that you completely wear yourself out. Swinging from one pole to another is not impossible either.

Our love and our love-in-action must be fed by our friendship, our life-giving connection to Jesus. Because on our own, even our good intentions go wrong or flame out. Here's a quote from Henri Nouwen's book *Prayer Embraces the World*: "Life becomes an unbearable burden whenever we lose touch with the presence of a loving Savior and see only hunger to be alleviated, injustice to be addressed, violence to be overcome, wars to be stopped, and loneliness to be removed. All these are critical issues, and Christians must try to solve them; however, when our concern no longer flows from our personal encounter with the living Christ, we feel oppressive weight."

As friends of Jesus, we are grafted into his life. As the True Vine whose sap runs in our veins and who brings life to us for love in action, Jesus commands us to do two things: Relax in our striving and trust his saving love for us; and kick in with some honest effort to love each other, trusting and knowing that all the while he has been loving us and mysteriously guiding us. Amen.

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