



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 15: 12-17

Spring 2023

"Friends Of Jesus"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Seth. Our text is John chapter 15, verses 12 through 17. When I was in seminary at Dallas Theological Seminary I had Dr. Haddon Robinson as the Homiletics professor. An excellent professor, he taught 'The Big Idea'. We were always to preach 'The Big Idea' of the text. And Seth has recognized it; let's see if you can recognize it. I'm going to begin with verse 12 and conclude with verse 17,

¹² "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are My friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. ¹⁷ This I command you, that you love one another."

John 15: 12-17

Well, He begins and He ends on the same theme; "that you love one another." May the LORD teach us to do that, and bless us as we study this text. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Father, we give You thanks for Your goodness to us. Your goodness is seen in so many ways. It's seen in this great text that we've just read where twice, at the beginning and the end, in a way that makes very clear the LORD's will for us—we're told to "love one another." Well we can do that because You love us—as John wrote in his epistle, 'We love You because You first loved us.' (1 Jn 4:19). And so we are the recipients of divine love; and we're to display that to one another.

So LORD, help us to love You more. One of the most practical things a preacher can do, and a most practical aspect of hearing a sermon, should be setting forth the glory of the Lord and showing from the text the greatness of our Savior. And we should be receiving that, and understanding that, and being built up in the great understanding of who our Savior is—who the Triune God is that would then make us desire to follow Him, follow You, and be obedient—and be obedient in this way; 'by loving one another.'

So LORD, we look to You to bless us. We pray that our time together will be one in which we see Your greatness, and Your goodness, and Your glory—Your love for us, and what that has brought us. It's brought us life, eternal life, and a great life in this life as we were taught in the Proverbs this morning. We can fear men, (and there's much to fear about men), but when we trust in You we find You faithful, even in the deepest, darkest times as we go through the valley of the shadow of death. And as we trust You, we find You always faithful, because You love us. So Father, bless us in that way.

And then I pray that You would bless Your saints physically, emotionally, and spiritually; and I pray Your rich blessing upon us. Prepare our hearts for a time of study together, we pray, in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) John Donne wrote the famous line, "No man is an island." That's true. An island is separate from the continent; it stands alone. But we're not made to stand alone. We're made for fellowship. We need friends. But it's better to have a good friend than lots of acquaintances.

A great example from the Old Testament of that is Jonathan and David. Jonathan was heir to the throne of Israel, but he knew David would be king, and he vowed to be

second to him and his support. He was a selfless friend. Maybe Solomon had that in mind when he wrote in Proverbs 18, (vs24), "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

That is a friend and it's the subject of our passage. There's no greater example of that than the Lord Himself; and here He calls His disciples His friends: "You are My friends..." (vs14a), He said. There's no greater privilege than to be counted a friend of Jesus Christ.

The Lord began His lesson on friendship and being friends of the King of kings in verse 12 with instruction to love; "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you." That really summarizes the subject. All of the qualities of friendship add up to nothing less than *love*. And the standard for Christian love, for real brotherly love, is Christ's love for us: 'Love as I have loved you.' That's the standard; that's the ideal.

How does He love us? Fully. Unconditionally. "To the end", John said at the very beginning of this discourse in chapter 13, verse 1. Unto death, His love was and is selfless; it is beneficial; it is sacrificial.

How different that is from the world's idea of friendship; that's a subject of sociologists and that's what they often study. And I know of one case in which a book was recently written by an English sociologist titled, *Friends*. He defined *friends* as, "The sort of people you like to spend time with", and pointed out, 'For primitive man, friends are necessary for longevity—lone travelers didn't last long on the Savanna.' That's not all wrong but according to that, friendship is really *pragmatic*; it's about what benefits you.

Not so with Christ; friendship is selfless and giving—and He's the standard for it. And that's the example He gave in verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." Jesus never asked more of us than He asked of Himself;

and while we can never love as fully as He loved, His standard teaches us the nature of love.

Love certainly involves affection and emotion. The Lord showed, that out of love, He was moved to tears over Jerusalem. He loved the city, loved the people, wept over them because He knew what was coming. But it's more than that. It's more than emotion. Mainly, love is active, not emotive. And love is, essentially, sacrificial—it involves a willingness to die for friends.

There are many examples of that. Every nation has its heroes—men and women who sacrifice their lives for others. That kind of courage and sacrifice is rare, but it happens. Still, no greater example can be given than that of the Lord Himself. And certainly He had His sacrifice in mind when He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." (vs13).

It was from love that He left the glory of heaven to become a man, a servant, and suffer the cross. That's the greatest act of love. That's the standard of love. We want to understand what love is? —then look at the cross. He died for His friends; 'for His sheep', as He put it back in chapter 10, verse 11.

Now, that's not the complete picture because while He calls His disciples *friends*, "The friendship", as Spurgeon put it, "was all on His side at the first." Paul wrote in Romans 5 that Christ died for us, "while we were yet sinners", (vs8), and that "we were reconciled to God...while we were enemies." (vs10). The friends He loved and for whom He died, were not friends by nature—but by grace. He loved us from all eternity knowing that He would change us by His sacrifice and make us His friends. But here, having changed these disciples, He spoke to them as friends for the purpose of setting a future pattern for their behavior—and ours.

The story has been told in regard to this verse, (you've probably heard it), of a Russian nobleman crossing the vast steppes of his country in winter when a pack of hungry wolves began chasing his sled. He lashed his horses to get more speed but the wolves just kept pursuing him. His servant began throwing out whatever he could to

satisfy the wolves—but in vain. They let loose one of the horses. The wolves devoured it and kept pursuing. Finally the servant, who had spent all his life with the family said, "There remains no hope for you. I will throw myself to the wolves, and then you will have time to escape." It was an act of courage and sacrifice. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." And yet it would be more like Christ's sacrifice for the nobleman to have given himself up for the servant...and for a lazy, undeserving servant at that.

God set His love on us when we were weak and undeserving—when we were enemies. This text, verse 13, was a favorite of the medieval theologian, Peter Abelard. He would quote it often, and repeatedly, as having the whole secret of 'the atonement of the cross' there in that verse. 'The love in Christ's death has the power to evoke love in us; and the more fully Christ's love wins from us, the more fully we are justified and saved.' That was his idea, and this is sometimes called '*the moral influence theory of the atonement*', which is very popular.

But as a theory it fails, because there is no *atonement* in that—there is no *satisfaction* of God's justice, His holy justice, in that idea. The reason for *atonement*, (for God's satisfaction toward us the sinner), is that our sins were laid upon Christ and fully punished and paid for by Him in His death—a death which was *vicarious*, (a death that was in our place), for our sins and for us.

It was a saving sacrifice made out of love, undeserved love 'of the nobleman for the servant', (and an undeserving servant at that)—and then that love should influence our attitude and behavior.

This is how the people of God are to act, (in light of what Christ has done for us and in light of the effectiveness of His atonement)—with love which is sacrificial. That's the mark of the Christian and the nature of true friendship.

The Lord enlarged on the meaning of friendship in verses 14 and 15 and states that it involves obedience; "You are My friends if you do what I command you." (vs14).

This is not new. The Lord has told them of the importance of obedience all through this discourse; but there are two things to notice here.

First, notice the Lord said, "if you **do**", not, "if you **don't** do." James Montgomery Boice made a point out of this. I think it was a very good point because often people reduce the Christian life to a list of *don'ts*. And often they are *don'ts* that are not given in the Bible. Now there are prohibitions in the New Testament of course, (in fact, nine of the ten commandments are listed for us which we must observe). But that's not the standard given here. Christ has called us 'to love one another'. Love is *active*. Love *does*. Well that's the first thing to notice.

The second thing to notice is that it is to be a constant, consistent pattern of life. *Do* is a verb, and *do* is in the present tense—it means, '*keep on doing*.' It is constant, and not as A. T. Robertson warned, "spasmodic obedience." Christ's love isn't spasmodic; it is constant. He is *always* faithful; the friend, "who sticks closer than a brother", (Pro 18:24), who "loves at all times, and a brother born for adversity." (Pro 17:17).

Now I'm suggesting He is the ultimate example of what the Proverbs describe as a friend. But the fact is, (and this is important), the Lord does not call Himself 'our friend' anywhere. We call Him that. We sing hymns like, *What A Friend We Have In Jesus*. And His enemies called Him "a friend of sinners." (Luk 7:34). And if friendship is measured in love poured out, then Jesus is the greatest friend. So we can sing those hymns, and we can make that claim—but He didn't describe Himself as our 'friend.'

And the reason may be, as Don Carson suggested, '*friend*' could badly misrepresent the nature of our relationship and suggest to us, what he called, "a chummy view of friendship." We are His friends, but our friendship is not something casual—He's our *Redeemer*; He is our *God*. When John saw Him in a vision on the island of Patmos, he "fell at His feet as a dead man.", Revelation chapter 1, verse 17; you can read it. He's there in all of His glory. It's symbolic, but there He is in great glory—and to look upon Him caused a man to 'fall down as dead.' Christ is God, and His word should command from us the greatest sense of awe and submission. We are to obey Him.

But our obedience is not like that of a household servant. And in verse 15, the Lord explains the nature of our relationship with Him: "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you."

A slave didn't have that kind of relationship with the master. He or she was not a confidant of the owner. In fact, among many in ancient times, a slave was not even considered a person—a slave was considered an instrument, a tool, like a shovel. A slave gave blind obedience to commands without knowing why. He wasn't brought into the plans and purposes of his owner, but only performed the task that was given to him.

But in Christ, things are very different. We are His friends. We serve Him, but not as *'menials'* or *'domestics'*. We are *'part of His body,'* as Paul would later explain, and here, a part of His conversation: *'We dine with Him,'* as it were; we have fellowship with Him. And He has let us in on the secrets of the ages. He has given us knowledge of His Father's plan and purpose. "I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." (vs15). And He would make more known to them through the Holy Spirit, who would teach them.

One of the basic characteristics of friendship is conversation. You don't have much of a friendship if you don't talk. We see that in God's relationship with Abraham. He was called, "the friend of God." (Jas 2:23). And in Genesis 18, before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, He had a conversation with Abraham and said, "Shall I hide from Abraham the thing which I do?", (vs17). Well, no. Not as a friend He shouldn't, and He didn't. So He revealed to him His plan of judgment. And Abraham, as you know, as you've read that passage, had a lengthy *conversation* about it with the LORD.

Now Christ was saying to His disciples, "You are My friends", (vs14), and because of that He revealed truth to them; they were given access to His revelation. That's the privilege of friendship with God's Son. And it is a privilege, the greatest privilege—and

not a matter of intelligence or training, but of *relationship*, that's the basis of the privilege.

Paul is an example of that: A brilliant man, a brilliant mind, and great education; but it wasn't until he met Christ on the Damascus road that he was given insight into what he called in Ephesians chapter 3, (vs4), "the mystery of Christ"; that is, the privilege we have. And if we give our time and energy to it, (and what I mean by that is, we give study and attention, read and meditate on the Word of God), we will have 'knowledge and insight that will make us wiser than our teachers', as the psalmist puts it in Psalm 119, verse 99. We can know God's 'plan of the ages'—the revelation of reality.

Men who dismiss the Scriptures live in nothing more than speculation about what is true and what is right and what is real. It's those who are grounded in the Word of God that have something as basic as that—an understanding of reality. We have the knowledge of God and of ourselves, which Calvin, in the first sentence of his *Institutes*, called "true and sound wisdom." What a privilege! As we spend our time in the Word of God we have "true and sound wisdom." That is greater than gold—and it is ours in Christ by the grace of God alone.

The Lord explained that to His disciples in verse 16, where He gives them the reason for their friendship; "You did not choose Me but I chose you." In case they thought the initiative of their relationship with Jesus had been theirs, He corrected that. The choice was one sided; it was His—it was not theirs. It was the sovereign choice of divine election.

Now we could understand Him as referring to His 'choice' of them to the office of an apostle (and that would be true). But think logically, 'From the lesser to the greater', if they could only have the *lesser* blessing of apostleship by His sovereign choice of them, then surely the infinitely *greater* blessing of eternal salvation could only be theirs by His choice in election. And there is a strong emphasis throughout this Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, on *divine election*, *unconditional election*, of being *chosen* by God.

And not only in John, but all through the Bible: God *chose* Abraham out of idolatry, out of darkness, when he lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, (Neh 9:7); it was *unconditional election*. Joshua said that in Joshua 24, verse 2; when they were worshiping idols, He 'called him out', 'made him His friend.'

He built the nation of Israel through election. He *chose* Isaac over Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau. It was God's choice alone, as Paul said in Romans 9, verse 16, "It *does* not *depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."

It's what Moses told the nation in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7 and 8. This is at the end of Moses' life, and he's giving a series of sermons collected in the Book of Deuteronomy. And there at the beginning, he gives them the right perspective on who they were and their relationship to the Lord God, who brought them out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness, faithfully, for 40 years; "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples,..."
(that is 'more glorious than any of the nations'), "...for you were the fewest of all peoples." No, the LORD *chose* you because the LORD *loved* you. No merit. No boasting. God's choice of them was due to His unexplained love alone.

And that's the reason for all election: It is due to the *unsearchable, unconditional love* of God. Love is its own reason—and we can't go beyond that. He loves us because He loves us. His will determines His choice of anyone and everyone. And that's the way this book began, John chapter 1, verse 13, God's children, "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." We have a mind and will, and we use them. We are not robots. We're not machines. We come to Christ willingly; we come to Christ gladly—but only because God shined His light into our dark heart and gave us understanding and gave us faith in what we understand.

Election doesn't exclude anyone who wants to be saved, so it's completely fair. In fact, no one in his or her natural state wants to be chosen or saved. Paul made that very clear in Romans chapter 3, verse 11, (he's just quoting from the Psalms there), he says, "There is none who seeks for God...no not one." So anyone who is troubled by

election because they're afraid they may not be elect, believe in Christ and then you will know that you are elect—because that's what the elect do...they believe. That's the sign of election—faith.

Nevertheless, divine election, unconditional election is taught in the Bible. It is taught here by the Lord Jesus Christ; "You did not choose Me but I chose you." (vs16). Leon Morris wrote that, "Students the world over delight to seek out the teacher of their choice and attach themselves to him. They may find that teacher nearby, or they may go across the ocean to have that teacher. They, the world over, choose the teacher that they want to be the one instructing them and in whose feet they want to sit at. But", he made the point, "with God, things are different; He makes the choice for us." That's grace.

That's the Lord's mercy; and Jesus wanted to make that clear. We have been chosen by Him and brought to Him—and into the greatest privilege of friendship with Him. That should never trouble a Christian; it is clear in Scripture and it is a blessing. We have been *chosen* by Him, and *bought* by Him, and *brought* to Him—and brought into the great privilege of friendship with Him. We should be grateful, not troubled.

And we should be *active* because that, too, is the reason for election and the lesson that He's giving here: To be *fruitful* as well as *friends*. "...I chose you," He said, "and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit..." (vs16). Election is never to salvation only. We hear about, 'Well, if you're elect, you're saved.' No, 'You're *elect* and *chosen to salvation*'—but in saying that, you are elected and chosen to salvation through faith, so you've been *chosen* to believe. So, we are, 'elected to believe and bear fruit'; to be active in the Lord's service to others, both to the saved and to the lost.

The fact that they were to, "go and bear fruit", suggests that the fruit here, is that which results from the mission that they would be sent on—that of gaining, (through their work of evangelism), new converts. And we are to be doing that; we are to be evangelizing. Solomon said, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, And he who is

wise wins souls." (Pro 11:30). That's what 'the eleven' had been chosen to do; they'd been chosen to win souls. And that's what they were chosen to do.

So, election is not harmful to evangelism—that's an old canard. One purpose of election is to raise up workers to be soul winners, which we do, not only by our words, but by our works. Our lives are a witness and a necessary complement to the Gospel. That's what the Lord comes to in verse 17, where Jesus repeats His commandment of love of verse 12; "This I command you, that you love one another." So obviously this is important, and we need to keep hearing it. That's why He kept repeating it to them.

Well, how do we love one another? By laying down our lives for one another. Love is selfless and sacrificial. It is a relationship in which we die to self for the benefit of others in our daily lives. Now, people rarely have the opportunity to literally lay down their lives, physically, for a friend. But often we have opportunities to sacrifice our time to help those in need, or check on people with a simple phone call. And we have the opportunity to pray for one another.

The Lord lays great stress on loving one another and praying—asking for ourselves and asking for others. We need to do that regularly. Prayer is not an empty exercise, it is valuable. It is the means of grace that God has given us for gaining His will for us. The Lord spoke of that earlier in verse 7, about asking in prayer and receiving what we want.

But the key to answered prayer, (and the key to obedience and to loving one another and loving Him, go back to the previous passage, the previous paragraph), is *abiding in Christ*, living in connection with Him, in fellowship with Him. So, in order to be the best friend to our fellow Christians and love one another, and in order to be a light in the darkness to the unbeliever, we must first of all *abide* in Christ; then His life is seen in ours. Then we will be "a brother born for adversity." (Pro 17:17). Then we will be able to give wise counsel, to give genuine, meaningful encouragement, and know how best to help one another.

The world's a hostile place to Christians. In the next verse, verse 18, Jesus says it 'hates us', it 'hates the Light'. So we are in a spiritual war, a spiritual conflict constantly—if not with the world, then with the evil one. We are all under siege, which is to say, 'We all need each other. No man's an island.' No Christian is. We need each other. And to make that point, the Lord repeats again this command, (that He called "a new commandment" back in chapter 13 in verse 34), to 'love one another even as He has loved us.'

It's like the image that the author of Hebrews gives in Hebrews 12:12 of 'strengthening the hands that are weak and the feet that are feeble.' It's in the context of 'running the race of faith' that begins the chapter. It's the picture of a weary saint, worn down from the trials and tests of life. If that is us, we're to recall the great promises that God has given us: Of who He is, of His care for us, of His plans for us, and His promises to us. We need to recall all of that and 'preach to ourselves.' I think it was Martin Lloyd-Jones that said, "We need to learn to preach to ourselves."

We're all preachers in one way or another; and when we get discouraged take the Word of God and preach it to yourself. Remember these things; and as we do that we will 'strengthen the hands that are weak and the feet that are feeble'—and then with others. Because, often we may be strong but we see others among us who are experiencing spiritual fatigue; they're worn down by life and the difficulties. We're to come alongside them in the race and help them along with the truth of God's Word.

Remind them that, "underneath are the everlasting arms" of the eternal God. That's Deuteronomy 33, verse 27, which describes the LORD as 'our dwelling place'; a hint back then in Moses' day of this great idea of *abiding* in Him. That's where we're to live—in Him. He's reliable. He'll never drop us. He holds us up, always. Even when we're weak, He keeps us going. He's faithful.

So that's the encouragement we're to have and give—to 'stay in the race' and keep running; looking to Him, trusting in Him. We need to ground ourselves and others *in the truth*. That has to govern the help that we give to one another, or that we receive for ourselves—the *truth*. There're lots of ways to strengthen feeble feet in the race of

faith, or to “bear one another's burdens”, as Paul puts it in Galatians 6:2; but fundamentally, it is giving wisdom and encouragement from the LORD's Word. We love one another in Christ and in *truth*—in His Light.

But the love and Light of Christ will not only shine to us and in us, but also into the darkness of the world. Christ did appoint us to ‘go and bear fruit.’ And from day one, the Day of Pentecost, the church has done that—it has gone into the *world* with the message of salvation; it's our enemy, but we're to be its friend. And there's no way to be a greater friend to the lost than to give the words of salvation and to live that salvation before them.

One of the great examples of that is from the Moravians. They had a great missionary history, (it was through them that John Wesley was brought to faith). They made sacrifices for others. One occurred in South America, where there was a leper colony. It was surrounded by high walls so no one could escape. There was only one gate—whoever went in never came out.

Two Moravians were there and they looked over the wall and they were shocked by what they saw—the condition of those people who were there. And so the two were moved by that and they thought, ‘They are dying of a foul disease by the hundreds inside that place; we'll go and preach the Gospel to them.’ Now they were warned, "If you go in, you can never come out again; there you will die of leprosy, too."

And as the story goes, they went in and never came out. They died for others for the love of Christ; “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15:13). And no doubt they made friends in that leper colony who became friends of Christ. Now it's hard to imagine something like that, hard to imagine such a sacrifice.

But what the Lord did was infinitely greater. He left the glory and the beauty of heaven, His eternal home, to enter this fallen, corrupt world—which is a *spiritual* leper colony. But He came willingly for us, then gladly suffered God's wrath on the cross for the joy of saving us from it, so that we could live with Him and be His friends forever.

Are you a friend of Jesus? He is 'the friend of sinners' and invites all to come to Him—to believe in Him as God's Son and our Savior, the One who died in our place. His death was far more than an example made to 'influence us to love.' It was a violent, vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice that absorbed God's justice in order to cleanse the believer from the leprosy of sin and guilt. And now all who join themselves to Him and His sacrifice by faith, and faith alone, are forgiven at that moment—justified, declared innocent, clean, healthy, and made sons of God *forever*. If you've never believed in Him, come to Him, trust in Christ and be saved. May God help you to do that.

LORD, we look forward to that day when we will see Him face to face. And yet I confess, as I say that, that we have no idea what that's going to be like. We gain a rather weak, even at the best of our understanding, a weak understanding of who He is and what He's done for us. Then, what a sight it will be to see Him!

In the meantime, we know You are the rock on which we stand upon: You keep us stable; You will never forsake us. We will run this race with weak arms and legs spiritually, but You'll hold us up. So help us to keep looking to You in faith and trust, and living for the day when we will enter into Your presence and see our Savior face to face. We pray for that. Bless us all to that end.

Give us a good week of fellowship with You, the Triune God, and service for You in this dark age in which we live. We pray these things in Christ's name.

And now Father, we pray You'd bless us and keep us. We pray that You would cause Your face to shine on us and be gracious to us and lift up Your countenance upon us. And LORD, give us peace. In Christ's name, Amen.

(End of Audio)