

Reflections on the Upper Room Discourse

The Gospel of John was probably written early in the reign of Trajan, so about 98-99 AD. By that time, churches had already been planted in most of the cities around the Mediterranean. John is different from the three other Gospels in that it highlights or stresses relationships, such as that between the Father and Christ, between Christ and His followers, and among His followers. Evidently John realized that those following Christ, and there were very many in the Roman world by then, had to understand that Christianity involved something deeper than forgiveness of sins and gain of eternal life. I suspect this Gospel is primarily and deliberately written for believers. “Belief” is a word with profound meaning. John uses the word here close to 100 times. I suspect that the Upper Room Discourse is key to understanding John’s Gospel and what “believe” means, indeed, what salvation means.

The first few chapters of this Gospel introduce Jesus, and then there are 5 chapters on His public ministry, which was mainly interaction with the unbelieving, rejecting Jews. John’s portrayal of Jesus’ public ministry focused on the “signs” and Jesus’ explanations of their meaning. Chapters 11 and 12 bring that public ministry to a climax with the raising of Lazarus from the dead and a resulting crisis, the intent to kill Him because – *because!* – He raised Lazarus from the dead. [Unbelief is absurdly irrational; it hardens people in sin.] Jesus then withdrew alone with His followers to an “upper room” to give them final instructions before His death, and that’s Chapter 13 and 14. As they then made their way to Gethsemane, Chapters 15 to 17, Jesus continued those final but intimate instructions. (For this lesson, I’m including 15 and 16 with 13 and 14.) Chapters 18 to the end are the so-called “passion” narrative. For this Sunday School lesson, let’s focus our thoughts on Ch’s 13 to 16. (We’ve already discussed Chapter 17 in some depth in a previous lesson.) There’s a lot here to think about.

“. . . the full extent of His love” (13:1). We’re involved here in something too transcendent for words or for explanation. No one can adequately grasp this. “The full extent” means infinite love is being expressed among finite beings. In Hebrew, “love” is *ahav*, and although it can include an emotional component, *ahav* primarily means commitment. Can we ever, for even a moment, sense what God’s love is? Well, here it’s on display. Jesus washed the feet of His followers. Even the feet of Judas, the foolish, Satan-influenced one who sold Jesus to His enemies. The washing wasn’t merely to get the dust and dirt off the feet. It was an act of condescending servitude. The humblest thing one can do is wash another’s feet. Here was One who had come from God (v. 3) and, having set aside His majesty and prerogatives, like a slave would do he stooped to wash feet. It was a gigantic act of personal sacrifice. The disciples found it jarring, as indeed they should. But notice: this is an act of love! So what does love mean? It means being deliberately humble, sacrificing ourselves, and serving others. That’s what God did in His great work of saving lost humanity. **“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done”** (v. 15). We’re to love others by deliberately being humble, setting aside our pride and selfishness, to serve others. If we’re in Christ, we’re to have a unique character, one that is committed to serving others. That’s love. Nothing else in life has such worth as being like God. **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another”** (v. 34). We’re to be in the same kind of loving relationship with each other as Christ was with us, His followers.

“. . . whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me” (13:20). We need to be exceedingly discerning. Christ sent Richard Wurmbrand from a Romanian prison to the West to plead for Christians to support persecuted brethren in communist countries. Many church leaders rejected Wurmbrand’s testimony and pleas, to their eternal regret. They weren’t just saying “No” to Wurmbrand, but to Christ, indeed, to God. Jesus was so identified with God that to accept or reject One does the same to the Other. See 14:10. And that holds for us: We’re to be that tightly identified with Jesus. He’s not just someone who, a long time ago died to obtain forgiveness of sins for us. He is our life! We’re not Christians to be sure to have eternal life when we die, but to be in a life-and-love relationship with Christ, the Son of the living God.

“I am going there to prepare a place for you . . . that you also may be where I am” (14:2-3). Jesus is the most beautiful, the most perfect Person ever. His wisdom, love and kindness overwhelm everyone who contemplates Him. The goal of the Gospel is for us to be with Jesus. It is (or should be) the Christian’s great abiding hope and desire. If the busyness and complexities of life steal away or obscure this, the very essence of Christianity, something’s wrong with our believing.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6). Jesus is the way to the Father, the only way. The Greek phrase could be translated, “I am the true and living Way.” There is no other way to God. Because of sin, there can’t be any other way. We have to want to be with God, of course, and that’s key to understanding Christianity. Christianity is a

relationship on offer, an intimate fellowship with our Creator, the holy, eternal and living God. We have to want it. Do even we “Christians” want it? What Jesus is saying is, we need to be in relationship to Him, and that relationship takes us into fellowship with the Father. Do we get it? Jesus isn’t an extraordinary character we read about in a book. He’s a living, relating Person. Christianity is being in loving, obedient, trusting intimate relationship with Jesus, which is to be in eternally joyful relationship with the Father. See 16:27; this is so important Jesus re-states it again and again. More: Jesus is also truth, living and embodied truth. We have to treasure truth, of course, for Jesus to be important to us. If truth is just some abstract idea, perhaps a societal convention, then the offer of salvation is irrelevant. And Jesus is the life that Deuteronomy 30:15 refers to: real, transcendent life, supernatural life, eternal life, life in the presence of the living God. If we’re satisfied with this biological life in the here-and-now, salvation is, tragically, irrelevant.

“. . . anyone who believes in me will do what I have been doing” (14:12). Our identity with Christ expresses itself in being like Christ and doing what Christ did. Love is as love does. Jesus came to bring people to God. We’re here to do the same. That means Gospel outreach. If we suppose that we can leave that task to the professionals in the Church, we’ve missed the “anyone” in this verse. “Anyone who believes in me” means every believer. Christendom has done something monstrous: It has turned following Christ into passive spectatorship. Following Christ is loving Christ which is doing what Christ did, calling people into the Kingdom. It means commitment and effort. Sacrifice too.

“If you love me, you will do what I command” (14:15; see also vv. 21,23, and 24 and 15:10). Love is obedience to Christ. We moderns *totally* misunderstand biblical love. We pretend the word means what we want it to mean instead of what Scripture means by using the word. Love is obedience as well as humbly being like Jesus serving others. Love and obedience and deliberate imitation of character are relationship terms. They establish and maintain an intimate relationship. Jesus isn’t just a Savior. He loves us and we’re in love with Him. Or maybe we’re not saved at all. Read Matthew 7:21-23! How many times does Jesus have to say the same thing for us to realize how important it is?

“. . . you will realize that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you . . . He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him” (14:20-21). We may be so familiar with these verses they no longer thrill us. We get complacent too easily. Christianity is a great love relationship involving God, Jesus, and us, that is, all of us believers together. Anything else isn’t biblical. “Belief” isn’t merely agreeing with certain propositions about Jesus or about salvation. “Belief” isn’t merely about having one’s sins forgiven and the promise of heaven. It’s living a new life in loving relationship with God, obeying God, who knows best how we should live, out of love.

“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit” (15:8, also v. 16). Jesus was concerned about the Father’s glory. He loved the Father, and the Father loved Him. They were in deep, intimate relationship. And Jesus consuming desire, His will, is for us also to share in that relationship. If we are in that kind of relationship, we too will be concerned about the Father’s glory, and we will bear fruit for Him. Passive spectatorship doesn’t glorify God, it glorifies ourselves. We glorify God by being like Jesus: Making whatever sacrifice is necessary, by giving of ourselves, to “bear fruit.” What’s fruit? In context here, it’s loving each other, but from elsewhere in Scripture it might include acts of righteousness, being sanctified or mature in godly character, and growing the Church by evangelizing. But what does “fruit” *really* mean? It means that life is present, the kind of new, regenerated, eternal life that comes from being in intimate relationship with the living God who in grace imparts life. Fruit doesn’t come from a dead tree. (See Matthew 13:23. This passage in John is central to the Gospel. In Deuteronomy 30:15ff, God clearly sets out a cosmic principle for everyone, us as well as Israel, we choose either life or death. Life is being in relationship to the living God, and that’s *tov*, the Hebrew word for good. To reject that is *ra*, evil, and it’s death. John is aware of this, which is why the contrast between good and evil have such a prominent place in his Gospel. If we have the kind of life Jesus offers, *His life*, we will bear fruit.

“Love each other as I have loved you” (15:12). The very same kind of relationship of love that exists between Jesus and the believer is to bind believers together in love. So humility, selflessness, personal sacrifice, meeting needs, forgiving sins, kindness and gentleness, instructing in righteousness – these character traits of Jesus that make loving others possible are to control us. The gift of the “Counselor” (14:16; the Holy Spirit) will make it possible, if we are willing.

“He who hates me hates my Father as well” (15:23). Whether it’s love or hate, the issue is a relationship. Even hate occurs within a relationship. These chapters are all focused on relationships, which is what Christianity is all about.

“He who does not love me will not obey my teaching” (15:24). Let’s be careful about what we suppose is truth. The Pharisees had a system, a tradition, by which they thought they surely were going to be in heaven. They were wrong. It’s easy to be self-deceived. Modern evangelicals are so anxious not to mix works with grace that we miss what Jesus

taught. Believing = loving = obeying. But, someone will ask, "Is it possible to love Jesus yet not obey Him?" Well, that's not here. But love without obedience is probably an oxymoron. What *is* here is what we must live by.

"No one will take away your joy" (16:22). We don't like hearing about obedience. It rankles us, because it instantly creates a conflict of wills, God's will *versus* our will. Yet . . . there is joy in obeying the one we love. (Or there should be, anyway.) If we know God, and if we love God and trust Him, we will rejoice at the privilege of obeying Him, regardless what it may cost. And that's the problem: we don't really know Him, love Him, or trust Him. We're too much in love with ourselves and the little world we inhabit. So, no joy. Followers of Christ all thru this era in place after place have suffered persecution, perhaps suffering too horrible to think about. Yet, Jesus offers us joy while experiencing whatever circumstances He sends our way. Why? He loves us is the easy answer. The deeper answer is, Because we love Him, trust Him, obey Him and serve Him, and we know that we're going to be with Him and the Father for an eternity of superlative blessing. "Believing" is what makes that real to us.

"You believe at last!" (16:31). And **". . . in me you may have peace"** (16:33). Believing is also understanding. And believing must also be trusting because that's what leads to peace. This is how Chapter 16 comes to an end. "Believe" is a big word! Believing is vastly more than mental or intellectual assent to something that may be true or that may be likely. To us today, believing may even be just holding an opinion. Thus, "I believe it will rain soon," or, "I believe exercise is good for me," are two examples how we use the word today. But that's not how Scripture uses it. Later, in 19:35; 20:8, and 29, the word believe clearly also means to be convinced that something is true. "Believe" means that too. This is why we need to understand the Gospel of John. Someone now will say, "All that you say here, what some people might call the 'deeper life,' is an option for those who desire it. But it's not necessary to be saved. I'm saved the way I am, I'm happy the way I am, and I have the assurance of being in heaven when I die." My response is, Beware! A profession of faith isn't the same as the reality of faith. The reality of faith is what Scripture says it is, not what we suppose it is or what our tradition says it is. God defines what belief is, not us.

* * *

Dear reader: The Church is loaded with nominal, professing Christians who may not be saved at all or, if so, are willfully immature. Don't take your understanding of Christianity from them!!! It's easy to do that, but it's deadly. Study the Scriptures instead. The Word of God reveals how to obtain life.

A study of soteriology in the Gospel of John reveals something striking. Nowhere in John is it stated that Christ died so that we can have the forgiveness of sins. Oh, it's there, but it's in the background, it's not explicit. For example, Jesus is proclaimed at the outset to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). A verse from Isaiah 53 is quoted (12:38). Cleansing from sin is implicit in the foot-washing. A vicarious death is (ironically) in the mouth of Caiaphus (11:50). But it really seems that John assiduously avoids making forgiveness of sins by the death of Christ explicit! Why? I argue that John wrote this Gospel to teach that salvation is far more profound than we believers realize. The atoning death of Christ is something that God initiated to deal with the issue of sin and evil, in order to make possible what is vastly greater, the love-relationships that creation and salvation intend.

The Upper Room discourse instructs believers what salvation is in its essence. Salvation is the call to participate in the joy, peace and love of the Godhead. And that occurs by being in fellowship both with God and with other believers who are like-minded. It's for those whose character is Christ-like, because Christ is the Beloved. Our character is precious to God. That's why love, trust, obedience, sacrifice for the good of others, servant-hood, humility, and selflessness are so *exceedingly* important. Salvation takes selfish, sinful, offensive creatures and changes them into Christ-like lovers of God. It changes us into a new kind of creature whose great desire or purpose in life is to be related to God. His will, His desire for us is life, *His* kind of life.

We are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Exactly what that means isn't clear. It possibly refers to what happens to us at our future glorification. We don't, indeed, we *can't* become deity at our glorification because God is *a se*. But we do in some way participate in the blessedness of that communion, of that living, Trinitarian fellowship. We don't want to miss out on that! So let's be sure we base our understanding of things and our lives on Scripture, the Word of God.