

# In the Upper Room

by G.W. North

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*The sermon explores the essence of true discipleship as defined by Jesus through love and servanthood.*

**Scripture:** John 13:14

**Topics:** "Love in Action", "Discipleship"

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## Description

G.W. North emphasizes the significance of love and servanthood in the life of a disciple as demonstrated by Jesus in the Upper Room. He explains that true discipleship is marked not by titles or positions, but by the love that disciples show to one another, reflecting the love of Christ. North highlights that Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, including Judas, to exemplify humility and service, urging His followers to love as He loved. The sermon stresses that the test of one's love for God is evidenced by their love for others, and that discipleship involves a personal recognition of God's love for each individual. Ultimately, North calls for believers to embody love in action, as this is the true hallmark of being a disciple of Christ.

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## Transcript

The Lord raised up men and called them apostles with a view to building His Church, and Paul who was himself an apostle said he thought the Lord had 'set forth us the apostles last', implying that apostles were the final group of men particularly named by God whom the world would see before the second advent. Men may create, indeed have since created, Popes and Ecclesiastics, Gurus and Cardinals and many others, but whatever office they may hold or whatever name they may bear, God did not create it: all such positions and names may be regarded as being contrary to the revealed will of God. It is refreshing to read John's simple heart on the matter; the feet Jesus washed were apostles' feet, including Judas's, but John who found the Lord at his own feet that day called all those men, except Jesus, disciples. With his Lord kneeling at his feet how could he do otherwise? It was by far the better description.

He could have argued that by His action Jesus had exalted them all above apostleship or discipleship to the heights of lordship, but he knew better. At least he and Peter, surely all of them, felt humbled and shamed by it; their Sovereign was their servant, wherever could they put their heads? Their only refuge was His love; He did not do it to shame them but because He loved them. He is altogether lovely and soon John got as close up to Jesus as it was possible for any of them to come and laid his head on His breast. He was the disciple whom Jesus loved, he said; again he could not find it in himself to call himself an apostle; like Paul he felt he was not fit to be one. He called himself a disciple -- a learner -- because that was what he was; the Apostle had washed his feet and he knew then that he was less than an apostle, if

apostle meant anything other, or should be made to mean anything above a slave.

Every one of those men, who that day knew they were disciples, were soon to hear Him say, 'ye are my friends; henceforth I call you not slaves, for the slave knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends'. They knew what their Lord and Master had done, He had washed their feet, He had also added, 'I have given you an example, ye ought to wash one another's feet'. In other words He was saying, 'be slaves, be disciples, learn of me and act to one another as I have done to you, and now He was adding further, 'keep my commandments and be my friends'. In His great love He became as a slave and washed their feet and now as their friend of greatest love He told them He was going to lay down His life for them. O how He loved them and longed for them to be disciples indeed and to give themselves up to learn of Him and His great love and how to express it properly to one another.

This was His great concern for them all before they left that upper room. They must be known in the world as men that loved one another. Whatever men thought of them when they became His companions and comrades and followed Him on earth, after He left all men must be able to recognise them by their love. 'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to another', He said. They had power, no-one could doubt they had power, they had preached the gospel, healed the sick, cast out devils, borne the cross; men knew they were His apostles, wouldn't they be known as His disciples for that? They were also men of loyalty and perseverance, they had left all to follow Him, they had put their hand to the plough and had never looked back; surely that was a mark of discipleship. They were also greatly privileged men; no-one could deny that, He had called them and chosen them and commissioned them; why did He not mention these things? They were most important weren't they? Surely men of power and perseverance and privilege as they were would easily be recognised as His disciples by anybody. Jesus did not think so.

Peter, spokesman for them all as usual, was baffled and hurt by the Lord's words. It was he who had said, 'we have left all and followed thee'; now he says 'why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake'. That is what he thought, but Jesus thought differently and told him so in words now famous among us, 'the cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice'. They all would have said they loved Him and loved one another and so saying would have been speaking the truth; He would not have denied it, but that was not good enough for Him. They must love one another with a new love -- His love -- 'as I have loved you'; in God's sight that is the mark of discipleship. We must love with the love of Jesus, in Jesus' way; His way of love and loving can only be learned personally, His love is individually bestowed and demonstrated -- it is not a general kind of feeling which has to be assumed and taken for granted; this positive, personal love is the hallmark of discipleship, nothing else is.

The test of their discipleship was not their love for Him but their love for one another. Perhaps that sounded strange in their ears; they would have wanted to make their love and devotion to Him the test, but He would not allow that. The proof of a man's love for the Lord is his love for all those beside himself whom the Lord has chosen. A disciple must realise the individuality of loving, 'love as I have loved you'. God's love for the world is so vast and the impact on us of the famous statement by John in chapter 3 is so great, that we can miss the individuality of it. Yet we ought not to do so, for this love for the individual underlies all God's commandments and statements about His love. The two-part summary of the ten commandments given to Israel was well-known to the eleven and cannot be less well-known to us, for the Lord repeated it: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God' and 'thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. The test of a person's love for God was to be assessed by a neighbour, not an angel. A man's neighbour could judge how much his neighbour loved God by how much or how little he loved him, and that is what God

intends.

Christ carried over this same intention of God into the new covenant with a difference; He applied it in a different way and how glad we ought to be about that. Every man must stand up to Jesus' test and be prepared for his alleged genuineness to be judged thereby. Each person's love for Jesus turns upon Jesus' love for him or her as an individual. John speaks of loving Him 'because He first loved us', and Paul says of himself and his relationship with God's Son, 'He loved me and gave Himself for me'. It is a wonderful thing if a man says 'I love Him', but it cannot be acceptable to God on any other grounds than a personal recognition and appropriation of His love and work for him as an individual. His first real knowledge of eternal love is not of his own love to God but of God's love toward him; everything turns on that. Disciples are not instructed to love each other as they love the Lord but as He loves them. Israel were commanded to love their neighbours as themselves, and that is good, though perhaps rare today, but beyond that the Church and saints of God are charged with higher things.

A person may judge how much I know and have experienced of Jesus' love by the amount and kind of love I have toward him or her. I must stand among my fellow-disciples at the judgement-bar of God's word. If I do not love them each one individually, as Jesus has loved and still loves me, I testify that I know little or nothing of His great love, even though I constantly talk about it. John says 'little children let us not love in word but in deed and in truth'. Love is not in words, though they be imagined to be words of love, such as 'I love you', and mouths be full of what may be called endearments. Of course let our love be vocalised -- John did not mean to tell us we should not tell one another we love one another; he was drawing our attention to the fact that love is not a word, love is (a) being, life -- a person -- which must express itself in attitudes and actions, that is in truth, reality and actual fact. It must be seen and felt and known and proved and witnessed to by another, or else it is not love. Love has its tender tones and sweet words, but they are the least part of it; the test of love is always 'as I have loved you'.

Paul's heartfelt confession cannot be bettered, 'the Son of God .... gave Himself': what a testimony! He had love so He loved -- that is John's testimony of Jesus; here it is in John's words: 'having loved His own which were in the world He loved them unto the end'. That is all love knows to do, it cannot do otherwise; to do or even to think differently is to cease to be. Love found it impossible to do other than what He did that night to His disciples and what He did was consistent with all He had ever done. Because of this, because He was the person He was and did these things, John wrote, 'God is Love' ; he discovered it for himself and discovering it made it the transcendent theme of his message. In the end a man's testimony of his friend and brother must be, 'he is love, he loves me as Jesus loves me'. The degree may not be the same but the quality must be identical. Disciples must prove to all men that they have love by loving as Jesus loves.

That is what the Lord wants; paraphrasing His words in an attempt to arrive at what He was really saying we may put it this way: 'I am going away and when I leave you, all of you will seek me because you want me. You will not be able to find me in the flesh, you will only find me in spirit and this only if you yourselves become love personified. Ask yourselves this question, when I am gone who is going to love Matthew as I have loved him? Who will take my place and love Peter as I do? Will you Philip? Will you John? Will you James be to Thaddeus who and what I have been to him? Will you? Will each one of you rise to this, his highest privilege and love as I have loved and shall always love every one of you?' Beloved there is nothing higher or greater than this, nothing in heaven or earth, and there is no true discipleship other than this, it is sainthood. This is a much higher calling than to following -- it is a promotion by regeneration to being, and that being -- Love.

It is very noticeable that the whole tenor of the Lord's teaching changed from the moment He entered that upper room with His disciples. It is as if He took His last opportunity to say things which must be said, things He had been wanting to say and had delayed until now. We know from Luke that He had 'desired with desire' to eat those last meals with them; He had timed events and words to perfection, so that the great significance of the occasion and His words should never be lost upon His disciples. They sang a hymn together and then He spoke what were perhaps His very last words to them before their departure, 'Hereafter I will not talk much with you for the prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me. But that the world may know that I love the Father and as the Father gave me commandment even so I do. Arise let us go hence'; and away they went. He knew that just beyond Him now lay Gethsemane and betrayal and apprehension and imprisonment and crucifixion; that is why He went; He loved His Father.

And as He went He continued with His unfinished teaching to His disciples, telling them vital things they must know about discipleship -- things He had not been able to say to them before. They realised that a great change was taking place, He was doing unusual things, saying new things; He had just spoken to them about His Father's house and about the Comforter the Holy Spirit coming to live in them, and He said that He Himself and the Father would come too. He had never said those things before. These were His last words and they listened distressed and mystified and amazed in the darkness of the night as He poured it into their ears. It was new truth. It was all about being His disciples, and as they listened they realised He was developing and explaining what He had been saying earlier in the guest-chamber at the supper, 'This is my commandment, this is what I meant when I said to you that you love one another as I have loved you', 'I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman; as the Father hath loved me even so have I loved you, continue ye in my love, love each other as I have loved you. Love, this love I am talking about and have shown you, is eternal; I didn't start it, love didn't commence with me, I have only continued it. The Father has love me eternally; He continued loving me as a man on earth and I have simply continued it to you by continuing it in myself. I love the Father and He gave me commandment what I should do and what I should say and I am now doing what I do because I love Him. By so doing I am not only continuing in His love to me and mine to Him, but at the same time and by the same action am continuing it to you also and this is the only way it can be done. Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends and you disciples are my friends if you do whatsoever I command you, as I have done and am still doing whatsoever my Father has commanded me.'

It all became plain to them after they were born again. John found no difficulty with it then. When he came to write it, the blessed baptism of Jesus had made it all feasible to his mind and workable in his life. He was speaking logical truth to them; spiritual truth is always logical and perfectly understandable, it was all a growth process, a progressive factor of life based upon Himself and His own relationship with His Father; as it was between Jesus and the Father, so must it be between Jesus and His disciples. He was not only talking about the coming death of the cross towards which He was moving all the time He was speaking though. When He said 'greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends', He was talking in retrospect as well as in prospect; He had already laid down a life in heaven before He came to earth to befriend men and love them and make them His friends and God's sons. Laying down His life was not new to Him. He had spoken of it before, 'the Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep, the Father knoweth me, I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. No man taketh it from me. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again; therefore doth my Father love me because I lay down my life for the sheep; this commandment have I received of my Father'. Laying down His life was natural and habitual to Him, His Father loved Him for it. It was not the originating cause of the Father's Love to Him but it was the reason for the continuation of it.

Every disciple must know with understanding that Jesus is speaking here of the very essence of discipleship. Without this discipleship can no more exist than a branch can exist or bring forth fruit without abiding in the vine. This entails recognition of authority and the rendering of obedience and the resolve to lay down One's life. Every disciple must be obviously loved by his Father, as obviously loved as Jesus was; beholding him, people must be able to behold his glory, 'the glory as of an only begotten with a father', as John wrote of Jesus. When the life is manifest it is glory, whether in Jesus or in any other of God's sons. When a man has a son and he is his only son, indeed his only begotten child, that father lavishes his all upon him. John said as much, 'Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands and that He was come from God and went to God'. Jesus was very conscious of it and we see the result of such consciousness -- 'He rose from supper, took a towel and girded Himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded'. He took the position and did the work of the most menial slave -- He laid down His life yet more.

'Ye call me Master and Lord', He said, 'I am. The slave is not greater than His Lord, neither is He that is sent greater than He that sent Him'. He was speaking of Himself, and His Father was greater than He; He said so, greater than all. He was the disciples' Master and Lord but not His Father's; He was Father's bond-slave, therefore He found it no difficulty to become the disciples' slave, the truth was so real. What He did was a further step in the laying down of His life. 'I do not call you slaves', He said to the disciples, 'I call you friends' my friends; He was their slave. There was no condescension about Him, He never patronised anybody or spoke patronisingly to anybody, He knew He was a slave, and at the end of His life could say 'I have given you an example -- do as I have done'. All His life He had been an example to them -- the only begotten of the Father in heaven became as an only begotten with a father on earth to be our example, our Master and our Lord.

A man must know his son-ship first though. No man can accept and follow His example until He first knows he is a son of the Father. To the statement 'Rabbi (Master, Teacher) we know that thou art a teacher come from God', comes the reply, direct and meaningful, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God'. In the kingdom of God, manifest on earth as a heavenly state, Jesus was a son and a slave, and a Lord and a servant. What happened in the upper room was an example, a demonstration of Jesus' lifelong practice; He did not suddenly become a slave then and there, He was a slave from the moment He left heaven. He laid down His life there first, before angels and archangels and His Father, and it is emblazoned on the sacred page for all who have eyes to see and a mind to read it. Let every man know that it takes all of a man to be a disciple, Jesus' whole life and total example being the proof of it. He did not tell them this immediately He called them, but it was not long before He commenced to teach them all the truth, and as they followed Him they saw it.

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