

## **The Greatest Love – Various Passages**

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).***

It’s all so clear to me now, these words of my closest friend. What’s really going on is always so much easier to see after it’s happened, when you’re looking back. Hindsight is 20/20, they say. And its so true.

***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”***

How could I know that my closest friend, the one who had already loved me like no one else ever had...the one who had changed my life and my whole way of thinking and viewing the world...the one who had shown me God and his power and great love...how could I know that he was about to put this simple statement into action right before my eyes? And in doing so, he was about to show me a still greater love than this...a greater love than had ever been seen among the human race.

You see, we’ve heard of people who’ve given up their lives to save someone they love. Parents willing to die to save their kids. People who sacrifice themselves to rescue a friend or loved one in danger. Even heroes who take a bullet to save another person. But what we’ve never heard of or seen is a person who’s willing to die to save, not just their friends or family, but also their enemies. And what about this? A person willing to die to save a friend who just stabbed him in the back...a friend who just abandoned him in his greatest moment of need and even pretended not to know him so he could save his own skin.

I was that person. I was the one who turned against my closest friend and denied I even knew him so I could save myself. You’ve probably heard of me. Does the word, “rooster,” bring me to mind? My name is Peter. Self-confident, bold, no-fear, Peter. Never afraid to speak my mind. Always confident that “I can do this.” Too confident, I found out.

I swore to Jesus that I would go to prison with him and even die with him if it came to that. I even had my sword ready to do battle with anybody who tried to mess with him. I was supremely self-confident.

Of course, Jesus knew better. He knew my confidence was misplaced. He knew the human heart. He knew my heart. He knew the weakness behind my show of self-confidence and fearlessness. He knew the human urge to survive and protect our own skin at all costs. And he knew I would fail as long as I kept trusting in myself and what I could do...as long as I kept trying to do battle with a spiritual enemy using only human strength. He even warned me ahead of time. He told me I would deny him...and not just once, but 3 times. *How ridiculous! That will never happen*, I thought to myself.

He warned me again in the garden. He told me to pray so I wouldn't enter into temptation. I fell asleep instead. It had been a long day. I was tired. He came back to me and woke me up and scolded me for sleeping at a time like this. He told me again to get up and pray so I wouldn't be tempted. *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*, he said. Instead of praying, I fell asleep again. And when Jesus came back the third time, things got crazy fast. I wish I would have listened to him and prayed. He knew what he was talking about. Because as Jesus woke me up, Judas arrived with a band of soldiers intending to arrest Jesus. I yanked out my sword and chopped off the ear of one of those soldiers. *See Jesus, I can do this. You were wrong about me.* I thought he'd be patting me on the back for my bold action and bravery. But instead he told me to put away my sword. What?!

You see, he'd been praying, and unlike me he had discerned the Father's will in this situation, and he had God's purposes in mind and was walking in God's strength. And as a result, he knew this was the key moment that would begin the fulfilment of the purpose for which he had come...the purpose of laying down his life...and not just for his friends, but even for his enemies...even for those hard-hearted Pharisees who'd been seeking to kill him for most of his ministry...and even for me, his friend, who was about to turn and run and leave him alone to be beaten and spit on and mocked...to be crucified.

You see, Jesus didn't need me to rescue him with a sword. God, his Father, was well able to rescue him at a moment's notice with a whole army of mighty angels

if needed. And that battle would have been very short and one-sided. But he knew that wasn't the plan right now and he was ready for the pain-filled cup he was about to drink. He was ready to show to the world and to me what true love looks like...God's kind of love...*agape* love...self-giving love. And he was about to show just how far he would go to express that love to us and invite us to live in it ourselves.

Of course, I didn't understand any of this at the time. All I knew is that if couldn't put up a fight...if I just had to stand by and let these soldiers arrest me and my friends when we had done nothing wrong...if that's what the plan was, I was outta here. In fact, we all turned and ran. If Jesus wanted to take that route, fine. But not us.

Well, I didn't get too far before my heart tugged me back to my friend. I had to see what was going to happen to him. Surely there was still a way out. John got me into the courtyard of the high priest, where they were holding and questioning Jesus. I tried to be invisible and watch from a distance. After all, I still didn't want to be arrested. What good would that do? But try as I might, everybody seemed to be staring at me. And not just one, but two servant girls couldn't mind their own stinkin' business and actually asked me if I was one of Jesus' disciples. What was I supposed to do? They'd either kick me out or arrest me if they knew. So I just acted like I didn't know him and even said so. Then, would you believe it, a 3<sup>rd</sup> person heard my Galilean accent and wouldn't leave well enough alone. "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you," he said. That was all I could take and I just lost it. I swore on my honor: *I DO NOT KNOW THAT MAN! And may I be cursed if I'm lying!*

And it was at that very moment that the rooster and I became connected forever. As I finished that terrible, cowardly, self-protecting sentence...as I denied my closest friend who was innocent and being unjustly accused...as I left him alone to suffer...the rooster crowed and from across the courtyard Jesus actually turned and looked directly at me. Our eyes met for a very long moment. And I'd never felt so ashamed, so weak, so broken, as I did at that moment. Jesus knew I needed to feel that shame...to recognize my guilt...to grapple with what I'd done...to experience the pain and heartache of the sinful choice I'd just made. Because only then would I be able to finally see how desperately I needed him. Only then would I be able to put away my self-confidence and pride. Only then

would I be able to come to true repentance and begin the path to healing, forgiveness and the new God-dependent life he had for me.

But I knew none of that now. I only knew the pain, the shame, the consequences of what I'd done. I left the courtyard...I left my friend...and I wept long and bitterly. The friendship was over. What else could happen from here? How would you like to keep being friends with a person who acts like they don't know you in front of other people...who turns and runs in your darkest hour when you've been falsely accused? It was over. Or so I thought.

But you see, I didn't understand God's kind of love yet...the love of my closest friend, Jesus. I still couldn't get beyond the limits of the human kind of love I'd known all my life. But over the next 43 days and then for the rest of my life, Jesus showed me God's kind of love in word and action, and he even changed me so deeply through that love, that I came to be a person who could show that same kind of love to other people...even to those who persecuted me and hurt me and turned against me...even to those who sentenced me to a martyr's death at the end of my life on earth.

Jesus showed this kind of love to me as he went to the cross and died to save me, his friend who had just deserted him...as he died to save the Roman soldiers who nailed his hands and feet to the cross and the ones who gambled for his clothes...as he died to save the Jewish religious leaders who had shouted, "Crucify him," and even mocked him while he hung on the cross...and as he died to save people from all walks of life who are living as his enemies, rejecting their Creator and Sustainer and actively rebelling against him. As my friend and fellow apostle, Paul, has so beautifully written:

***6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***  
(Romans 5:6–8)

That's God's kind of love, my friends. That's the love of my closest Friend and Savior, Jesus Christ. A love that sees the big picture. A love that puts aside self and offers grace and forgiveness to those who don't deserve it. A love that

rescues lost and enslaved people and desires good for them. A love that turns the other cheek. A love that longs to see people freed from sin and selfishness and walking in God's good purposes for them. A love that will do whatever it takes to restore and reconcile rebellious sons and daughters with their true Father.

Jesus continued to show this love to me after he rose from the dead. You see, I was wrong. Our friendship wasn't over. Not even close. In a conversation I'll never forget on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus helped me deal with and move on from my shame for denying him 3 times and leaving him in his darkest hour. For each time I denied him, he asked me to reaffirm my love for him, and I did. With his words and his touch, he healed those terrible wounds and reaffirmed his unchanging love for me. And he showed me that in spite of my failure and the painful discipline it brought, he still had plans for me...big plans!

And now that I knew firsthand how weak I really was in the flesh, in my own strength, I was finally ready to give up my self-confidence and pride and replace them with God-confidence and true humility. I was now ready to pray continually and learn to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit he would soon give me and all of his other followers. And I was ready to begin showing to others the same love Jesus had just shown to me. Because Jesus calls all those who experience his amazing *agape* love to offer that same love to others. And, in fact, that's how others will know that we're his followers. And that's how they'll come to know him themselves.

***13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you... 17 These things I command you, SO THAT you will love one another.***  
(John 15:13-14, 17)

*Love one another as I have loved you*, Jesus tells us...a selfless, self-giving love that sees the big picture, keeps God's purposes always in mind, is willing to confront sin when needed and provide loving discipline, and that offers the love we've received from Christ to others, even our enemies.

I want to close today with the new me, the new Peter, in action, showing the love I received from Jesus to other people...people who were very hard to show love to, because they were the very ones who had delivered up my friend, Jesus, to be

crucified on the cross. And yet listen to my words from Acts chapter 3...tough words that didn't excuse or ignore sinful behavior, but actually called it out. But words that then offered – even those hard-hearted Pharisees – forgiveness and reconciliation with God through repentance and faith in Christ. This is what I said to them:

***13 The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him.***

***14 But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses... 17 "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. 18 But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. 19 Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, 20 that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...***

Imagine being able to offer forgiveness and times of refreshing through repentance to those who had just murdered your closest friend. That's a different kind of love that comes only from God himself. And this is where Jesus is leading his people. He's leading us *to live in his love and offer his love* – the same undeserved love we've received – *to ALL through repentance and faith in his name...*the greatest love...love as it was meant to be...God's kind of love...only found in our precious Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ.

Now if you're here today, and you haven't yet received Christ's love and forgiveness, please do it today. Jesus truly is your only hope in this dark and painful and sin-filled world. He's your only hope for your own sin and brokenness and failures, which we all have. And Jesus will be overjoyed to give you his unchanging love and forgiveness, if you'll just ask. He won't force it on you. But he longs to give it to you and bring those times of refreshing in his presence as he leads you into his ways of living life...a life of meaning, purpose, power, joy, and endurance...a life where you have a compass and a map, the Word of God, teaching you how life works and how to navigate it...something the world simply does not have and cannot offer.

## **A Simple Prayer to Accept God's Offer of Salvation**

God, I've sinned against you and I want to change.  
I want your forgiveness and unchanging love.  
I believe You died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead.  
I receive You as my Lord and Savior.  
I invite You to take charge of my life from here.  
Teach me to live life with You and like You by the power of Your Spirit.  
Thank you for saving me. Amen.

Perhaps there's someone here today who's like Peter after his denial. You've done something you know is wrong or you've had a season of rebellion against Jesus and haven't yet confessed it and repented of it with him. Will you do that today? If you're his child through repentance and faith in him, his love for you hasn't changed even slightly. He loves you just as much as he always has and wants you back in fellowship with him...back in his arms and back in his good ways of living life. Just own up to whatever has happened, ask for the forgiveness he purchased for you on the cross, and tell him you're ready to change by his power. Like the prodigal's father, he's sees you in the distance and is already running to meet you and welcome you back into life in his house.

And for those of you already in a healthy place with Christ and seeking to follow him, are you ready to share the love and forgiveness and new life you received from him with others, no matter what it costs you? And are you ready to do it in both words and actions? Are you ready to offer the love of Christ received through repentance and faith in him even to those who treat you badly...even to those who look different from you and come from a totally different social background...even to those of a different political persuasion... even to those who might mock your faith in Christ when you share it with them...even to those chained up to full rebellion against God and who seem like too tough of a "nut" to crack? Well, no "nut" is too tough to crack for God. Amen?! Let's offer the love of Christ to all and be willing to speak the words of the gospel to all...words that we're not ashamed of...because in them is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (See Romans 1:16-17).

Peter's going to show us, as we continue studying his first letter – the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter – how to live the kind of self-giving life that he lived and how to thrive even

when persecution and ridicule and financial loss are the costs of living this way. And these costs can be expected, because we have an enemy who does not want the message of Christ going out...an enemy who doesn't want to lose his slaves and who definitely doesn't want the power of God revealed to the world through his love-giving saints. So we can expect some challenges and some costs from a worldly perspective. But we remember, we're just passing through this world that's not our home, and we rest in that truth from 2 Corinthians 9:8 that we meditated on last week during the message and in some of our Fellowship Groups:

***And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.***

Let's believe this and live like we know it's true. God's grace is more than sufficient...it's abundant for every need we face as we seek to live in God's purposes for our lives.

I'd like to invite those serving Communion today to come forward now, as we prepare to remember what Christ did for us on the cross to show God's *agape* love and provide every person in the world an opportunity to receive that love and live in it from now into eternity.