
The Fellowship of the King: The Measure of Christian Community

Hebrews 10:19-25 and 1 John 3:11-4:21

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Introduction

It is no great deed to love when it is easy, when it is motivated by self-seeking, or when it is done to manipulate. It is much harder to love when it takes effort, when it requires sacrifice, when it seeks no return. My father was a high school English teacher who taught in the high school I went to. Before I reached high school, I have to admit I was somewhat afraid of having him for a class. But I soon found out that there was little to fear, as he was a favorite teacher to many of the students. One of the things that has stuck with me over the years was the memory that his class room was decorated not for himself but for his students. I can still see in my mind's eye, the many posters he had hung on the walls around his room. I particularly remember one of them which hung right near the center of the chalk board. It said, "Work is love made evident". For some reason it made sense to me and has stuck with me all these years. It expresses in just a few words, the truth that the measure of how much we love someone or something is seen in how hard we work at it.

Tonight is the final message on the series on Christian community titled "The Fellowship of the King". We have covered "The Means of Christian Community", "The Marks of Christian Community", and "The Mandate of Christian Community" as we looked at several passages that spoke to this topic. We have seen that we are united and placed into the body by Christ. We have seen that the power of the Gospel transforms us and evidences itself within this community. And we have seen that Christ is equipping the body so that it may grow and mature for both ministry and love. Tonight we will look at "The Measure of Christian Community" as begin with Hebrews 10:19-25 and spend the majority of our time in 1 John 3:11-4:21.

It may seem odd to tie these two passages together. But the reason I wanted to do so was to set the tone with the Hebrews 10 passage as an overarching view of Biblical community. Chad and I were having breakfast at Cracker Barrel on a Saturday morning a few months back as I was beginning to prepare for these messages. As we talked about Christian community he mentioned this passage in Hebrews and it has stuck with me ever since. So I was putting this series of messages together, I thought it would be an appropriate way to begin the ending, if you will. Think of it as an hors d'oeuvres before our final meal in this series taken from 1 John 3 and 4.

As I mentioned in the opening message, this series really began out of a passion for community that started more than two years ago. The more I read and thought about community life, the more I became convinced that as a church we must become more intentional about drawing people into fellowship and relationships so that we may grow and mature in our faith. Just as there is a continuum from milk to meat as we mature in our love for God, there is also a continuum from anonymity to intimacy as we mature in our love for one another. Moreover, I believe that there is a God-designed interconnection between our love for God and our love for one another. That is, the more we love God the more our hearts pour out in love for one another. And the more we love our brothers the more we are encouraged to love our God.

As a church that has been strong in emphasizing our vertical relationship with God, we must also work at developing our horizontal relationships with one another. This is not to say that Clearcreek is not a loving community. Rather, I strongly affirm the depth of our mutual love and I have personally seen it both directly and indirectly. But as in so many modern churches, we are a terribly busy people; caught up in such a whirlwind of activities that we do not make time for one another. And to varying degrees, I believe that this busyness diminishes both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Godly relationships and constrains us from growing in knowledge and love for one another.

In this series, I have made much of the church being a kingdom community. We accept and believe that there is a spiritual reality to our lives that exists over and above what happens to us in the world. Yet how easy it is to become too comfortable and too confident in the earthly realm. There is an illusion of independence that often clouds our thinking. It often takes a calamity or life-shattering crisis to remind us that our lives hang by a thread. In these moments we realize that we are not as in control our lives as we think we are. We are not as safe from harm as we would hope to be. We are not as self-sufficient as we would like to be. In one sense it is good and by God's grace that we do not daily focus with the constant possibilities of danger and distress that surround us. That our minds are able to ignore our frailties and the hazards of life is a blessing that allows us live productive lives. But to live in complete ignorance of our dependence upon God and our need for one another is also wrong. In other words, we must not become so self-confident that we no longer see ourselves depending on Christ and the Church.

The truth is that no matter how self-assured or self-reliant we become, we are never beyond the need of Christ for every breath of air that brings us physical life and every breath of faith that brings us spiritual life. As members of the Body of Christ, we have also been designed to need each other. We have already seen in scripture that the church is the primary community by which God has given us to mature and grow in Christ. It is the primary place of relationships within the Body. And it is the primary place where the godly character of transformed lives should be most clearly seen.

Tonight, I propose to you that there is a common thread in both passages having to do with Christian community. The common thread in these two passages is that they each contain a call to believers that has to do with community. The first passage in Hebrews 10 is in a sense a call to fellowship. This call to fellowship is first vertical in nature. It is a fellowship

between man and the God who has made a way for us to commune with Him. We are to draw near to the One who has seen to our redemption and given His Son to be both our Savior and Priest. Additionally, this call to fellowship is horizontal in nature. It is a fellowship between man and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are also to draw near to each other, encouraging and meeting together to stir one another up to love and ministry.

The second passage taken from 1 John 3 and 4 is a longer section of text and carries a call to love one another. We are to love one another with the same self-sacrificing kind of love that Christ modeled for us on the cross. In fact, our love for the body testifies of our love for God. There is a sense of assurance that stems out of the overflow of love from our hearts toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. We will see that one of the measures of Christ's presence abiding in us is the love we have for others in the Body of Christ. This passage should cause us to ask this question of ourselves. How can we claim to love God when we do not demonstrate love for those who also abide and fellowship in Christ?

Because of the amount of text between these two passages, I will be working through them in larger chunks this evening. My hope is that together we will see the larger themes present in the text and land upon the key points that speak to the measure of Christian community. As we read through and linger over these passages, be looking at how it gauges our heart's commitment to the Body of Christ.

Biblical Community (Heb. 10:19-25)

Like each of the previous passages, Hebrews 10:19 puts us at a pivotal point in the book. The author of Hebrews has moved through who Christ is and what He has done, to the practical results of what that should look like in the lives of believers. In other words, after all that God has done for us and promised to us, a life of faith is to be lived like this. It is the "live like this" part that the author of Hebrews goes on from this point and defines in the rest of the book. Keep in mind that the Hebrews had gone through and were going through tremendous struggles and trials. In light of this, we should likewise be encouraged that if believers can live "like this" when they are being persecuted, when their rights are being trampled, and when life is very, very hard, then how much more so should we be able to do so when life is relatively easy.

Love for God (v. 19-23)

The author's argument here is that since we have an assurance that we can approach Him through the work of Christ, we should then draw near in fellowship to Him. You see the natural result of Christ's work should be a love for God. If he has made us a part of His kingdom then our hearts are changed to want to enter into fellowship with Him. The desires of our heart start to follow Him in joyful obedience and reflect His character. Our joy begins to turn from being found in creation to being found in the creator as we give Him the glory.

We can be assured that Christ has made a way for us to draw near. He has cleansed and washed us that we may appear before God with confidence and hope. We are also assured that we can hold fast to this hope because God is faithful. In drawing near to

God we are drawing near to what we know to be true about Him and all that He has promised. And as our confidence grows, our love for Him grows stronger so that we are drawn even more toward His throne.

Love for Others (v. 24-25)

Not only does the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ's work draw us near with a love for God, but it also results in a love for others. Clearly the sense of others here is the context of the local Church. There is a connection between love for God in the previous verses and a love of others in the next two. Just as we draw near to God and hold fast to Him, we are to live in a way that demonstrates a love for one another, especially as we fix our eyes on Heaven. And it follows that the more that we love God, the more that love is to overflow through us into the lives of others.

Out of this overflow we are called to stir one another up to love and good works. This is what life in the body is to look like. We are to look for ways to stimulate and kindle a fire of love and service toward one another. This is not just a casual looking for. Now if you have ever asked your children to go look for something, you know what I mean by casual looking. Kids use the "drive by" method when looking for something. You know what I mean. They kind of wander around, and as long as they get in the general vicinity of where you asked them to look, they have fulfilled their childhood duty. It's really a pretty smart approach when you think about it. Why stop and get out of the car to actually find something, when you can just drive by and let mom do the looking for you?

Well, this is not the kind of looking scripture has in mind. The sense of this verse is that there is an ongoing pursuit and strong consideration of ways we can be of help to others. It is a treasuring of relationships and a concern for others that makes real the hands and feet of Christ in the lives of others. In reading these verses we have to ask ourselves, what relationships has God given me here at Clearcreek that I can encourage others toward acts love and obedience? What opportunities do I have to build up the body? And in contrast, what opportunities have I missed or worse have actually hurt others or caused harm?

There is a presumption here that we have developed the kind of relationships with one another that allow for this level of involvement. And that there is a valuing of the body that causes us to both consider and interact with others in mind. As we value others and draw near in our relationships we will move into each others lives with words of encouragement and deeds of service and ministry. This drawing near implies a level of intimacy and understanding that is only developed through spending time in fellowship together.

So how do we get to a point where we naturally think about each other? The author of Hebrews writes that we must not forsake or neglect meeting together. I wonder if we get the sense of what this meant to the original readers of Hebrews. I doubt they were thinking of Sunday morning services in padded chairs and air conditioned sanctuaries. Amidst persecution and struggles, they were to be faithful to meeting together. There was to be a priority and desire to being together that surmounted far greater obstacles

than personal comforts. What keeps us from flock; from Adult Bible Education at 9:15 on Sunday mornings; from Sunday evening service; or from opening our homes on a regular basis to others? These are opportunities to encourage, to pray together, to share joys and sorrows, to help, to teach, to get to know, and to engage one another that we may be drawn together and so draw nearer to God. Let us hear and heed the two calls of this passage; to love God and love others.

Love One Another (1 John 3:11-4:6)

We need to move on to the second passage we are looking at this evening. As we shall see, this passage from 1st John first expands upon the call to love one another. And then second, it builds upon love for the Body of Christ as defining the measure of our love for God. It affirms the connection between loving God and loving others. We hear this connection in 1 Thessalonians 4:9 which says, “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” Let me say this plainly, if we do not have a love for the Church that draws us into fellowship, prayer, and acts of service then we must question whether we truly love God.

The command to love (v. 11-15)

We pick up in verse 11 with John saying, here is the truth of what you have been taught from the beginning, that you should love one another. The foundation of our love for one another begins with the command to love. Looking back to the previous verse will help us pick up the context that continues through this passage. Verse 10 says, “By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.” Simply put, one measure of those who are and those who are not of the faith, is love for others.

The truth of this can be seen all the way back in Genesis in the relationship between Cain and Able. The example of Cain’s wickedness is seen in wrong worship and murdering his brother both demonstrating his lack of faith. We are then taken from a specific example of murder to the general principle of hate. Just as Cain hated his brother’s righteousness, so the world will hate ours. Again, this is one of the ways we know we have been regenerated into a life of faith. Believers will have a love for their brother that has replaced hatred. It is evidence of the change that has taken place within us. We now reflect the love of Christ that is present within us.

It is easy to say to ourselves that we don’t hate anybody. But John does not give any room here for such thinking. There is no neutral ground. In essence, he is saying that if we do not love or have love abiding in us, then we, in effect, are hating. Hate is the absence of love. And if we hate our brother, we are murdering him in our hearts. So let us be careful of considering ourselves higher than we ought when thinking that by not hating we have met God’s standard. The standard is to have an abiding love for our brothers within our hearts.

The example of love (v. 16-18)

Our love for one another is not only commanded but is seen in the example of love we have in Christ. John puts before us the ultimate example of love in the self-sacrificing love of our Savior. This is how we know what love is. It is a selfless, serving, humble, caring kind of love that ministers to the needs of others. We are to reflect the same kind of love that Christ had for us in the love we have for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Put in the context of the body, we are to show the same kind of love to other members of the body as Christ, the head, has shown to us and the body as a whole.

Now again, John does not leave any neutral ground. It is not enough to say that we feel love or say we love the body. There must be a compulsion to live out that love in action. This is what struck me about my father's poster in high school. To say we love without ministering to needs or closing our hearts to the joys and sorrows of others negates any words of love and demonstrates that God's love does not abide in us. I can tell someone I love them every 15 minutes, but until I demonstrate that love to them it is not made real. Real love means sacrificing and sharing. It is a sacrificial giving of our time, talents, and treasures for the sake of others. It is in our commitment to fellowship, prayer, and meeting together where the rubber meets the road. It is not just in the big events of life, but it is often in the sharing of the everyday mundane things where we truly minister and build relationships within the Church.

The confidence of love (v. 19-24)

John continues the progression from the command to love and the example of love, to the confidence of love. The words "By this" at the beginning of this portion of the passage refer us back to the previous verses. When we read these words we should ask ourselves, by what? Here it is clearly, by the preceding verses. By the evidence of love that demonstrates itself in self-sacrificing acts to others, we know that we are of the truth. The confidence of our faith and love for God is given in the expression of our love for others. One of the results of loving others is the confidence that the Spirit of Christ is within us.

We can have confidence before God because in loving others we are keeping His commandment. It is *prima facie* evidence that Christ is alive within us when we are freed by the power of the Spirit to love others. It is important to note that what we are talking about here is a pattern and not perfection. Only Christ is perfect. But there should be a growing pattern of love for others in the life of a believer that provides a strengthened assurance that we are a part of the Body. Praise God that true believers can have a true confidence of their salvation as they see a pattern maturing and obedience in their love for their brothers and sisters in Christ.

The testimony of love (v. 4:1-6)

We have seen the command to love, the example of love, leading to the confidence of love, now pointing to the testimony of love. At first glance, this section of the

passage seems out of place. This may be in part because it is part of a larger chiasmic structure that covers the whole of 1st John and does not fit our western way of thinking. But this section is sandwiched between two passages dealing with love for the Body of Christ. And I think the key is to see the connection to verse 10 of Chapter 3. In this sense, these verses seem to be an expansion of the thought that love for God and others is part of a test to see who is truly in the faith and who is not.

The early church was often under attack from false teachers distorting the Gospel and deceiving believers. Here John gives them two tests to determine if teachers who come among them are truly of Christ. First, was a test of their confession of Christ. Will they confess that the Jesus who came in the flesh to earth is truly God? Will they confess Jesus as deity? It is likely that John did not just intend a verbal confession here as is cautioned against in Matthew 7:21, but rather, just as in the previous section, that there is evidence of this confession at work in their lives.

The second test was whether a teacher listened or adhered to the teaching of the apostles. You could say in today's world, do they listen and adhere to sound doctrine. A person who is of the faith will proclaim and love truth and not error. So just as the testimony of love for others points to the work of the Spirit in the lives of others, so does a person's confession of Christ as Lord and God and their love for sound doctrine. These tests provide a measure of the heart for both others and ourselves as evidence of true faith.

The Measure of Love (4:7-21)

Having dealt with the call to love on another in the first part of this passage, John closes with defining the measure of love for one another. Here we will see that God is the source of our love and that we are to reflect His love for the Body of Christ. Furthermore, as His love is lived out and perfected in us, we can have full assurance that His Spirit abides in us and we are His.

The basis of love (v. 7-12)

In these verses John first establishes the basis of love. It is hard in our modern minds to separate our definition or view of love from emotion. And when we think of love in emotional terms, we want to look at God's love in the same way. But when we hear God is love, we must understand that God is the measure and standard of love. It does not define Him, but He defines it. As Russ and I interacted over this passage he helped me to see that God's love and hatred is expressed in His actions and out of His character. Russ expressed this in noting that there are several spheres of love in which we see God's love manifested. He said, "There is God's love for Himself where we ought to love God, God's love for His children where we ought to love our brother, His love for humanity largely considered where we ought to love our neighbor, and His love for creation which we are not commanded to do, but which flows out of loving the Creator. God's [hatred and wrath toward] the wicked is grounded in holiness and righteousness"

All this is to say that God is the basis for our love for one another. He is the source of our love and He provided the greatest example of sacrificial love in sending His Son to the cross that we might live through Him. If God was willing to love us in this way, then shouldn't we sacrificially love each other as well? If He is present in our lives through the Spirit, shouldn't we express the same love toward others that He has for the Church? Just as God's love was manifest for the Church at the cross, we are to manifest that love toward one another as Christ indwells each of us. And as we visibly express love to one another we make Christ's love present within the Church.

The assurance of love (v. 13-21)

Just as the measure of love is seen the basis of love, it is also seen in the assurance of love to guard against doubting God's presence in our lives. There is an assurance that comes from manifesting Christ's love within the Body of Christ. When we see the work of the Spirit transforming us to love others we can be assured that God's love abides in us. In addition, John writes that we can also have assurance in God's love for us.

Parts of the text here parallel verses in Chapter 3 where we spoke of the confidence of love. But there is not only a confidence that comes from loving others, but there is an assurance of our standing in Christ. We do not need to fear standing before Christ on the Day of Judgment. The evidence and testimony of love for others assures us that we are one with Christ. And if we are in Christ we have no fear of condemnation, nor should we fear punishment or God's wrath. Rather, we can look forward to Christ's returning and being present with Him in glory on that day.

The last few verses again parallel those in Chapter 3, but go further. John asks, how can we say we love God if we do not love our brother? The truth is that our actions reflect what we believe and want. If there is no love in our heart for God and others, than it will not produce the kind of self-sacrificing love that only comes from the transforming power of the Gospel. It is not possible to love God and not love our brothers in Christ. If we think this is not true than scripture says that we are liars. The crux of the issue here is how we can not love the Body of Christ which we can see but we can love God who we can not see. Again, there is no neutral ground. This is the bottom line of the final verse, "Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

Lessons and Application

Reflecting back on both these passages a common theme emerges. This theme is that a love for God will necessarily result in a love for the Body of Christ. Hebrews 10 calls us to both draw near to God and to draw near to one another. There is to be a growing closeness in both our relationship with God and our relationships within the body. Similarly, the passage from 1 John 3 and 4 makes the same connection between our love for God, who is the source and basis for love, and our love for one another, which assures us of Christ's presence within us.

So what lessons can we draw from these texts? First, those who desire to draw near to God will desire to draw near to one another. The same heart changes that direct our desires and passions toward God will also direct our desires and passions for one another. We must

fight worldly pressures and selfish thinking that keeps us developing relationships of encouragement, accountability, prayer, and care. Next, we must be faithful to meeting together so that we may encourage, love, and serve. Ministry will not happen in a vacuum. It takes a gathered Church to minister together. We must value our time together and be faithful to be together whenever the Church gathers. Another lesson is that love for our brothers and sisters evidences the new life within us. There is a joy and confidence that comes when the Christ's love flows through us assuring us of His presence within us. Next, a lack of love for our brothers calls our faith into question. This is a hard lesson, but one that comes directly out of scripture. If we do not have a desire to be with the gathered church we have to question the character of our faith. Do we feel the drawn to be here when we serve the Lord's table? Do we make a point of attending baptism services or do we view them as optional?

A fifth lesson is that love that is in word only, is not love. Words do not often require us to make a sacrifice. What would happen if our love for others within the Church required us to give something up? We need to be a church that loves in action and is willing to make sacrifices for each other. Next, we must remember that our love for one another is only possible because of the work of Christ in us. We are freed to love one another because of Christ's love shown to us. And we manifest the love of Christ in our midst when we show love one to another. The next lesson is that those who love God will also love one another. God is love and we must understand that He is the measure and standard of love. God is the source of our love and He modeled sacrificial love for us in sending Jesus to the cross that we might love others through Him. Lastly, our love for the Church is measured by what it takes to keep us from her. What keeps our Sunday evening attendance at a fraction of our AM service? What keeps many from regularly attending flock? What keeps us from meeting with a younger man or woman to encourage and pray for them? Whatever is keeping us is probably something that we treasure more than our brothers and sisters in the Church.

Let's move from lessons to applications. Here are a few applications that we can make. First, do I feel my heart drawn to fellowship with and love others here at Clearcreek Chapel? As we grow and mature in faith, we should feel a corresponding love for the Body of Christ. Second, do I feel my heart drawn to be with the Chapel family whenever it is meeting? If not, we should examine our hearts and see what is drawing us more? Third, is a lack of genuine love for others causing me to question my faith? Maybe, this is a time to grow in love for God and others. Or maybe, a lack of love for the Body of Christ is pointing to a struggle with sin in your life. Fourth, what keeps me from being with the Church when it meets? Think about this question the next time you feel like not coming to Church or attending flock. To put it boldly, what is it that I love more than being with my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Fifth, what sacrifices am I willing to make to show love to others? It may be financial, but it may also be a sacrifice of time to pray; or a sacrifice of time to relax in order to be an encouragement to another. It may take a temporary sacrifice in priorities to engage in a ministry in the Church. Sixth, what is my response to the weak, elderly, needy, and hurting? We have no lack of opportunity to minister here at Clearcreek. How many of our elderly would enjoy visits from some of us? How many folks have been stuck at home with an illness or pregnancy and would be encouraged by a card or phone call? How many would love for someone to invite them over and develop a deeper friendship? Seventh and last, do I long to

see Clearcreek Chapel grow in love and maturity for the sake of God's glory? If we believe this to be true and desire to see God glorified in our midst, that it will overflow in action. Actions that seek the benefit of others even when it comes at some price to ourselves.

This will sound strange, but John MacArthur once asked his congregation this question. What is your love life like? He was not referring to married couples in the church, he was speaking to everyone about their love for the Body of Christ. So what's Clearcreek's love life like? Has this message and this series encouraged us to be more committed to fellowship and community? What are some practical ways we can grow closer together and truly be a kingdom community? May God guide us and give us wisdom to be a stronger community for His sake as we grow in grace together.