

## Living it out (Application):

**Last week's question:** Have you seen the Kingdom at work? In your networks?

What is God saying to you today through 1 John 3: 16-18?

## Coming Up at St Mark's

Thank you so much for all the **responses** about groups/gifts/formation groups. It's been wonderful to hear back from so many. As a result, it will take a while to work through the responses, so please be patient. Many thanks!

If you would be interested in joining/helping or leading on the next **Alpha Course** in the spring, please see Andy Patrick.

If you would like to join our team of **"Snow Angels"** available for clearing snow from the paths of vulnerable people, please see Terry Wilcox, or Christine Hornby.



prayer

*Please pray for...*

Pray for **Monique Teo**, moving to India after many months to work with children involved in temple prostitution. Please pray for protection for Monique, and strength for the task.

Continue to pray for **Andrea, Val, Di** and others in need of healing and strength at the moment.

Pray for the **development of God's plans** for St Mark's, and those pulling them together.

Pray for **newcomers at St Mark's**, and for a warm welcome for those who are new.

### Mission Partner Prayer Focus:

Paul and Ruth Turner in Peru ask us to pray specifically for long-term missionaries in the country, who may be affected by a new law restricting the availability of visas to smaller churches. Pray that the law doesn't interfere with the mission of the Kingdom.

Please do take the opportunity for more prayer requests/feedback - it's a wonderful way of sharing.

*Thank you for your prayers for this church community!*

# INDIVIDUAL STUDY NOTES

Week beginning: 20th January 2013

## Worship/reflection:

Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4VZWOx1c8U>. N.B. It is a strong scene. How do you respond to it?

Read 1 Corinthians 13 reflectively, changing the word "Love", for the word "God". Give thanks to Him for His love for you.

## The Way of Jesus: The two greatest commands.

The kingdom of God was the priority of Jesus' life. But you can't talk about the kingdom without immediately talking about the two greatest commands-to love God and to love others. **If someone asks, "What does the kingdom look like?" The answer will always be: Love.** Love is the summary of the law -everything begins and ends in love. Jesus said that we would not be known by our mission, gifts, power, or authority - but by our love.

But how do we love God? And how do we become loving people? What's distinctive about Christian love? A lot of people celebrate love in our culture, but **to love like Jesus is utterly distinctive.** And how do we love those that we find difficult to love?

I imagine many of you know the story of Les Miserables or have seen it recently. In it, Jean Valjean is transformed by the power of unconditional love. Having been released from hard labour after 19 years, he finds himself hungry and wretched, being welcomed into a kindly bishop's home. But rather than show gratitude for the hospitality, Valjean is so dehumanised by his experience as a prisoner that he just grabs the bishop's silver and makes a run for it. He is caught by police and brought back to the Bishop's house. A lifetime of imprisonment beckons, but the Bishop does something remarkable. He asks, "My friend, you forgot the candlesticks. Why?" He tells the police that he had given the silver to Jean Valjean and asks them to release him. **The grace he receives breaks Jean's heart and he is transformed.** It is a sign of God's redemptive love in the world. Love like this is the only power that can change anyone's heart. It's the last word. Martin Luther King said, **"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality."** Love God, love others.

In its simplest terms, what is it to love God? Just before he went to the cross, Jesus told his disciples what it is to love God: **"Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.** The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show

myself to them...**Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.** ... Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”

**Love and obedience are impossible to disentangle.** While loving God is about emotion and the attention of your heart, and worship is an expression of our love, love of God is ultimately seen in obedience.

You see poor people and you have money. What is it to love God?

You see someone standing on the edge of the crowd alone. What is it to love God?

Society tells you to be one way, but you know that you are called to live differently. What is it to love God?

Only you can respond to these questions—because there is no formula for love. In fact, that's the point. Often we'd be more comfortable with a “To Do” list of love. But that kind of legalism would destroy the essence of what it is about. Imagine if I came home with a bunch of flowers and gave them to Ruth and said to her, “I am giving these to you because it's on my list of things to do to love you.” I think she would throw them back in my face.

**God never wants us to obey him as slaves.** He wants us to obey him as loving partners, because that is our greatest good. Psalm 40 tells us that he is not impressed by our behaviour, but he wants his law, our obedience to be written **on our hearts**. “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come – it is written about me in the scroll. **I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.**’ The law might tell us not to lie, **but behind the law God wants us to have hearts that are true.** The law will tell us not to covet, but behind that **God wants us to have hearts that are happy with what we have and generous.**

Neither, too, can loving God and loving others be disentangled. Sometimes in some ways it's harder to love people within the church than outside it. Have you ever come across these kind of situations: people being offended by someone criticising something they've done in church and then not sticking around? People in a group disagreeing over a piece of scripture and not being able to process the difference? People not talking for a long time because an email was sent that was too blunt in the way that it sounded? I have known worship groups that have split simply because people couldn't agree on the kind of songs and how to sing them.

Yet Jesus' new commandment to us - the fulfilment of the law - **was that we love one another.** John tells us in his first letter that “No one has ever seen God but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” The early Christians were known for the radical nature of their love. Famously, when a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the third century, Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves. Meanwhile, pagans were throwing infected members of their own families into the streets even before they died, in order to protect themselves from the disease.

Love can be cheap currency in the world. It can mean, “You complete me. You fulfil me. I like you. I agree with you. We click.” Christian love takes you to the edge – it means you love your

enemies, you bear with people so different from you, you refuse to bear grudges, you are patient with difference, you put others first. This is because the kind of love God calls us to is the love Jesus showed. He loves people, not because they are attractive, or because they click with him, or because they agree with him, or because or because they fulfil him. Jesus' love has nothing to do with any merit. **It is a choice to put someone else first at cost to himself.** If you want to know what love means, reflect on Jesus washing the feet of Judas.

It is hard to love each other. Part of the reason is **because we are on a journey** and the **church is God's way of putting us together with people that we might not normally spend time with in order to teach us to love** those who are very different from ourselves. Another reason is because church can also be a place of spiritual warfare. **The ultimate reason is because the kind of love that Jesus calls us to exercise is the most beautiful, but the most costly kind of love of all. To give yourself away, without expecting anything back.**

If we are going to love like this, we need to be changed, so that when we love God, and love our unlovely neighbours, it is less and less about what we are **doing**, and more and more about **who we are becoming**. Loving people, with loving hearts, seeing others as Jesus sees them. You may have people you find irritating, people you avoid, even people you hold grudges against. But you know that the two greatest commands will define your life. Do you not want, in your heart of hearts, to become a more loving person? There is only one place in the universe where this deep change occurs. There is only one way God really changes us. **It's when we are melted by the realization of how much he loves us. As we are. Whether we love him or not.** This is how we know what true love is: that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us – when we were his enemies.

The film “Thirteen” offers a parable of this self-sacrificial love. A thirteen year old girl lives with her mother. Throughout the film the daughter's behaviour becomes increasingly rebellious and in addition she is aggressive and distant. Yet underneath she is in pain, and expresses this through self-harming. The final scene brings things to a head – the girl, rejected by her friends and utterly alone, rails at the mother, pushing her away, cursing her again and again, revealing the scars on her arms. The mother tries to embrace her, but the daughter resists. Yet the mother refuses to let go, telling her, despite all her hatred and rejection, **“You are my heart.”** Then, rolling back her daughter's sleeves, the mother **kisses her daughter's self-inflicted scars**. It is at this point that the daughter's healing begins. She becomes open to love.

***It is at the point when you know that your Saviour has washed your feet, died for you, and effectively kisses your self-inflicted wounds with His love, that the heart to obey your God in love and love your enemies begins to blossom.*** Lord, make us people, loved by you, who would love like you. Amen.

## Study

Psalm 27: 4-14. How can we better express our love for God when we worship together?

1 John 4: 9-10. How can you let God's love get into your heart?

Matthew 22: 37-38. In what way is love found in the law? How do the OT prophets express love?

Luke 14: 25-33. Why does love for God require sacrifice?

1 John 5: 31-33. Is obeying Him meant to be hard? Why? Why not?

Luke 6: 27-36: Why is this the jewel of the Kingdom?