

Greater love has no-one than this

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Date: 11 November 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Today is Remembrance Sunday, and it is right and fitting that we remember those who have died, those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the defense of king and country, and secured for us the freedoms we enjoy and often take for granted.

Today is not the day to debate the rights and wrongs of the many wars we have as a nation fought in and continue to fight in.

Such a debate is necessary, but that is for another day. Today is a day to remember. As our clocks ticked midnight last night, Australians met at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne to remember, as we do, those who fought and died in the Great War and in the many wars that followed, in the 20th and into the 21st century.

The Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne is perhaps the most striking landmark in that city, and those who gathered there some hours ago may have entered into the sanctuary, and there they will have seen sunk into the center of the sanctuary floor the Stone of Remembrance, on which are engraved five words.

Each year, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, a ray of natural sunlight passes through an aperture in the ceiling of the sanctuary and falls onto the Stone of Remembrance over the second of these five words engraved in that stone.

[1 : 58] And the word upon which the ray of light rests is the word love. What might the other words be? Well, the five words on that Stone of Remembrance are taken from the Gospel of John, chapter 15, and verse 13.

Greater love hath no man. Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Of course, these words are poignantly appropriate and serve as a reminder of how in God's common grace, men and women are capable of truly humbling acts of courage and heroism. And it is to these words of Jesus addressed to his disciples in the upper room in the very shadow of Calvary that I want us to turn this morning.

Today is a singularly appropriate day to consider these words as we celebrate Remembrance Sunday, and particularly as we look forward to another Remembrance Sunday that we will celebrate in seven days when we gather at the Lord's table in remembrance of his greater love.

[3 : 21] Well, what can we say of these words of Jesus? Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

What do these words mean? What did Jesus have in mind when he first declared them? Well, we can answer these questions by posing and answering three further questions.

These are the questions that will occupy our attention this morning. The first question is this, how does this greater love of Jesus find expression? How does this greater love that he speaks of, how does it find expression?

But the second question we want to pose and consider is this, to whom is this greater love shown? To whom is this greater love shown? And then thirdly, how are those so loved to live?

All of these questions are answered in the passage before us this morning in John's Gospel and chapter 15. The first question then is this, how does this greater love of Jesus find expression?

[4 : 32] Well, Jesus gives us the answer there in verse 13. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

As Jesus pronounced these words, it's very important to be conscious and aware that his own death was imminent.

The shadow of the cross hangs darkly over Jesus as he has gathered his disciples and is speaking to them almost for the last time.

Here Jesus speaks of his own death. But what can we learn from these words concerning the death of Jesus? We know that there is so much that we can consider and explore surrounding the death of Jesus.

But what about these words? What do these words teach us concerning his death? The language that is used reveals truths concerning his death.

[5 : 33] And there are two in particular that I want you to notice. What do we learn concerning Jesus' death in these his own words? Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

I think the first thing that we can notice that is so very much to the fore in these words of Jesus is that his death was a voluntary death.

Jesus lays down his life. Now, while not seeking to detract in any way from the courage of our own fallen men and women in the various conflicts in which we have been involved in as a nation, is it not the case that for so many of them death was an unwelcome intruder?

Their lives were cruelly snatched from them, and they fought till their final breath to resist death as it enveloped them. But not so Jesus.

Not so Jesus. He, in his own words, lays down his life. There is this clear, voluntary, conscious laying down of his life.

[6 : 49] Jesus was no powerless victim. Jesus was no hostage of circumstances. Not even a tragic hero. Jesus laid down his own life.

When the time was fully come, he walked purposefully into the very arms of death and embraced death.

He embraced the wages of sin. Why so? Why is this the case? It's very clear. The language is clear. He laid down his life. But why? Well, he did so because for that he had come.

Jesus came to die. His was a very peculiar mission. He came to die. It is said of General George Patton, the American general who directed U.S. forces in North Africa in World War II, that he addressed his soldiers with words to this effect.

You are not here to die for your country, but to kill for your country. Very brutal, but very true when we think of what a soldier has been called to do.

[8 : 03] But not so, Jesus. Not so, Jesus. He came to die. And in the words of Paul, as he addresses the Christians in Philippi, Jesus was obedient.

Obedient. Obedient to death. Even death on a cross. So, this is the first thing that stands out in these words concerning the death that he died.

His death was a voluntary death. This greater love of Jesus finds expression in his voluntary laying down of his own life.

But I want to notice a second thing that we can say that we learn concerning the death of Jesus in the words that Jesus uses on this occasion. We can say this, that his death was a vicarious death. Not only a voluntary death, but a vicarious death. Now, what does that mean? Well, a vicar, that word is familiar to us. A vicar is someone who stands in the place of another or who represents another.

[9 : 07] Christ's death was vicarious in the sense that he died in the place of others. Notice what he says. Greater love has no man than this than that he laid down his life for his friends.

The language we sometimes use when we speak of this truth concerning the death of Jesus is the language of substitution. Jesus died as our substitute.

He died the death that we deserve to die. He died in our place and in our stead. But as we read this verse, Greater love has no one than this than that he laid down his life for his friends.

Can we, on the basis of this verse, legitimately come to the conclusion that Jesus here is speaking of dying as a substitute of his death, as a vicarious death?

Could it not be argued that the language used simply speaks of Jesus dying on our behalf in some sense, but not necessarily in our place? And there is a difference in these two expressions.

[10 : 18] Well, it would be fair to recognize that on the basis of this verse alone, we could not construct the historic and orthodox doctrine of substitutionary or vicarious atonement.

But we don't, of course, have to build on such a limited foundation. The Bible story, the Bible story of redemption is shot through with the language and the necessity of substitution.

From the Lamb provided by God to die in the place of Isaac that we read of a few moments ago, to the sacrifices ordained by God in the Mosaic administration that were offered in the place of the

sinner, to the person of Jesus identified by John the Baptist as the Lamb of God.

And then we have the language of the letters in the New Testament. Perhaps one of the most explicit and unequivocal descriptions of the death of Jesus as vicarious or substitutionary is found in Peter's first letter and in chapter 3 and in verse 18.

And there we read, For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, the righteous in the place of the unrighteous, the righteous one, Jesus Christ taking the place, our place, those of us who are and we all are unrighteous.

[11 : 47] With what end? To bring you to God. But returning to the language of Jesus in our text here in John chapter 15 and verse 13, the word that is used here that is translated, for greater love has no one than this, that he laid down his life for his friends, this preposition for that of course can mean different things, can have different emphases, but the word used on this occasion can certainly carry the meaning of in the place of.

Certainly it is used with that meaning by Paul when he writes to the Christians in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 21 we read, God made him, that is Jesus, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. But even if we take a step back, we can also affirm that the death of Jesus is a monstrous thing if it is not as a substitute.

It is only as a substitute that his death makes any sense at all. You see that Jesus died is clear beyond dispute, that death is the wages of sin, is indisputable in the light of the Scriptures, that Jesus was without sin is the clear testimony of the Bible.

How then could he die? How then could he die? Only if he died in the place of others. Only if he died in the place of sinners, bearing the punishment for sin that we deserve.

[13 : 32] However, Jesus died for his friends. His death was a vicarious death. It was a voluntary death. He laid down his life, but it was also, as the language he himself uses on this occasion points to, certainly hints at, it was a vicarious death in the place of others.

Now, this truth that Jesus dies for others takes us on to our next question. The second question we'd highlighted at the beginning, which is this, to whom is this greater love shown?

How does this greater love find expression? Well, it finds expression in Jesus handing himself over to death, in laying down his life. But to whom is this greater love shown?

Well, again, Jesus gives us the answer to that question. It is shown for his friends. Greater love has no one than this, that he laid down his life for his friends.

Now, who are these friends for whom Jesus laid down his life? It's clear that Jesus considers those to whom he is speaking on this occasion as his friends.

[14 : 45] That is, his disciples. He was gathered with his disciples. In the very shadow of Calvary, he was there with his disciples, his friends. They are his friends. They are the ones he's speaking to.

They are the ones he clearly considers and designates as his friends. It is for them, for his disciples, that he will lay down his life. As he speaks these words, and as he in his own mind, even if the disciples are unclear on the significance of them, in his own mind, the cross is before him, and he has in his mind this laying down of his life that he has in many ways already begun to do.

And who is it for? Well, it's for them, for his disciples, to whom he is speaking. But we also here need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture to establish more precisely who are the friends for whom Jesus laid down his life.

Yes, certainly his disciples, but how can we consider this matter more broadly? Well, I think we can say three things in answer to this question, to whom is this greater love shown?

Or to put the question another way, who are the friends for whom Jesus lays down his life? And the first thing we can say is this, they are those chosen by Jesus to be his friends.

[16 : 07] Notice what Jesus goes on to say in this same passage in verse 16, speaking to these same disciples, You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.

And he goes on. This greater love is shown to those chosen by Jesus to be his friends. And on what grounds did he choose his friends?

Well, if we think of the disciples, let's begin with the disciples to whom he is speaking. Were they chosen because they stood out from the crowd? Were they chosen because they had the apostolic X factor?

Were they chosen because they ticked all the boxes that others failed to tick? Is that why they were chosen as his disciples, as his friends? Was that the basis on which he chose them?

No. They were chosen, as is true of all of Jesus' friends. They were chosen long before they could tick any boxes or show any signs of promise as friend material.

[17 : 13] Listen to what Paul says as he writes to the Christians in Ephesus in the first chapter of that epistle, reading from verse 3.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves.

To whom is this greater love shown? Who are the friends of Jesus? Well, first of all, we can say they are those chosen by Jesus to be his friends. But we can say, secondly, this, that they are those transformed by Jesus into his friends.

One objection, if objection is the right word, or perhaps one seeming difficulty in this expression of Jesus, greater love is no one than this, that he laid down his life for his friends.

[18 : 24] One seeming difficulty is that it doesn't actually describe the greatest love. Why do I say that? Well, you might argue, is not laying down your life for your enemies a greater love than laying down your life for your friends, as Jesus expresses himself here.

Well, this difficulty, or problem, if indeed it is a problem, is overcome when we realize that the friends for whom Jesus lays down his life are elsewhere described as his enemies.

Listen again to Paul as he writes to the church in Rome. And in chapter 5, and in verse 10, we read, For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, through the laying down of his life, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life?

You see, the wonderful truth is that in laying down his life, Jesus makes it possible, not only potentially, but actually, for enemies to become friends.

And so we can say, legitimately, that Jesus laid down his life for his enemies, he laid down his life for his friends, and indeed, those who he laid down his life for are both enemies and friends.

[19 : 50] They become friends. They are transformed into friends by the laying down of his life on their behalf. Jesus laid down his life for those he had chosen to be his friends.

And in so laying down his life, he transports us from the enemy camp into the intimate circle of his friends. To whom is this greater love is shown.

Who are the friends for whom Jesus lays down his life? Well, they are those chosen by Jesus to be his friends. They are those transformed into his friends by Jesus.

But they are also, thirdly, those who show themselves to be friends by their obedience. They are those who show themselves to be his friends by their obedience.

And this third description of those to whom this greater love is shown introduces us to our third question. Remember, we've considered two big questions thus far.

[20 : 57] We've asked the question, how does this greater love find expression? We've asked the question and sought to answer the question, to whom is this greater love shown?

And in answering that second question, we've noticed that it is to those who show themselves to be friends by their obedience. And that leads us into this last question. How are those so loved to live? How are the friends of Jesus to live? Well, what does Jesus say? There in verse 13, greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life but his friends.

And then what does he say? You are my friends if you do what I command. You are my friends if you do what I command. Now, in the light of what we have already discovered, it's inconceivable that Jesus is here laying down conditions for enjoying his friendship.

Jesus is not saying, if you obey me, then you can become my friends. Jesus is not saying that he'll look down from heaven and see, well, who are the obedient ones?

[22 : 04] Ah, this one's obedient. He can be my friend. Oh, this one doesn't behave very well. He's not going to be my friend. That is not what Jesus is saying. What he is saying is this, you will demonstrate that you are my friends by obeying me.

He's speaking to his friends. He's speaking to his disciples and he's saying, the manner in which you will demonstrate to one another and to the world that you are my friends is by your obedience. This obedience required of his disciples and it is required of his disciples but this obedience required of his disciples is not what makes them friends. It is what characterizes them as friends. And it could be no other way. Those who are the objects of this greater love of Jesus, those who appreciate that Jesus laid down his life in their place, those who have discovered that they have been granted the status of friends of Jesus must testify to their appreciation and experience of the love of Jesus by their obedience to Jesus.

Obedience is at the heart of what Jesus is teaching his disciples in the upper room. Obedience, as we've just noticed, is the evidence of our friendship with Jesus.

[23 : 37] It performs that great function of giving that evidence, of demonstrating that we are friends of Jesus. But also, if we just look at the verses that surround our verse, we notice this and discover that obedience is the manner in which we remain in his love.

In verse 10, if you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. So, obedience is the evidence of our friendship with Jesus.

Obedience is the manner in which we remain in his love, but obedience also is the path that leads to fullness of joy. Notice what Jesus goes on to say in verse 11, I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

You see, the central role that obedience plays in the life of the believer our primary concern this morning is that it serves as evidence that we are friends with Jesus.

But notice also these other functions that it performs, the manner in which we remain in his love and the path that leads to fullness of joy. Now, this is true and applies to our obedience to all the commands of Jesus.

[24 : 54] But we would be doing the passage and Jesus himself an injustice if we did not notice the particular command that Jesus places in the foreground. And what is that?

Well, it is there in verse 12. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you. We're asking the question, how do those so loved demonstrate that they are friends of Jesus?

Jesus. And Jesus tells us, you're my friends if you do what I command. Jesus says, the manner in which you'll demonstrate the love that you enjoy will be by obeying me.

But he doesn't just say that. He has already introduced that by identifying the principal command that he is concerned with. My command is this, love each other as I have loved you.

Love is the principal identifying mark of the friends of Jesus. We are those who love one another. And the extent or the quality of the love required is staggering.

[26 : 04] As I have loved you. As I have loved you. It is, in other words, a laying down your life kind of love that is required.

Now maybe a laying down your life kind of love does not serve as a catchy lyric for a song on love. But laying down your life and a laying down your life kind of love is the only kind of love that will do. This is the love that we are commanded to show. that we would love one another.

Jesus is speaking to His friends. Love those who form part of this family of love. Those who have been brought in to friendship with me. Love one another.

There is so much that we could say of that, but I simply want to pose a question in response to that demand. Might this love for one another within the intimate circle of the friends of Jesus?

[27 : 13] Might that not appear or might there not be a danger that that could be quite an exclusive kind of love? What of those who know nothing as yet of the love of Jesus? Where do they fit in to the picture?

Well, the love we show one another will be the means not only of identifying ourselves as friends of Jesus, but of drawing others to the love of Jesus.

Listen to what Jesus went on to further say when He gave His disciples this same command just a little previously. We only need to turn to chapter 13 of John's Gospel and in verse 34, a new command I give you, love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Well, that's familiar. It's in our text. But what does then Jesus go on to say? By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

So this is not an exclusive love that we keep as a family secret. No, by this, all men will look on and discover and establish who we are, that we are disciples of Jesus.

[28 : 27] So this is the principle command that we are to obey, that we might demonstrate that we are friends of Jesus. But of course, we are to obey all the commands of Jesus as evidence that we are His friends.

But today, on a day of remembrance, and as we look forward to another day of remembrance in one week's time, let's consider one other command Jesus gave His disciples in this same upper room on this same occasion.

A command that's not found in this gospel, but in the other gospels. And what command am I referring to? It is the command, this do in remembrance of me.

As in that same upper room, Jesus gathered His disciples to celebrate the Passover meal. And as He gathered them, He gave them this command, this do in remembrance of me.

And so this morning, I would ask you the question, did Jesus lay down His life for you? Did He die in your place instead? Has He, born of sheer and immeasurable grace, chosen you and made you His friend?

[29 : 44] Then show yourself to be His friend. You are my friends if you do what I command. And in that same upper room, one of the commands that He left His disciples was this, do this in remembrance of me.

Well, the shrine of remembrance in Melbourne is so designed that once a year, a ray of sunlight rests on the word love.

May our lives be so lived that we may not once a year, but moment by moment shine a light that draws men to see and discover that greater love of the Savior who laid down His life for His friends. Let us pray. Amen.