

LOVE

Lesson Number Nine

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13 March 1983

John 13:34 & 35 says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And I John 3:11 says, "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another."

And I John 5:2 says, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments."

And, in the King James version, Romans 12:10 says, "be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another;" Turn with me now to I Corinthians 13:12 on Page 1000 in your Bibles.

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I Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in Part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."

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Now we see in a mirror dimly....At the time that these words were written by the Apostle Paul, they didn't have fine clear mirrors like we do today. Their mirrors were simply polished metal that gave back a reflection that was dim and rather fuzzy. You could probably make-out enough of an image to tell whether or not you had a big splotch of dirt on your face but you probably couldn't do much better than that. You certainly couldn't see well enough to apply mascara or false eyelashes.

Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. What a marvelous thing to look forward to: we are going to someday meet our Lord face-to-face and all our days of incompleteness and misunderstanding will be over and everything will be crystal clear. At the turn of the century, Breck and Tullar wrote:

Face to face with Christ my Savior,  
Face to Face - what will it be -  
When with rapture I behold Him,  
Jesus Christ who died for me?

and another has Penned:

It will be worth it all  
When we see Jesus.  
Life's trials will seem so small  
When we see Christ.  
One glimpse of his dear face  
All sorrows will erase.  
So bravely run the race  
Til we see Christ.

Now I know in Part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. To see in a mirror dimly is not as good as to see face to face. To know in Part is not as good as to know fully. But THANK GOD that we DO see in the mirror dimly and that we DO know in Part. There are millions upon millions who are totally blind and

cannot see at all. There are millions upon millions who have no knowledge at all and never will. They will never see God. They are on their way to hell.

Today....Today, 250,000 People will die. Tomorrow, 250,000 People will die. Every day, 250,000 People die. That's almost two million Per week; one hundred million each year! Most of them go straight to Hell! Think about that as you go about your job this week or as you do whatever else is on your schedule. This week, two million People are going to die and go into a Godless eternity, destined for the Lake of Fire where there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth without any hope of escape or Parole forever and ever...and ever...and ever!

In the early hours before dawn on December 7, 1946, a raging fire engulfed the Winecoff Hotel on Atlanta's Peachtree Street. Before the last flames had been brought under control, scores of men, women, and children had died. Most were not actually burned to death. And, unlike many modern hotel fires, they did not die by suffocating in their sleep without ever waking up...No...in Atlanta, they died as they searched desperately for escape. Many jumped in Panic from high windows to Perish on the Pavement below. Others were overcome by smoke and heat as they searched for one safe exit after another. But for all of them it was too late. They simply woke up too late to escape the horror of that fifteen story holocaust of flames, and they died searching for a way out.

In WORLD AFLAME, Billy Graham says that the world is on fire and men are searching for a way out but can't find it and so Perish in the flames. Man has thrown God out of his life. But, in doing so, he threw himself out too. Now he can't find his way out, he can't find himself, and he can't find any reason to continue. Without the love of God in his heart, man is totally blind. You and I can't see clearly because we are bound to our sinful flesh which gets in the way. But we CAN see, even if only dimly. Those around us are totally blind and stumbling into the Pit. What kind of monsters would sit and watch others stepping off a Precipice without shouting out a warning. And yet, is that not exactly what we do when we avoid mentioning our Lord for fear of offending someone or of being embarrassed. 250,000 will die today. In the day of Judgement, some of them will look at me and accusingly complain, "Why didn't you warn me?" There will be many who won't be able to because I did warn them. But there will be some whom I failed to warn. I am ashamed! The fact that I am a sinful human and that it is not possible for me to be Perfect in warning others any more than I can be Perfect in anything else does not make a difference. There will be those who look upon me in anger and accusation because I watched them step off the edge without saying a word. I am deeply ashamed. Thank Jesus that his blood is sufficient to cleanse even this dark spot.

There will be those at the Judgement who will look at you too. Those who will complain that you watched them step off into damnation without saying a word. 250,000 will die today. 2 million will die this week. 100 million will die this year. What CAN we do? In love, we MUST do something. We CANNOT sit by and watch them go into Hell without doing something! We can't reach them all. What can we do?

We can't reach them all...But there IS one whom we can reach! At any moment and at every moment! We CAN PRAY! We don't have to reach every one ourselves. We can Pray to the Lord of the Harvest and ask him to send more workers...and to strengthen US to be better workers too. Leonard Ravenhill says:

Could a mariner sit idle if he heard the drowning cry?  
 Could a doctor sit in comfort  
 and just let his Patients die?  
 Could a fireman sit idle, let men burn and give no hand?  
 Can you sit at ease in Zion  
 with the world around you DAMNED?

Prayer is the sovereign remedy. Prayer is the acid test of devotion. From the day of Pentecost, there has been not one great spiritual awakening in any land which has not begun in a union of Prayer.

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This morning, we're going to look at small groups and what they are and how we should be making use of them. A "Small Group" is usually defined as being either a formal or an informal regular gathering of from four to fifteen people whose purpose is to apply the new commandment with each other. The "Growth Group I" here at our church fits that mold in some ways. But in others it is not quite the same thing. In any event, the modern concept envisions several groups rather than just one within a local church. And, ideally, every member of the local church would also be a member of at least one small group within it. Such small groups usually meet at least once a week and divide each meeting into five parts: worship, bible study, sharing, prayer, and accountability. The time spent on each segment varies from meeting to meeting according to need. That's what I mean when I say "small group". Galatians 6:10 says, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are the household of faith." We discussed that verse four weeks ago. The first of the ten commandments tells us we are to love God above all else. The second commandment tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves and Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that "our neighbor" includes all other human beings. Now, here in Galatians 6:10, we are told that among our neighbors, those who are brothers and sisters in Christ should come first.

Suppose we went for a trip to another city, say perhaps to New York. And suppose on Sunday we went to a large metropolitan church where we didn't know anybody at all. And suppose that as soon as we entered the narthex, we grabbed the first person we saw and gave them a big hug and kiss and exclaimed, "I love you!"...At the very least, we could expect everybody to look at us as if we were perhaps a little weird.

I was saved at Moody Church in Chicago. My wife and I were members there for several years before we moved here to Northbrook Covenant. George Sweeting, who is now the President of Moody Bible Institute, was the Pastor of Moody Church at that time and he was a spell-binding preacher. He had stories and illustrations that could keep you on the edge of your seat. A lot of what I have been presenting in

this series comes from his book, AND THE GREATEST OF THESE which, in turn, was developed from a series of sermons he delivered at Moody when we were there. He was a tremendous speaker and often all 4,000 seats at Moody Church were filled on Sunday Morning. I was active in the church. I taught Sunday School, sang in the choir, was church librarian, and served on the Board of Christian Education; for a brief period. I was even doing all four at once. As active as I was, did I know all of those 4,000 people who were in church on Sunday morning? Not hardly. I knew perhaps one hundred and fifty people by sight, maybe fifty by name well enough to greet them, perhaps twenty fairly well, and about ten that we spent any real significant time with. Informally and without realizing it, I was in a small group within the local church.

Here at Northbrook Covenant, we don't have quite that many people to try to keep track of. Our annual report says that we had 323 members at the end of 1982. But again I recognize maybe one hundred and fifty people by sight, perhaps seventy-five well enough to greet by name, and maybe thirty-five to forty fairly well. Even within the local church, even within a fairly small one, it is NOT possible to know everybody. To try is a mistake.

God never expected us to be fully and intimately involved with every other christian in the world at once. He knew that wasn't possible. That's why he designed the local church assembly; to allow us to gather together and worship him in groups of more manageable size. And, while the local church is a more effective size of group for functional worship than the body of Christ as a whole (at least while we remain in this life), it is also true that the small group was designed by God to be more effective for functionally loving one another than the local church as a whole. That's right! God designed small groups. They are not some latter day invention of man.

Jesus had many followers and hangers-on while he walked upon this earth. But there were only seventy disciples that he considered close enough to send out to teach in his name. And only the twelve were close enough to be with him always. And, even among these twelve, three had a special closeness. Jesus functioned in a small-group fashion himself.

Turn with me to Acts 2:42-47 on page 949 in the Bibles. These verses tell us about the kind of lifestyle that was found in the early church. Now, I'm not going to suggest that we should go back and try to live just like the people in the early church did; I don't think that's really appropriate for today and I don't think it's the Lord's will for us. A lot of things have changed since then. First and foremost is the fact that we have the Bible. The early church didn't; the New Testament hadn't been written yet. But there are still things about the way they lived together back then that we can take lessons from today.

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Acts 2:42-47, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common;

and they sold their Possessions and Goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, Praising God and having favor with all the People. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

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The very first thing that is obvious is the fact that these early christians spent a LOT of time together.

Three thousand were brand-new christians; babes in Christ. One hundred and twenty of them were former believers. All of them, former and new, were living out the new lifestyle together.

"They devoted themselves." Do you catch the intensity of that declaration? Remember: these were real People just like you and me. They still had jobs they had to go to; they still had to clean their houses and change the baby's diapers and do everything else that normal People have to do. But they WANTED to be together so they GOT together. They set their Priorities and they lived by them.

What kind of life did those first Christians live? When they were together, they devoted themselves to four things.

First, they gave themselves to "the apostles' teaching." That was everything the apostles had seen Jesus do and heard him say. Eventually they got it all written down; now we call it the New Testament. Our equivalent today of the "apostles' teaching" would be Bible Study.

Second, they devoted themselves to the fellowship. That was simply being together for the joy of being together. Why spend your time with non-christians who have nothing of real importance to contribute to your life, when you could be absorbing more and more of the life of Christ from other christians. This was not intended as a way to cut themselves off from the world in order to be exclusive. Their fellowship was the strong base from which they reached out to others. Come out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord. There was more Power for evangelism in their close-knit community than we find today. Our spirits are diluted by our excessive exposure to the world and its wiles. We are deceiving ourselves if we try to say that we just go among them in order to win them for Christ. First we must separate ourselves from the world and unto God. Only then will we be able to effectively go back into the world as Christ's ambassadors.

Third, they devoted themselves to breaking bread together. Some say this simply meant taking communion together. While I'm sure taking communion was included, I think this Passage refers more to taking regular meals together. Imagine it. Here is Thomas the apostle with a roomful of new believers in a home together. They are singing, praying, laughing together, sharing their trials, and listening to Thomas teach. Finally, one of them slaps his forehead.

"I don't believe it!" he exclaims. "The sun's gone down. I hadn't even noticed. The children must be starving."

Everybody looks shocked and frustrated. The lady of the house says, "Oh, Thomas, just keep talking. I'll throw something together for us somehow."



Another woman speaks up, "I kind of thought we might run late. I packed some bread and cheese for us just in case we did."

I'll bet that the meals just happened that way at first, and they added so much fun to the meetings that they began to become part of the planned activities for the meetings.

The fourth ingredient in their life together was "the Prayers". In the original Greek the phrase is TAIS PROSEUCHAIS. TAIS is the definite article, the word "the" in the phrase, "the Prayers". The same phrase also appears in the Greek of Acts 3:1. "The Prayer" was the stated time for worship in the temple, and all the believers went together. The temple leaders probably weren't Christians themselves for the most part. They were the ones who led the mobs against the apostles and their teachings. The Christians went to the temple probably simply because their savior had gone regularly. Luke 4:16 says of Jesus, "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day..." Jesus was accustomed to going to the synagogue on the sabbath. The Christians also probably saw that this habit of faithful "churchgoing" (so to speak) was a righteous habit, and by it they spurred each other toward good deeds.

Let's check OUR lifestyles. Have we eliminated a lot of clutter from our lives so that we can give ourselves to Bible study, to fellowship, to eating together, and to the regular activities of the church. Today, even in the midst of a rampant denial of God by most people, there are still many who are accepting Christianity as an explanation of life. But, that isn't enough. Christianity is not merely an "explanation" of life; it is a "way" of life. Lots of people who call themselves evangelical Christians live lives no different from those of the world.

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The small group is the way to put these activities together in a practical way that won't seem so formal and impersonal as the full Sunday morning service. These days, Jesus' analogy of us as his sheep is more appropriate than ever. Immorality surrounds us on all sides. Like a pack of wolves it howls and snaps around us. Unless the sheep bind together tighter than ever, more and more sheep on the fringes of the flock will get snatched. If we don't move in close together for mutual safety and support, we'll be ripped away and ripped apart. In a tightly bunched flock of sheep, the flock is a single mass. This is like the church as a whole. Within the flock, one sheep can see several others and perhaps even bleat across several yards to another sheep. This is like the local church assembly. But the sheep is only really close, shoulder to jowl, with only the few sheep that he is actually physically in contact with. They are the ones whose closeness and tight proximity hold him up and keep him from falling when his knees become weak with fear. They are the ones who hold him fast when he is tempted to wander off to some seemingly greener pastures where the wolf lies in wait. This is what the small group is all about.

While a small group usually meets about once a week, I want to stress that it is not just a meeting; it is a relationship. It's just like the physical family that way.

It's like the family in that your brother is still your brother even if you go to different schools. But at dinner time, you sit down and spend time together. The small group members are "family" all the time. It's just that they sit down and spend time together once a week or so. Anne Ortlund, whose husband is Pastor of the Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, California, recommends a small group size of from four to eight in her book, LOVE ME WITH TOUGH LOVE. She says that at least four are necessary to really use the time together richly and that, with more than eight, some tend to get lost and anonymous. She also suggests that there are two basic different types of small groups.

One type is designed for discipling. In this kind of small group, the emphasis is on learning and growing in Christ. Worship, sharing, prayer, and accountability are still parts of the small group's fellowship but the emphasis is on bible study. In such a group, there is usually one or two Christians who are spiritually mature and several Christians who are younger in the faith; babes in Christ if you will, or perhaps adolescents to carry the analogy a bit further. The process is simply for the older Christians to pass-on what they have learned to the younger ones. In such small groups, Anne Ortlund recommends that the groups should be all men or all women in order avoid having tinges of romance get in the way of the goal the group is striving for. She DOES say, however, that it is really good to mix married people and singles in such groups; their different insights into various issues help them to learn to better appreciate one another.

The other type of small group is the "supportive fellowship". In this kind of small group, more-or-less peers in Christ simply get together and say "You teach me what you know about Jesus and I'll teach you what I know. Where I'm strong and you're weak, I'll help you. Where you're strong and I'm weak, you help me. We can grow together."

Supportive fellowships can be just one sex, or they can be couples, or they can be couples and singles mixed together. Or they can also be parents and teenagers mixed together; either their own physical children or other children willing to adopt spiritual moms and dads for awhile.

A small group program should have some formal organization of at least a minimal nature in order for it to work. To really get the most out of such a program, small groups should form and exist for a specific period of time (Anne Ortlund recommends one year) and then break and reform into different groups in order to avoid isolation within the local church assembly as a whole. Some way also needs to be set up for finding small groups for those who are not comfortable about approaching others and asking outright, "Hey, how about us forming a small group for a year or so?". But, at the same time, informality should be maintained so that those who wish can do just that: go to one another and put together individualized small groups that meet their individual needs.

We already have some of the prototype networks here at Northbrook Covenant that a functional small groups ministry could really swing into gear around. Growth Group I is one



starting Point. The occasional family suppers together with one or two other families is another. The fluctuating group that hits Brown's Chicken for lunch together after church on Sundays is a third. Even such simple things as the way we divide up into teams at the family olympics nights could be used as starting Points.

But, regardless of what starting Points we begin from, regardless of how we choose our groups and the members in them, the goal must be to put together members of the local assembly in groups that are small enough to interact together in love on a meaningful and effective Practical basis. To say we "love" the entire body of Christ may be true in one fashion. To say that we love everybody at Northbrook Covenant Church may also be true in another fashion. But to truly and effectively carry out the new commandment to love one another, we have to really spend TIME working at it. That means we simply can't love everybody with the same intensity. If I have two hours available to spend practicing love this evening, and if I spend those two hours with Jack and Jeff and Jim, then who practices such love with Mike and Mark and Matt. I can't. My time is gone. Someone else has to or else Mike and Mark and Matt don't get properly loved in accordance with the new commandment. In a small group, we can take all our talk about love and really put it to work. It's a small enough unit that we can really devote enough time to each member to make the love real instead of just words.

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Let's Pray together for a few moments before we go on to discuss this morning's case study.

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