

The Greatest Evangelist

John 13

We have reached the end of our evangelism series and today we get to the subject that I think is probably most important for us when it comes to influencing our community with the gospel. So far the focus of this series has primarily been on personal evangelism and letting our light shine for Christ as individuals, and this is important, but there's something even more important in our context that I believe we need to excel in if we are going to effectively reach the people around us.

When I look at evangelism in the New Testament, I see a two-part pattern. The first part gets most of the attention and is all over in the book of Acts and it involves evangelism in unreached communities. Evangelism began in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles, and they began to bear witness about Jesus and his resurrection. Peter preached and thousands turned to Christ. In the following weeks and months, similar things happened as the disciples continued to preach and teach in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages of Judea and churches began to form.

In Acts 8 you read that when persecution broke out against the church, those believers were forced to flee and they went to Samaria and Galilee, preaching the good news in communities that had never heard. Once again, groups of believers began meeting and local churches were formed. This continued beyond Israel's borders when Paul converted to Christ and received his call to take the gospel to the Gentiles. The second half of Acts tells about Paul's missionary journeys into the regions of Galatia, Asia, and Macedonia, and in every city he went to and preached, people turned to Jesus and local churches were established.

So the gospel spread. In each new area the apostles preached to the unreached, many turned to Christ and local churches were formed. Then the apostles would move on to people that had never heard, and the pattern would continue. Similar kinds of pioneering missionary efforts have continued since then – that's why we keep sending missionaries to places where people have never heard.

So that's the first part of the pattern of evangelism, and it's all in the book of Acts. But now I want us to consider, what happened in those communities after they

had been reached with the gospel and after a local church was established? What did evangelism look like then? The church was already present, the gospel had already taken root, but there were still unbelievers that needed to be reached. What were those Christians supposed to do to reach the lost in their communities? (Because that's where we're coming from.) Were they supposed to keep doing what the apostles did? Focus on personal evangelism and preaching the gospel to unbelievers?

I think that's what many Christians assume, which is why we tend to put so much emphasis on personal evangelism. Our study guide spends five weeks on personal evangelism and only one week on what we're talking about this morning. Yet if you look at the pattern of evangelism in the NT in communities that already had a local church you will see that the emphasis is much different. To better reflect that pattern, a study guide should spend 1 week on personal evangelism and five weeks on what we're going to talk about today.

So the second part of this pattern in the New Testament has to do with evangelism in reached communities like ours where the local church has already been established. There are still unbelievers in our community – lots of them. What are we supposed to do to reach them? Should we put all our attention on personal evangelism and preaching the gospel to them, or is there something else? The New Testament shows a different focus. Personal evangelism is still part of it, as Peter writes: “we should always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have,” but the focus is primarily on something else. In the nine letters that Paul wrote to different churches, he doesn't tell them to go out and preach the gospel to the unbelievers. His focus for established churches was on something else.

It's something Jesus taught and modeled to his disciples; it's something that was done very well in the early church in Jerusalem; and it's something that's strongly emphasized in the letters to the churches. I really believe that if we are going to have an influence on the unbelievers in our community, we are going to have to focus on something more than personal evangelism. In fact, I think it is because we have neglected this that our effectiveness in reaching the lost has been hindered. Unbelievers aren't interested in what we have to say and may even be turned away by Christians because this gets overlooked.

So there's a lot of places I could go to preach about this, but I'm going to start with something Jesus taught his disciples in the Upper Room before his death. John records what happened and in John 13 we see a vitally important teaching for the ongoing effectiveness of Christians continuing to reach the lost in communities that have already been reached.

Read John 13:1-5.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

So this would have been surprising. According to the Reformation Study Bible, *"Footwashing was a common element of hospitality in a dusty country where people wore sandals. But the task was usually performed by the lowliest member of the household."* Here it was being performed by Jesus, the guest of honor. And the disciples took notice – in fact Peter was appalled that Jesus was washing his feet. It wasn't right for him to do such a lowly task for them. And yet Jesus did. He went around to each disciple and washed their feet. He was about to teach them a very important lesson...

Read John 13:12-15.

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

So Jesus takes it a step further – not only did he humble himself to serve his disciples, but he did it to be an example for them so that they would do the same to one another. I imagine that this too would have been surprising for them.

“Wash one another’s feet? Why should we do that?” Jesus continued to teach them... (skipping the parts about Judas Iscariot)

Read John 13:34-35.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

When Jesus washed their feet, it wasn’t just a household chore, it was a demonstration of love. John said in verse 1 *“he loved them to the end.”* He loved them by taking on the form of a servant and washing their feet. He was giving them an example so that they would do the same and love one another as he loved them. And then he told them this in verse 35 – *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

So Jesus showed his disciples in a very clear way what he wanted the world to think of them. He wanted them to think of them as people who loved one another – not just in the same way the world does – but that they loved one another by willingly lowering themselves before one another to serve one another. *“They will know you are my disciples by your love.”* Love was to be their reputation. Love was to be their defining characteristic. When they world looked upon them, they should see love.

By loving one another they would be a witness to the world of what God is like. The next morning, after Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, he demonstrated the greatest act of love the world has ever seen. He lowered himself to the lowest place, taking all our sin and guilt upon himself as he suffered and died on the cross. He washed us completely. God sent his Son to die on the cross to demonstrate his love to fallen humanity so that we could be saved. And that is why Jesus called his disciples to love one another. 1 John 4:10-12 says, *“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”* The world sees God’s love when they see us show love to one another. And when the world sees that kind of love, it has a major influence.

The disciples lived this out really well in the days of the early church in Jerusalem. Listen to this description and the effect it had on the unbelievers in their community.

Read Acts 2:44-47.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The church loved and served one another and it had a major effect on the unbelievers around them. The love they saw in the church drew them in and showed them what God was like. And their ears and hearts were open to the gospel. God used their love for one another to continue to evangelize that community.

The love of God's people is a witness to the world. And when it comes to our context where there's already Christians and already churches, the most effective way we influence the unbelievers in our communities will likely not be by preaching the gospel to them, it will be by loving one another – loving one another in our own church family and by the love and unity between churches. Love becomes the greatest evangelist.

And Christians don't always do a great job at that. In fact we struggle a lot. It's easy for us to give in to our sinful tendencies and get angry with one another, slander, gossip, argue, neglect, and even divide. We tend to place more importance on nonessential beliefs and practices than on love. We tend to push to get our own way instead of humbling ourselves and serving others. There is great division and separation between churches. And sometimes it is necessary, but far less often than what is being practiced.

So when the unbelieving world looks upon Christians they unfortunately see a lot of arguing, fighting, and division instead of love and unity. And for a lot of unbelievers, that turns them off to the gospel. Why would they want to become part of that? We may be good at preaching the gospel, but if we fail at love, it

doesn't make any difference. Paul writes about the emptiness of Christianity without love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3: *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

Loving one another in the Christian community is vitally important when it comes to evangelism in reached communities and that's the emphasis you see throughout the writings to the churches. In all the NT letters, the apostles place a high emphasis on love. It's all over in Paul's letters and it's hard for me to narrow it down to a few examples, but I want to just give you a taste.

In 1 Cor. 13, which I read from earlier, Paul says, *"I will show you a still more excellent way... Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

In Ephesians 4 he writes: *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

In Philippians 2 he says: *"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."*

In Colossians 3 he says: *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must*

forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

The call for believers to love one another is all over in the letters to the churches – not the call to go out and preach the gospel. Love is the greatest evangelist. That tells me something about what our focus needs to be when it comes to reaching the unbelievers in our community. Jesus said: *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Love must be our focus if we are going to influence the unbelievers in our community.

I feel that we do a pretty good job here at East Lincoln – I’m often blessed when I hear about the ways people love and serve one another. Just this week I was blessed in some wonderful ways by people who showed God’s love to me. But it’s something we all probably need to grow in, especially if the world is going to take notice. Jesus sets the bar high when he washes the disciples’ feet. Are we loving one another like he did? One of the things that sticks out to me is that Jesus washed Judas Iscariot’s feet, knowing what he was going to do. Do we love fellow Christians that are hard to love – in the East Lincoln family? How about in other churches?

Loving one another like Jesus did, that’s what we’re aiming for – serving, helping, kindness, forgiveness... How can you grow in love today? There are countless ways we demonstrate it and I encourage you to ask the Lord how he wants you to respond today.