

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 8, 2014**

WHAT THE WORLD THINKS OF THE CHURCH

John 13:31-35

Before we turn to today's Scripture reading, there are two things I want to talk about with you for a few moments. The first, as you can read on the prayer page in your bulletin, is that I am scheduled to have outpatient surgery a week from tomorrow, on Monday, June 16, in the hope of alleviating or eliminating some of the chronic daily headache pain that has been my constant companion for the last 15 years or more. What I am having done is called peripheral nerve surgery. The surgeon, in whom I have great confidence, will make small incisions above my left eye and in the left temporal region to remove sensory nerves in these two areas where my headaches are most often concentrated. The hoped-for result is that by removing these nerves I will exchange my chronic headache pain for permanent numbness in these areas. It seems like a pretty good trade to me. Though it is outpatient surgery and we don't anticipate any complications, the recovery period is likely to be a minimum of three weeks and possibly longer.

I am hopeful the Lord will use this surgery to give me permanent relief from the daily headaches I experience in these regions. Whether He does or does not, whether the surgery is successful or not, I will continue to praise the Lord as long as I live. I will continue to worship Him and follow Him and serve Him and love Him and trust Him with my whole heart. His grace – saving grace and sustaining grace alike, the grace that comes free of charge to people like me who don't deserve it and never will – has *always* been *sufficient* for me. *Always*. And I have no doubt that His grace *will always* be sufficient, whether I experience healing in this life or not.

I will be grateful for your prayers for me, for the surgeon and his staff, and for Mary Sue and our family in the coming days prior to the surgery, for the surgery itself next Monday, and for my recovery. I am more grateful than I know how to express for the loving, faithful, persistent prayers that so many of you have prayed for me over a period of many years, and pray for me still. A number of Bible commentators, including John Stott, have said that intercessory prayer is one of the highest forms of love. You have demonstrated great love for me, a love undeserved, by your prayers on my behalf.

I look forward to seeing what the Lord will do through my surgery, and I pray above all that God will be glorified to the max in how it all works out.

I should tell you this, too: In addition to being a nerve specialist, my surgeon is also a plastic surgeon. So, even if the peripheral nerve surgery is not a success, I should still come out of it looking at least as good as I do now (haha!).

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The second thing I want to mention has to do with last Sunday's message. The main point I tried to communicate last Sunday is the paradoxical truth that freedom is found in surrender. Freedom and surrender seem like opposites, and yet *true* freedom – *real* freedom, the kind of freedom for which we were created, the freedom for which Jesus came and died to set us free – is found only in surrender to God and His loving, gracious, wise, and sovereign rule over every detail and every square inch of our lives. Zaccheus, as we saw last week, found freedom in surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ. John Mulder, about whom I also spoke last week, at his lowest point, found freedom when he surrendered to the presence, love, and forgiveness of God in his life. True freedom is found in surrender to God and His purposes for your life. This is true whether you're young or old or anywhere in between.

If you were here last Sunday and heard the message, I trust you took it to heart. I trust you took time to examine your heart and life honestly. And if you found something there that has had a grip on you, something that has been holding you hostage or drawing your heart away from what is good and right, I pray that you made the decision and took whatever step(s) you needed to take to surrender it, to let go of it, to give it up and give it over to God.

Maybe there is something someone here today needs to surrender to God. If this is the case for you, don't wait another day. Don't wait another moment. Surrender to God. Whatever it is in your life – fear, worry, anger, unforgiveness, pride, hypocrisy, some kind of addiction, alcohol, drugs, lust, porn, infidelity, idolatry, greed, envy, covetousness, a pattern of temptation and sin you can't seem to shake off – God knows all about it. Surrender it. Renounce it all. Surrender yourself to God and let Him have all of you – everything you are, everything you have, everything you know, everything you can ever be. Everything. Why? Because only when you surrender it all to Him will you be truly free. It is only *in* Jesus, only *through* Jesus, only *by* the power of His love and grace at work in us, only in surrender to His rule over our lives, that true freedom is found.

The Bible says it is for freedom that Jesus has set us free (Galatians 5:1). I want you – each of you – to know in your own heart, in your own life and personal experience, the revolutionary, exhilarating, life-giving, joy-bringing, God-glorifying, freedom of the dearly loved children of God that is meant for you as a follower of Jesus. I don't want to miss out on it in my life. I don't want any of you to miss out on it. Surrender it all to God right now, because true freedom is found only in surrender to Him.

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Now, let's look together at God's Word in John 13:31-35. The setting for these verses is the Upper Room where, after washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus ate the Last Supper with the disciples and instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a visible reminder of His saving love for us. The snippet of conversation in these verses takes place after Judas has left Jesus and the other disciples in the Upper Room to carry out his plan to betray Jesus. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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Today's message is really a follow-up to the message from two weeks ago, when I talked about how dramatically the cultural and religious climate in America has changed since the 1950s, when I was born. In my lifetime, our culture has changed rapidly and radically. American public life has become increasingly secularized, as the Judeo-Christian beliefs, values, and ideals that once undergirded our common life have been systematically rejected or redefined. As "Exhibit A," I spoke about the astonishing change that has taken place in beliefs and attitudes about homosexuality in the last 50 years, as our culture has morphed from an almost universal disapproval of homosexuality to tolerance, from tolerance to full acceptance, from acceptance to celebration (and even veneration, in some cases), and now to the public disapproval of and discrimination against persons and/or organizations that express a dissenting viewpoint.

The seemingly inexorable (from a human point of view) march toward the legalization of "same-sex marriage" everywhere in the United States, unthinkable at the beginning of this millennium, is further evidence of how quickly and dramatically our culture has changed.

I suggested that difficult days lie ahead for people who refuse to be conformed to the ways of the world, who will not allow the world to squeeze them into its mold (Romans 12:2), but who are serious about living as faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in a world determined to go its own way. I think it is likely to get worse, and may get much worse, before it gets better, unless the Lord Jesus comes back soon, or God in His mercy and grace sends a great revival to His church and unleashes a new, Holy Spirit-powered great awakening in our land. Not just in our land, but in every land, on every continent, to the ends of the earth. (O Lord, let it be so!)

If we are to face opposition and persecution here in America because of our allegiance to Jesus, Jesus Himself has told us in John 15 to be ready for it (15:18-25). Peter reminds us that we shouldn't be surprised or embarrassed if we are called on to suffer for our faith. Instead, when it happens, we are to give thanks and praise to God for the privilege of suffering for the name of Jesus. And we are to keep on trusting God and continue to do good (1 Peter 4:12-19). Amen?

I have taken the time for this review because I think it is important to establish or re-establish the foundation for what comes next.

I think it was the poet Robert Burns who wrote:

Would to God the gift He gi'e us
to see ourselves as others see us.

Do you know how others often see us? How "the world" views Christians, or evangelical Christians in particular? Tullian Tchividjian says that the first thing evangelical Christians should be known for is the *evangel* – the great good news of the gospel. "Good news" is what the word *evangel* means. Above all, we should be known for the good news of God's amazing grace and saving love expressed in the incarnation, life, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ for us on the cross. Do you think this message and this love are what first come to

mind when the world thinks about the church? In some cases, perhaps. I hope so. Unfortunately, in our culture today, what many people associate with the church is condemnation – in particular, the condemnation of homosexuality and hatred of homosexuals. We are thought to be homophobic by virtue of our moral opposition to homosexuality and “same-sex marriage.” We are labeled “anti-women” and “anti-choice” because of our principled opposition to abortion. Right or wrong, evangelical Christians are known more for what we are against than we are for proclaiming and living out the love of Jesus for a hurting, needy world.

The evangelical church in America today has an image problem. Unfortunately, the church – which, of course, is made up of people like you and me – bears a large measure of responsibility for the image problem we have. Too often, Christians acting in unChristian ways have given the world plenty of reason to reject the gospel and oppose the church. An extreme example, but an example nonetheless, is the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, KS, which is known for its vitriolic hatred of homosexuals (the church’s web site address is *godhatesfags.com*), its protests of military funerals with posters saying “THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS,” and its condemnation of everybody who doesn’t believe exactly the way they do.

Thank God – really – that there aren’t many “churches” out there like Westboro Baptist. It doesn’t mean there aren’t a lot of professing Christians who do a lot of damage to the name of Christ and the cause of the gospel by the words we use or the ways we treat people with whom we disagree. Someone who heard my sermon two weeks ago sent me a thoughtful email expressing concern about the way some Christians treat gays. This person wrote: “I have met gay people who hate Christians due to being disowned by their families and treated as second class citizens and called derogatory names.” You may know someone who has had it happen to them. Does anyone really think that calling others derogatory names, showing contempt for them, and treating them as less than equals will draw them to the Savior and His love?

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment to love one another (John 13:34). In one respect, the commandment to love wasn’t new at all. In the law of Moses, the people of Israel had been commanded to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus cited this command when He was asked to identify the greatest commandment in the law. You remember His answer: “The most important commandment,” He said, is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. The second,” He said, is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31).

What was new about the commandment Jesus gave His disciples in the Upper Room was the quality of the love they were to show to one another. “As I have loved you,” Jesus said, “so you must love one another.” His love for them was to be the model for their love for each other. His love for *us* is to be the model of our love for one another. What kind of love is it? It is self-giving, self-sacrificing love that seeks the highest good of the beloved. The quality of this love is spelled out for us in 1 John 4:10-11: “This is love: not that we loved God (first), but that He loved us and gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends,

since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” We are to love each other with the same kind of love with which God loves us.

Jesus, after giving the disciples this new commandment, made a statement that continues to echo in the world today: “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, by the love you have for one another” (13:35).

When I was a teenager, Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book entitled *The Mark of the Christian*. Focusing on these words of Jesus in John 13:35, Schaeffer made the convicting case that our love for one another – our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ – is to be the distinguishing mark or characteristic of our lives as followers of Christ. Schaeffer says that, in this verse, Jesus gave the world outside the church the right to judge us, the right to make a judgment regarding the genuineness of our professed faith in Christ, on the basis of ... what? Not whether all of our doctrinal i’s are properly dotted and all our t’s crossed – as important, even essential, as the content of our faith is. Not our moral standards and our vigorous condemnation of the sins of others, no matter how right we may be in our judgment. No. Jesus gives the world outside the church the right to judge us on the basis of our love. On the basis of the way we love one another.

Here in John 13, Jesus is talking specifically about our love for one another in the church. How we love each other is a huge part of our witness to the world. It prompts the question for each of us: How am I showing the love of Jesus in my relationships and interactions with others in the church? How are we doing as a church in loving each other? Does the world outside the church look at us and say: “Wow! Those Christians at Faith Church really love each other?”

But it goes beyond this. It has to go beyond this. Not only does Jesus call us to love one another with the same kind of love He has lavished on us, as radical as this is. He also calls us to love our enemies. He calls us to love people who don’t love Jesus and who don’t like people who love Jesus. He calls us to love people with whom we sharply disagree about beliefs and values and politics and lifestyle and other basic life issues. We will need to talk about this next week.

For right now, as you think about what the world thinks about the church, remember that it is by our love, or the lack of it, that the world will judge us. Remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus. The main thing is the gospel. The main thing is love. We – by which I mean Christians or the church in general – must learn how to better and more winsomely communicate and demonstrate the love of Jesus for sinners of all kinds without condoning or approving of the sin.

The church in America has an image problem. In the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit given to the church on Pentecost, we need to change our image one relationship at a time. “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, by the love you have for one another” (John 13:35). Let’s let the world see love in us and in our relationships this week.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.