

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 26, 2012**

TIME TO LOVE

Mark 12:28-34

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

I am intrigued by a Bible verse tucked away in the Old Testament book of 1 Chronicles, where, in a listing of those who came to join David's army when he became king of Israel, 1 Chronicles 12:32 speaks of "men (from the tribe) of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." They had the wisdom and discernment to know what time it was, and what needed to be done.

You and I – all of us together – are to be like these men of Issachar in our generation. Like them, we are to understand the times in which we live and how God wants us to live in these days. We are to look to God's Word and Spirit for counsel and direction, for wisdom and courage and strength, to know how to live as God's people, as fully devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the time God graciously allots to us here on earth. In the words of Paul, in Ephesians 5, we are to redeem the time we have, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are full of evil (5:15-16).

One of the Rolling Stones' greatest hits from the '60s is a song called *Time Is on My Side*. At one time it may have been true. At one time, time may have been on their side. Or, at least, it may have seemed so. But that time has come and gone. Time is no longer on their side. And, like it or not, time will not always be on our side. Which is why it is so important for us both to understand the times in which we live, to know what God wants us to do, and to redeem the time, making the best use of every opportunity God gives us to grow in His grace and to serve His purposes in this generation. God wants us to be spiritual descendants of those men of Issachar, to know and understand what time it is in the scope of God's redemptive plan, and how God wants us to live in our time. Today.

TIME TO SEEK THE LORD

Last Sunday, we saw that it is time to seek the Lord (Isaiah 55:6). Is there ever a time when it is not time to seek the Lord? No. Will there ever be a better time to seek the Lord than right now? No. Today is the day to seek the Lord – while He may still be found. If you say, "I'll seek the Lord later. I'll come back to Him after I've done my own thing and lived for a while on the wild side," 'later' may never come. Time may not be on your side. This is no time for spiritual dawdling. It is not a time for procrastination. It is time to seek the Lord. Time to turn from our sinful ways and thoughts. Time to run to the cross. Time to run straight to Jesus. Time to give God the reins of your life.

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call on Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake their ways

And the unrighteous their thoughts.
 Let them turn to the Lord,
 And He will have mercy on them,
 And to our God,
 For He will freely pardon.
 (Isaiah 55:6-7)

Now is the time to seek the Lord. Let those who have ears hear what the Lord is saying to you today.

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: TO LOVE GOD AND OTHERS

It is also, as our Scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark makes clear, time to love God with everything we are and everything we have, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31). Is there ever a time when it is not time to love God with every fiber of our being, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, with all our passion and prayer and intelligence and muscle and energy (see *The Message*, Mark 12:30 and Luke 10:17 combined)? No. Is there ever a time when it is not time to love others as we love ourselves? No. There is never a time when it is not time to love God totally and devotedly, and to love one another as God has loved, and continues to love, us.

I'm not telling you something you don't already know. You know that God wants you to love Him more than anyone or anything else. You know that God wants you to put Him first in your life. You know that God wants you to love other people – not just “people” in general, but real people: Flesh-and-blood people with names and attitudes and, in a lot of cases, annoying habits or infuriating opinions about politics or religion or sports or whatever.

You know that God wants you to love church people, too. Jesus made a huge deal out of the “new commandment” He gave to His disciples on the night before His crucifixion. He said: “I have a new commandment for you: Love one another. In the same way that I have loved you, you are to love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other” (John 13:34-35, adapted from *MSG*).

Church people can be kind of hard to love sometimes, don't you think? Not all church people, but some. And sometimes we do a lousy job of loving one another in the church. Sometimes we aren't very loving in what we say or in the way we treat one another. Sometimes it can be hard for people outside the church to see Jesus in us, because they don't see much love. I'm not talking specifically about Faith, or the Cove, or anybody in particular. I'm talking more about “the church” in general, about what we communicate to the world around us by our love, or lack of love, for one another.

KNOWING AND DOING

But you know all these things. The answer Jesus gave to the question from an expert in the Jewish law – a question Jesus was undoubtedly asked on other occasions, too – is most likely

not new to you. Here is the thing: Knowing and doing are two different things. Knowing that no commandment takes precedence over wholehearted love for God and love for others is one thing. In a world where people – including church people – often fail to live up to our expectations, where people act irresponsibly or, in some cases, with evil intent, in a world in which, it turns out, God’s plans and purposes are not always the same as ours, consistently living out this kind of love is another thing altogether. It is not like we decide one day to love God with everything we are and everything we have, and to love others – the ones who are easy to love and those who are not so easy to love, and that’s all there is to it. It is not as though the fire of love for God and people continues to burn on automatic pilot once it has been lit in your heart. It doesn’t work that way.

LOVE IN WORDS AND ACTIONS

There is another problem, too. Lots of people are really good at talking about love. They know how to use words to express love. They can really talk a good game. But, too often, they are all talk and no action. Or too much talk and too little action. This is true in all kinds of relationships, including a lot of marriages. Unfortunately, it is too often true of people like us. We say we love God, but the way we live sometimes says something else. Sometimes our choices, our priorities and actions don’t back up our claim to love God. We talk about loving and caring for one another in the church, but sometimes we let the opportunity to show our love slip away, because we have filled our lives too full. We talk about our concern for our neighbors, especially our neighbors or friends or colleagues who may not yet have a relationship with Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives, but, for some of us at least, our plates are so full with all our have-to’s and all our other want-to’s that we haven’t enough time or energy left over to be intentional about developing relationships and prayerfully looking for opportunities to tell others about the Savior and His love, or to put His love into action. You know what I’m talking about. I doubt that I’m telling you anything new that you don’t already know.

THE SUPREME ACT OF LOVE

You know this, too. You know that actions speak louder than words. You probably know it already – I hope you do – but consider what John the apostle says in 1 John 3:16-18. He says that we know what real love is because Jesus sacrificed His life for us. The essence of love – the kind of love God has for us, the kind of love Jesus demonstrated for us, the kind of love with which we are to love God and love one another and love our neighbors, the kind of love bound up in the New Testament word *agape* – is self-giving for the sake of another. The essence of *agape* love is self-sacrifice, which, of course, is what Jesus did for us on the cross. He willingly gave up His life there for us. For you and me. What Jesus did was and is the supreme act of love – redeeming love. There is no greater love than this, and there never will be. But the sacrificial love of Jesus is also an example for us to emulate, says John. Since Jesus laid down His life for us in the ultimate act of self-giving love, we ought to put our lives on the line and live sacrificially for our brothers and sisters in the faith. If we see or know of a fellow Christian in need, big or small, and have the means to do something about it, but we turn away and do nothing, what does it say about God’s love? It says that God’s love is not in us. The point, John says, is that it is not enough to just talk about love. “Let us not love with

words or tongue (only), but with actions and in truth” (3:18). The way Jesus showed His love for us.

A LETTER FROM JESUS

There is something else, too. In Revelation 2:1-7, there is a letter sent by the risen and exalted Lord Jesus in heaven to the church in Ephesus. It is the first of seven letters sent to seven 1st century churches, with a specific message from the Lord Jesus to each church. The Lord Jesus commends the church in Ephesus for their hard work in His service, their perseverance in the face of opposition to their faith and witness in Ephesus, and their orthodoxy in matters of doctrine and life. In all these things – and these are not small, insignificant matters – Jesus acknowledges their faithfulness and affirms them. It is obvious that they did not take their faith lightly. The church in Ephesus was a busy church. Its members were busy doing good things. But after commending them, the tone of the letter changes in verse 4, where Jesus says: “I have this against you. You have forsaken your first love.”

What is Jesus talking about here? He is talking about the Ephesians’ love for Him. He is talking about their love for God. He is talking about their love for the Savior who gave His life for them. He is talking about their love for the God “from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things” (Romans 11:36), who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to save us from our sins and to reconcile us to Himself. He is saying to the church in Ephesus: “Your love for me is not the same as it once was. It is not as strong or as vibrant as it once was. The enthusiasm you used to have for worship, for prayer and Bible study – what happened to it? You’ve lost the joy and the passion of your love for me. And it’s time to get it back! It’s time to get back to it! It’s time to return to that first love. It’s time,” Jesus is saying, “to rekindle the fire of love and thankfulness you had in your heart when you first came to grips with the truth of what a helpless, hopeless, unworthy sinner you are, but what a great and awesome and amazing Savior I am. It’s time to recall and embrace the love that welled up inside you when you really began to understand deep in your heart what I did for you.”

Maybe Jesus is saying the same thing to you today. Maybe He is saying the same thing to all of us here today. Maybe He is saying the same thing to the church today that He said to the church in Ephesus near the end of the 1st century. Maybe, if He were to write us a letter, Jesus would say much the same thing. Would He? I don’t know. But I do know this: If it could happen in Ephesus, if it could happen to a church as remarkably blessed as the church in Ephesus had been through the ministries of both Paul and Timothy, it can happen anywhere. It can happen to any of us. It can happen to the believer who withdraws from the fellowship for some reason, perhaps as a result of some hurt or misunderstanding. It can also happen to believers who are so busy doing, so busy serving, so busy trying to meet the needs they see, that they fail to take time to be with the Lord. As a result, their relationship with the Lord suffers. The flame of love for God doesn’t burn as brightly as before. At its core, dear friends, as John Stott pointed out, we must never forget that the Christian life is essentially a love-relationship to Jesus Christ (*What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 23). And it takes time to cultivate and nurture this love-relationship.

YOUR SPIRITUAL LOVE-LIFE

Some of you might squirm in your seats if I were to ask you about your love-life. You might think I was prying, and you might not feel comfortable talking about it. OK. So I won't go there today.

But what if I were to ask you instead about your spiritual love-life?

How is it in your love-relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ?

How is the temperature of your love for God these days?

Is the fire of your love for God burning strong and bright?

Or, has something happened to cool the love you once knew in your heart?

Is it possible that, like members of the church in Ephesus, you have walked away, or just drifted away, from your first love?

Does it still thrill your heart to ponder the fact that you are a redeemed and beloved child of God?

Or, do you have a "ho-hum" attitude about it?

Does your heart resonate with John when he says in 1 John 3:1:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!

As is usually the case, there is so much more I want to say about this. There is so much more God's Word has to say about this ... about His amazing love for us, about the meaning of love itself, about loving God totally and supremely, about loving our neighbors, about loving ourselves, about loving each other with the same kind of love with which Jesus has loved and still loves us, and about the power of love – the power of His love at work in us, the reality of His love expressed through us – to make a difference, even an eternal difference, in the life of someone who needs to know and experience His unfailing love.

NOW IS THE TIME

Dear friends, there is never a time when it is not time to love God with everything you are and everything you have. There will never be a time when it is not time to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And there will never be a time when it is not time to love others as you love yourself (assuming, of course, that you have a healthy love of self – which is a topic for another time as well). There will never be a time when it is not time to love one another with the same kind of self-giving, self-sacrificing, forgiving, gracious, patient love with which Jesus loves us. Never a time.

Which means that now is the time. Now is the time to examine your own heart. Now is the time to vow, with the help of the Holy Spirit, or to renew your vows, to love the Lord your God with your whole being, to live in His love, to nurture and strengthen your love for Him. Now is the time to dedicate or rededicate yourself, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live a

life of love by loving your neighbors near and far, and by loving one another in the fellowship of the church – not with words only, but with actions and in truth.

I hope nothing I've said today has come across as harsh or judgmental. Please forgive me if it has. That has not been my intent at all. My intent has been simply to explore with you what God's Word says about the primacy of loving God and others and to plead with you to look at your own heart and life.

Nothing is more important in life than loving God with your whole being, and loving others as the Lord Jesus loves you. Not so that you may earn God's love and favor by the love you show, but because you are already loved by God with a love that will never change and never fail. We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

May it be so in us, now, and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.