

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

www.ffbic.org

**SERMON:** *The Pinnacle Virtue*

**SERIES:** *Practicing Virtue*

**SCRIPTURES:** *1 John 4; Matthew 22:36-40; 1 Corinthians 13*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

**DATE:** *2024 - 2 - 11*

---

---

*\*Credit to Richard Foster, John Ortberg,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is so good to worship with you today, everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning into the livestream.

We've been working our way through a sermon series called "**Practicing Virtue.**" (**Series Graphic**)...Following Jesus, means that each day it is our goal to live like Jesus. And so we've been exploring five virtues that we can practice that will help us to live more like Jesus.

So far we have talked about practicing **surrender, prudence, courage, and confession.**

And this morning you might say, we come the culmination of the series. Today, we come to the...

## **I. The pinnacle virtue.**

The virtue that we want to aim our lives at, most fully.

I was thinking about this...some of the most popular New Year's resolutions have to do with getting in **better physical condition**, exercising more, eating healthier. And

I began to think, you know, in the Bible there's a story about a guy who was in pretty good physical condition. The strongest man in the Bible, his name is **Samson**. But what's interesting is that even with such great physical strength, his life was a wreck. And then you know, many people make resolutions related to their **finances**...their job. Gonna work harder this year, earn a little more money. There's a story in the Bible about **a rich man**, built his life on accumulating wealth, he comes to Jesus and Jesus tells him, he must go sell everything he has. Some people set **educational goals**, want to get smarter...smartest guy in the Bible, his name was **Solomon**...he had 1,000 wives, how do you think his life worked out?

And so, I began to wonder, what if we went to Jesus? What if we asked Jesus, "if there was one thing...one virtue that we might aim our lives at?" What might Jesus say?

There's a telling passage where a group of religious leaders come to Jesus and ask is similar kind of question (Matthew 22), "**What is the greatest command in the law?**" What is the highest virtue Jesus? If we, could spend our lives, practicing and perfecting one character trait Jesus, what would it be? Jesus makes it pretty clear and pretty simple, he says "**LOVE...love God and love others**" because LOVE is the highest virtue.

In fact, a little later on when Jesus is coming to the end of his life, he reiterates this to his disciples...he says,

**John 13:34-35 - <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."**

And you might say, "why is this a new command?" It's because, you've heard of the golden rule right? Everybody knows the golden rule: **Do unto others as you would have them do unto you**. Jesus says that golden rule, sums up Jewish Law. But

notice, here in John 13, Jesus changes the emphasis. Here is the new command...He says, **you should love others as I have loved you**. I heard somebody call this the platinum rule (Stanley). Golden rule...love others the way you want to be loved. Platinum rule: love others the way Jesus loves you.

This is why love becomes the defining virtue of those who follow Jesus. And then Paul caught hold of Jesus vision. There's actually an entire chapter in your Bible called the love chapter in **1 Corinthians 13**.

Listen to what Paul writes about the supremacy of the virtue of love,

**"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>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 do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing...<sup>13</sup>And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."**

Sometimes, in my sermons, I'll say, *"If you get nothing else out of the message today...get this, learn this, remember this."*

It's seems like that's what love is to Jesus. If you get nothing else out of life, nothing else out of following me, surrendering your life to me, then get this...the highest virtue is love. The deepest meaning of life is discovered in loving relationships not accomplishments, or our physique or wealth, stuff. And what's fascinating, is that, you don't even have to be a Christian to sense that this is true. We catch glimpses of that reality all around us. We know that it is true...

- When an elderly woman faithfully cares for her ailing husband year after year, as his physical body deteriorates and his mind fails, and she stays by his

side...You stand back and admire and you know somehow she got it right about life. That's love.

- If you've gone to a wedding, and a young couple stands in front of their friends and family, staring nervously into each other's eyes and awkwardly repeat their wedding vows to one another...you catch a glimpse of the stuff life is really about.
- When a school teacher chooses to passionately do their job while others have walked away for more prestigious or more convenient opportunities...
- When a firefighter chooses to walk into a burning building to save someone he does not even know...

These examples are all around us, aren't they? They are the reminders that what matters most in life is love. One author says it like this, love ***"...is simple enough for a toddler to...appreciate, and profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."*** (Carson on John 13)

If we were to ask Jesus, *"What should we aim at, what is the pinnacle of practicing virtue?"* I think Jesus might say *"Learn to practice love above all else, because that is the mark of my disciples. Become a church overflowing with God's LOVE."*

So, let's just spend a few minutes today, talking about and understanding love and how we might practice this virtue. And in one sense, this is not as easy as it sounds, because love is a rather broad topic. Love covers just about everything. And we use the word, the concept in so many different ways in our cultures. Start looking up this word in your Bible and you will find hundreds of Scriptures dealing with LOVE. There are entire chapters written on love. Authors have written entire books on the topic. And so in order to truly get at the heart of love, I thought let's start with what some real experts have to say about love...I found some statements by some 4-8 year olds...here is how they describe or define love.

**"Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other." ~ Karl - age 5**

**"Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." ~ Chrissy - age 6**

**"Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK." ~ Danny - age 7**

**"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." ~ Bobby - age 7 (Wow!)**

**"Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it everyday." ~ Noelle - age 7**

**"Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well." ~ Tommy - age 6**

**"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." ~ Mary Ann - age 4**

Childish in a sense, but you know when you hear those statements there's something true.

So, as we think about love and practicing love as followers of Jesus, I just want to take us to a couple of passages in Scripture that describe love for us. So, grab your Bible...three key passages I'm gonna highlight. Put a little marker in 1 Thessalonians 1, then another marker in Numbers 6, and now open first to **1 John 4**. First thing we see is that,

## A. Love is full of grace.

In other words...given and received even if, underserved or unearned.

There's this really small, yet powerful statement that John makes...

### 1 John 4:19 – We love, because He first loved us.

Practicing love is a response to the unconditional, underserved, unearned love that we have received from Jesus. And I was thinking just how powerful a concept this is to grab hold of.

Notice this, we do not make ourselves lovable and then Jesus chooses to love us. Jesus just loves us first, lavishly, extravagantly, no strings attached. It has nothing to do with making ourselves worthy enough. It means that love is filled with grace.

That's not usually how love works in our world. We tend love things that are unique, attractive or will give us something in return. And so, we will spend our resources, our energy, our time...our lives trying to prove we are worthy of being loved.

The transformative truth about our faith is that Jesus first loved us.

I was recently reading a book that someone had given me talking about this grace-filled aspect of love...and has such a powerful title. The book is called, "**The Raggamuffin Gospel**". It means the life...the love that Jesus offers is for ragamuffins. A ragamuffin is simply fancy way of saying "weak, frail, and those not quite up to par." Here's what author Brennan Manning says,

The Raggamuffin Gospel (the love of Jesus is for) was written ***for the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out. It is for the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from hand to the other. It is for the wobbly and weak-kneed***

*who know they don't have it all together and are too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace. It is for inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker. It is for poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents. It is for earthen vessels who shuffle along on feet of clay. It is for the bent and the bruised who feel that their lives are a grave disappointment to God. It is for smart people who know they are stupid and honest disciples who admit they are scalawags. The Raggamuffin Gospel is a book I wrote for myself and anyone who has grown weary and discouraged along the Way.* (pg. 14)

It means, God knows all about you. He knows your story. He knows the good and the bad. He knows all the things that make you lovable and all the things that make you unlovable. **He knows your deep dark secrets...and He absolutely loves you.** The person who knows you most deeply, loves you most fully. That's a kind of love that is filled with grace.

I love this passage when God talks about why he chose Israel as His people...

**Deuteronomy 7:7 - <sup>7</sup> The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. <sup>8</sup> But it was because the LORD loved you**

God does not love us because we are unique, attractive, or we provide value to him. He loves us first and that makes us infinitely, inherently valuable, worthy, beautiful.

CS Lewis wrote this: **“God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous (unnecessary) creatures in order that he may love and perfect them.”**

God did not create us because He had to. He did not create us because He was bored or lonely or had nothing better to do. God did not create us because he NEEDED to. God creates us out of love.

You are here. You are lovable, you are worthy because you are the result of God's love. That grace-filled love should change how we think about life and how we go about living life.

This is why, John's little phrase (**BRING UP 1 JOHN 4:19 again**) is so important for us to grasp. Practicing love is first of all a response to Jesus' unconditional love for us. So that's where we start with the virtue of love, learn about, soak in, internalize God's grace-filled love for you. To help you do that this week, I've listed some of my favorite passages/stories in Scripture about God's love. Read them this week. Soak in, understand, internalize God's love for you.

Second,

### **B. Practicing love requires "attention."**

All of us have an "attention", it means **the thing we are focusing on**. And all of us have control over that attention. One author says,

**"The work of love is the work of paying attention. Love notices. Love listens. Love remembers. "When is her birthday? What kind of coffee does he like? What is his favorite movie?"**

Scott Peck writes, **"The principle form that the work of love takes is attention. When we love another person we give him or her our attention."**

Attention is one of the most powerful forces in the world. A baby needs the attentive gaze of a human face. A baby lies in the crib and smiles, the human face smiles back, and the baby realizes that someone is watching, responding, that what the



baby does counts. The baby's joy, anger or sorrow is reflected in the face of another. The baby realizes it is possible to be somehow connected to another human being, through attention. The face, scowls perhaps, or disappears, and the baby tries to figure out what happened, how to bring it back. The face becomes the mirror through which the child learns whether it is a source of delight or disappointment. A child simply cannot survive without the face. That face is what tells the baby that it matters. (Ortberg 32)

This is love by attention. Giving attention is giving love!

Now this is really important for us to grasp in our world today. Because we have so many things vying for our attention. We have busy schedules, we have hurried lives, and perhaps most of all we have these little portable screens, that we carry around with us, calling for our attention almost non-stop.

In fact, I read a statistic that the average American "checks" their phone once every 12 minutes. Meaning we look at our phones about 96 times a day and the average person is on their phone for about 4 hours a day. And, just to clarify there is nothing wrong with giving your phone time and attention. It's part of how we function in the world. But it's a helpful indicator of the importance of "our attention."

Now look at this great passage of Scripture in Numbers 6. This is a one of the priestly blessings that God taught the people of Israel. Sometimes we use it as the closing benediction for our services:

**Numbers 6:24 - The Lord bless you and keep you, the lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.**

To turn your face toward someone is to give that person your whole-hearted, undivided attention. It is not the casual listening of a preoccupied mind. It is a

statement: “I have nothing else to do, nowhere I’d rather be. I’m fully devoted to being with you.”

This is why we can learn so much by reading the stories of Jesus life. You begin to notice the kinds of things Jesus gives his attention to.

Jesus notices a tax-collector trying to hide up in a sycamore tree. He felt it when a woman desperate for healing touched the hem of his robe, even though he was jostled by bustling crowds. He saw a widow no one else would have given a second glance and observed that she gave everything she had. He gave recognition to unimportant little children that the crowd was trying to make disappear. Even his teaching reflects the power of his attention. Jesus noticed the way mustard seeds grow and yeast spreads; the way people jockey for seats of honor at parties and high-status titles in their little communities. He noticed when his friends argued about who was the greatest disciple; he noticed their doubt and fear on a stormy boat ride; perhaps sometimes they wished he didn’t notice so much.

Giving attention is giving love!

One author says it like this...

**“What is the work of God? It is simply to see what Jesus would see if he were looking through my eyes, and respond as he would respond.”**

I read a neat story about this, from author Deborah Tannen. She writes: *My great-aunt, for many years a widow, had a love affair when she was in her seventies. Obese, balding, her hands and legs misshapen by arthritis, she did not fit the stereotype of a woman romantically loved. But she was – by a man, also in his seventies, who lived in a nursing home. In trying to tell me what this relationship meant to her, my great-aunt told of a conversation. One evening she had had dinner out, with friends. When she returned home, her male friend called and she told him about dinner. He listened...attentively and with great interest and then asked her,*

*“And what did you wear?” When she told me this...she began to cry. “Do you know how many years its been since anyone ask me what I wore?” When my great-aunt said this, she was saying it had been years since anyone had paid attention. (Ortberg 33)*

### **The principle form that the work of love takes is attention.**

All of us have an attention...and where we choose to give that attention...to our work, to our hobbies, to our screens, to our relationships, to our families... is a reflection of the kind of love we are practicing in our lives.

This week, as you consider practicing love, by thinking about where your attention is focused. Think about how you prioritize all of those items vying for your attention and perhaps most important...consider giving your attention to the people around you...and if you do you’ll be practicing the pinnacle virtue.

Finally...

### **C. Practicing love is a commitment.**

Too often in our world we have turned the concept of love into only a feeling or an emotion. We talk about falling in love...as if it is something that happens to us, outside of our control. I remember the moment in high school when I realized that the girl I liked (Jenny), liked me back. We had classes together. And that feeling of racing heart, churning stomach, sweaty palms. But that is only a part of the love experience. There is a deeper love that involves my will-power...commitment.

CS Lewis talks about it like this...

The feeling of **“Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. ...no feeling can be relied on to last...”**

**But...Love is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit...this love** (committed love), **lasts even at those moments when they do not like each other...** (When the feeling isn't there...

Paul, writing to one of the early churches, says something similar...

**1 Thessalonians 1:3 - <sup>3</sup> We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor of love...**

He's talking about this commitment kind of love, that you labor to achieve. You commit yourself to it. That means you worked...you chose it, even though you didn't feel like it.

I was thinking that this word LABOR, is such an appropriate word for thinking about the commitment kind of love that we must have, because those tiny little babies whom we love so deeply, are the result of a mother's labor and commitment.

Most of us forget that the process is 9 months, where a woman's body experiences all kinds of physical changes, many of them inconvenient to say the least. That in order to hold that little child in your arms, to experience the joy of looking into those little eyes, tickling that little belly, requires hours of labor, pain, commitment.

Jenny and I have three beautiful children, they are our labors of love. I remember, the anticipation each time, heading into the hospital. I remember sitting in that hospital with Jenny on those occasions as she went through excruciating pain, as I relaxed in the recliner beside her and I started talking about, how exciting this is. And how much I just love Jenny.

And I remember, Jenny looking back at me with hatred in her eyes and saying, *“You’re the reason I’m in this mess to begin with. I love you, but I do not like you right now.”*

Yes love involves our emotions but it must move past our emotions and become a commitment.

There’s a powerful book called, “A Promise Kept” written about this committed kind of love. It’s written by a man, by the name of **J. Robertson McQuilkin (PIC)**. Don’t know if you know his story, but it’s really powerful...about his commitment to his wife...for better for worse, in sickness and health. He was serving as president of Columbia International University, when his wife Muriel, around age 55 started exhibiting signs of early Alzheimer’s. He writes, *“We were visiting friends in Florida the summer of 1978 when Muriel, my wife, started to repeat the same story she had told us five minutes earlier. I reminded her this was a re-run. She just laughed and continued. Funny, I thought, that’s never happened before. But it happened again and then more often.”*

McQuilkin goes on in this book, to describe over the next number of years, the difficulties, the ups and downs, and the journey of loving his wife through this as her mind began to leave her. Even the painful choice he chose to make at one point, stepping away from the presidency of the university in order to be with Muriel. It’s an incredibly powerful story exemplifying love as commitment.

Our own stories may be very different, but we all know the reality, when our love must move beyond simply feelings.

At the end of a hard day at work, when you are exhausted...  
When your co-worker continues to get on your last nerve...  
When your kids are not cooperating...

When you woke up on the wrong side of the bed and nothing seems to be going your way...

When you're in a hurry and everyone around you keeps getting in your way and moving so slowly...

Loving Jesus is no exception either. Loving Jesus requires commitment...even when you don't feel like it.

There are moments when I know how I want to behave, but I sense Jesus beside me telling me...that as his follower, I can't. And sometimes, in those moments. I wish he would go away or that I could ignore Him. And loving Jesus, becomes a commitment. There are moments where I begin to wonder if I will ever have victory over some temptation...and I get angry at Jesus. Why aren't you helping me?

There are moments when I don't feel like serving or volunteering or my ministry efforts seem fruitless.

There are moments when Jesus and his way of life seem to get in the way of the way I want life. (Rich young ruler). What do you mean I have to be patient? What do you mean I have to give up gluttony? What do you mean our family needs to change our schedules around?

There are moments when life is just hammering me and I feel like Jesus walked away and left me. And it is then that love becomes commitment.

Practicing love is a commitment. And it is perhaps in those moments, that I am reminded most of all of the committed love that Jesus showed to me. John describes it like this...

**John 13 - Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.**

It's such a wonderful phrase isn't it. He loved them to the very end. It means...

He stuck with it. He loved them through betrayal, and denial...through pain and even through death...to the very end he loved every single one of them and he loves every single one of us. That's practicing committed love.

So here we go Five Forks...it is our desire in 2024 to morph more and more into the character of Jesus. We can do that practicing the virtues that Jesus himself practiced. And of course the pinnacle virtue, the virtue we should aim our lives at most fully, if you get nothing else...is love.