

*Series: The Upper Room Discourse*

## **John 13:31-38**

### **Glory, love and blindness**

by Scott Grant

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#### **Prodigal blindness**

The prodigal son wanted everything now. "Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me." Such a request was unheard of. A Middle Eastern father would be expected to explode in anger, yet he granted the request. The father was loving his son in an unheard of way, yet the son missed it. He took the money and ran. When the son ran out of money and came to his senses, he returned home, and the father loved him in an unheard of way once again, running to greet him. All the while, then, there was the love of the father. But the son missed it. It was what he needed most, but he couldn't see it, because he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Because his eyes looked inward, he couldn't see outward.

It's very easy for us to miss what God has for us because we want what we want when we want it - usually now. Such preoccupation with our own supposedly urgent needs blinds us to the great things God wants us to show us - even now.

The timing of immediacy runs through John 13:31-38. The following words appear: "now" (verses 31, 33, 36 and 37); "immediately" (verse 32); "a little while" (verse 33); "new" (verse 34); and "a cock may not crow until you deny me three times" (verse 38), meaning that the denial would happen quickly. Jesus wants to show his disciples some great things, even now, but Peter, who is representative of all of them, and us as well, can't see them, because he has his own ideas of what "now" is all about.

#### **Jesus' immediate glorification**

John 13:31-32:

*(31) When therefore he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him; (32) if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and will glorify him immediately."*

Judas had just left supper, and none of the disciples knew why (John 13:28-29). Confusion swirled. Later that night it would become clear that Judas had left to tell the Jewish leaders the whereabouts of Jesus so that they could arrest him. Verse 31 begins with "therefore," referring to Judas' departure, so the words of Jesus here are motivated by the ensuing confusion, and soon-to-be despair, among his disciples.

His words concern glorification, first the glorification of the Son of Man. Daniel 7:13-14 presents a figure called "one like a Son of Man" as a glorious figure. But the New Testament speaks of the Son of Man suffering. How are these two concepts reconciled? First, glorification involves revelation of true identity, assuming the identity in question is glorious. God is glorious, and when he is glorified, he is shown to be so. So when the Son of Man is glorified, his identity and attributes are revealed. And glorification for the Son of Man concerns suffering and death, which reveal his attributes of love. It means the cross.

Jesus says, literally, "Now the Son of Man *was* glorified." Most English translations treat the verb as a dramatic past tense, which is used when something in the future is seen as so sure that it has already happened, and use the present tense. And it's true, Judas' departure set off a chain of events that will result in the glorification of the Son of Man. But Jesus wants his disciples to know that what just happened was good news, not bad news. These are words of comfort, for they concern the glorification of the Son of Man and of God. They concern the Son and the Father being revealed for who they are. And in Judas'

departure, the Son of Man was shown to be someone of phenomenal love - reaching out, offering friendship and then letting Judas betray him.

Whereas he spoke of immediate past glorification in verse 31, he speaks of immediate future glorification in verse 32. Both God and the Son of Man will be glorified. This looks ahead to the cross.

This glorification will take place "immediately," Jesus says. This is in keeping with Judas' departure, which happened "immediately" (John 13:32). Jesus is telling the disciples not to worry about Judas' immediate departure, because something great will happen immediately.

Glorification just happened, and glorification will happen quickly. What's Jesus' purpose in telling them this? He doesn't want them to miss it. It's as if he's saying, "Something great is happening here. I know you're confused. You will be in despair. But in the midst of it all, check out the glory of God!"

Michelangelo labored over his spectacular sculpture of David for three years. Finally, it was placed in a crate and dragged for one mile by 40 men over 40 days from his studio to the front of Palazzo Signoria in Florence. The crate allowed only glimpses of magnificent work. Finally, the workers knocked down the crate and installed the David at the foot of the palace steps. Michelangelo returned the next day to see pieces of paper fluttering from the marble. They were notes of love from the people of Florence, who marveled at the beauty of the work.

Until the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the world received only glimpses of the glory of God. The prophets craned their necks in anticipation. But in Jesus Christ, the crate has been knocked down. And the glory of God is fully displayed for all to see. "Behold, I do something new; now it will spring forth; will you not be aware of it?" (Isaiah 43:19)

Like a beacon into the misty confusion and dark despair of our lives beams the word of Jesus, who tells us to lift up our eyes and check out the glory of God. Check out Jesus Christ. Check out the Father. Check out the Spirit. Gaze on the glory of God. And marvel.

Noteworthy in all this glorification are the roles that the Father and Son play. Each is glorifying the other. Each is giving preference to the other. No one's hogging the glory. Such an orientation sets the stage for Jesus' instructions to them in verses 33 through 35.

### **Disciples' immediate love**

John 13:33-35:

*(33) Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You shall seek me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' now I say to you also. (34) A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (35) By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Jesus calls his disciples "little children." It was somewhat common for teachers to address their disciples in this manner, but such an address was also common when a father was passing on last wishes to his children. In view of his calling attention to his being with them "a little while longer," he's probably addressing them in a testamentary manner, passing on his last, and most urgent, wishes. Therefore, because he will be with them for only a short time, he wants them to pay close attention.

He then proceeds to tell the disciples, just as he told the Jews, that they will not be able to go where he is going (John 7:34, 8:21). Although the wording is almost identical between his address to the Jews and to his disciples, the meaning is different. Jesus says that he is telling his disciples this "now." If there is a "now" for the disciples, there will be a later. He's leaving them, but not for good.

Jesus' purpose is not to send them into despair but to heighten the importance of his instructions to them. In his absence, he wants them to obey a "new" command. The word "new" also heightens interest. The

content of the new command is that they love one another as he has loved them. The command to love each other was not new. They received that command from their scriptures (Leviticus 19:18). The new element concerns the manner of love; they should love each other in the manner that Jesus loved them. As they had come to know by now and would discover more fully later, the love of Jesus was something new.

And being a newly introduced command, it is something that they can do now. Just as they could see the glorification of the Son and the Father "now" and "immediately," they can also now see and respond to this "new" command.

We see in verses 34 and 35 three characteristics of this love: It is receptive, reproductive and revelatory.

Love is first of all receptive. One cannot love unless one receives love. As we receive the love of Jesus, we can love each other as Jesus loves.

Second, then, his love is reproductive. His love for us, if we receive it, gives birth to our love for each other. We have a picture of what love for one another looks like in the relationship between the Father and the Son, in verses 31 and 32. Each is seeking glory for the other. Twice Jesus speaks of the Father being glorified "in" the Son, and once he speaks of the Father glorifying the Son "in" himself. The word "in" here speaks of the actions of one benefiting another. Verse 35 literally reads: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love *in* one another." The model for other-centered love in the body of Christ is other-centered love in the Godhead.

Third, it is revelatory - it reveals Jesus. Our love for each other reveals to "all" that we are followers of Jesus; that's how those who don't believe in him see him. People who live in darkness are attracted to Jesus by the light of the love they see among believers.

It is in "this," Jesus says, receptive and reproductive love, that all will know we are his disciples - that he will be revealed to the world. Believers' love for one another is Jesus' calling card to the world. The best strategy for evangelism, therefore, is simply for followers of Jesus to love each other. Such love will create an irrepressible pulse of love into the world that will be irresistibly attractive.

Note that there is no question, even in Jesus' impending departure and their upcoming desertion of him, whether they are or will be disciples. They "are" his disciples. He also told the Jews that they couldn't go where he was going, but he didn't tell them to love one another, because they weren't his disciples. In fact, he told the Jews that they would die in their sin (John 8:21). He tells his disciples to love one another because they are his disciples. The only question is whether others will know it.

We therefore don't have to try to be disciples or better disciples; we simply need to know that we "are" disciples. And if we believe we are disciples of Jesus, we'll start thinking and acting like his disciples. We'll love each other, and the world will see it. Jesus, though he is absent in body, will be present - and visible - in spirit.

When I walked into a church youth group at age 15, I saw something different. I saw people relating with one another in a manner foreign to my experience. I saw more intimacy and openness than I had ever seen. I saw love. I saw Jesus.

In verses 31 through 35, Jesus wants them to see something and do something. He wants them to see the glory of God and his love for them, which enables them to love each other. These are the immediate concerns, the beautiful jewels he sets before his disciples. But Peter, like us, can't quite see them.

### **Our immediate blindness**

John 13:36-38:

*(36) Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I go, you cannot follow me now, but you shall follow later." (37) Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you right*

*now? I will lay down my life for you." (38) Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, a cock shall not crow until you deny me three times."*

The first thing to note in these verses is that Peter asks two questions and gets no answers. He's 0 for 2. He wants to know where Jesus is going, and he wants to know why he can't follow Jesus now. The answers he receives don't really address his questions. Apparently, Jesus wants Peter to see something else - say, the glory of God and the importance of loving his fellow disciples.

Often our questions of God seem to bounce right back to us unanswered. Perhaps he wants us to see something deeper. Perhaps beneath our questions is a deep longing to see his glory, to be loved by him and to love others. Perhaps that's what he wants us to see.

That's what Peter misses, anyway. But he does pick up on two other items: Jesus' departure to some unknown place, and his inability to follow. Why can't he see what Jesus places before him? Because he has his own ideas about what is important, and it concerns his ability to follow Jesus. It's an ability that he's trying to generate, reminiscent of his statement in John 13:9, "Lord not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

The reason Jesus tells them that he's departing to a place that they cannot follow is to heighten the importance of his command that they love each other, but Peter derives a meaning that Jesus didn't intend. Peter interprets it as a challenge, and if it's a challenge, he's determined to meet it.

This inward focus blinds him to the beautiful things Jesus has placed before him. He's closed himself off to truth. His filter is narrow and distorted. For Peter, it's all about being good enough, making the grade, measuring up. It may appear spiritual, but it's fleshly.

Here he misses something important. Jesus tells him that "you shall follow later." There seems to be no question about it. He will follow Jesus. That doesn't mean that God will check out and get back to him later. It means God is working presently to make sure that Peter will follow later. And if God is working presently, God is present now. That means he can know God now. This is the best news for both now and later.

But Peter wants what he wants when he wants it, and he misses the positive news in Jesus' words and reinterprets them negatively. And what he wants is to convince himself that he's a worthy disciple. He's trying to convince himself that he has what it takes to follow Jesus now.

Jesus tells him that something quite the opposite will happen now. Before a cock crows, meaning before morning, Peter will deny that he even knows Jesus not once but three times. That's what Peter is capable of "now."

Peter is trying to convince himself and Jesus that he'll do whatever it takes to follow Jesus. But "whatever it takes" is about to happen, and it is Jesus himself who will do it. Peter vows to lay down his life for Jesus, but it is Jesus who is going to lay down his life for Peter (John 15:13-14). That's what it takes for Peter - and us - to follow Jesus.

After the Lord had given David rest from his enemies, David wanted to build a house for the Lord. The Lord told David he never asked him to build him a house. In fact, he said, "The Lord also declares to you that the Lord will make a house for you," meaning a dynasty that would result in the Messiah (2 Samuel 7:11). The Lord just wants to give.

Peter is so intent on mustering the ability to lay down his life for Jesus that he has no ability to see that Jesus wants to lay down his life for him. And when Jesus lays down his life, everything changes. No longer does Peter or anyone else have to muster the ability to die for Jesus, because all those who believe in Jesus already have died. Paul is quite clear about this in Romans 6:1-11, where he says that we died with Christ and were raised with him as disciples in the fullest sense. In a very real sense, then, Peter was about to lay down his life; he just didn't know it.

The death and resurrection of Jesus makes us full disciples. It's true; and it's simply a matter of believing the depth of that truth - the awesome love of God expressed therein - and living it out.

But like Peter, we have trouble seeing the truth. The glory of God is shining forth - now. The love of Jesus that would enable us to love each other is beaming - now. But we can't see it, because we're looking inward, trying to fix ourselves.

I'm a fairly experienced photographer, but the following has happened to me more times than I care to admit: I'll spend an inordinate amount of time fiddling with the camera, messing with the aperture and the shutter speed. Once I'm certain the camera is in working order, I'm ready to take the picture. But I've forgotten the most important thing. I've forgotten to remove the lens cap. I've forgotten to let in the light. The camera was fine, I just needed to let in the light.

We spend an inordinate amount of time looking inward at the self, examining the camera, so to speak, trying to get ourselves in working order. But the cross of Jesus Christ says there's nothing wrong with the camera any more. The camera is fine. There's nothing left to fix. We don't need to work ourselves into some state of capability. We simply need to take off the lens cap, look out and behold the truth of God - his glory, his love, love for each other that responds to his love.

### **The rest of the story**

That's exactly what happened for Peter. He couldn't see it "now," but he saw it later. His effort to pump himself up into a state of worthiness failed as he denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. He was deflated (Mark 14:72). He knew he was unworthy, and he was a broken man. Yet Jesus returned to him. He cooked him breakfast on the beach of the Sea of Galilee - a warm expression of friendship. Three times Peter denied Jesus. Then Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" - three times. And he instructs Peter, "Shepherd my sheep" - three times. And he tells Peter, "Follow me" (John 21:15-19). With these words, Jesus assures Peter that he loves Jesus, that he's able to serve Jesus and that he is a full disciple.

When he was fiddling around trying to make himself worthy, he was unable to follow Jesus. Now he knows he's unworthy, which, strangely enough, makes him fully able. Peter was a full disciple with no effort on his part, motivated to live out the truth of his discipleship by a fuller understanding of Jesus' love for him that came about when he saw love that wouldn't die in the face of his unworthiness. Jesus was right when he told Peter that "you shall understand hereafter" (John 13:7) and that "you shall follow later" (John 13:36). We see a completely different Peter in the book of Acts; we see a man living out the truth of his discipleship.

A distraught woman came up to me after one sermon and asked if God could forgive her for breaking a vow she made to him. I began to embark on what was going to be a lengthy theological explanation with the words, "Do you remember Peter?" She stopped me right there, clutched my arm and looked at me in joyful disbelief. She didn't say a word. But it was obvious that she remembered Peter - how he broke his vow to lay down his life for Jesus and how Jesus returned to embrace him.

- SCG, 1995

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