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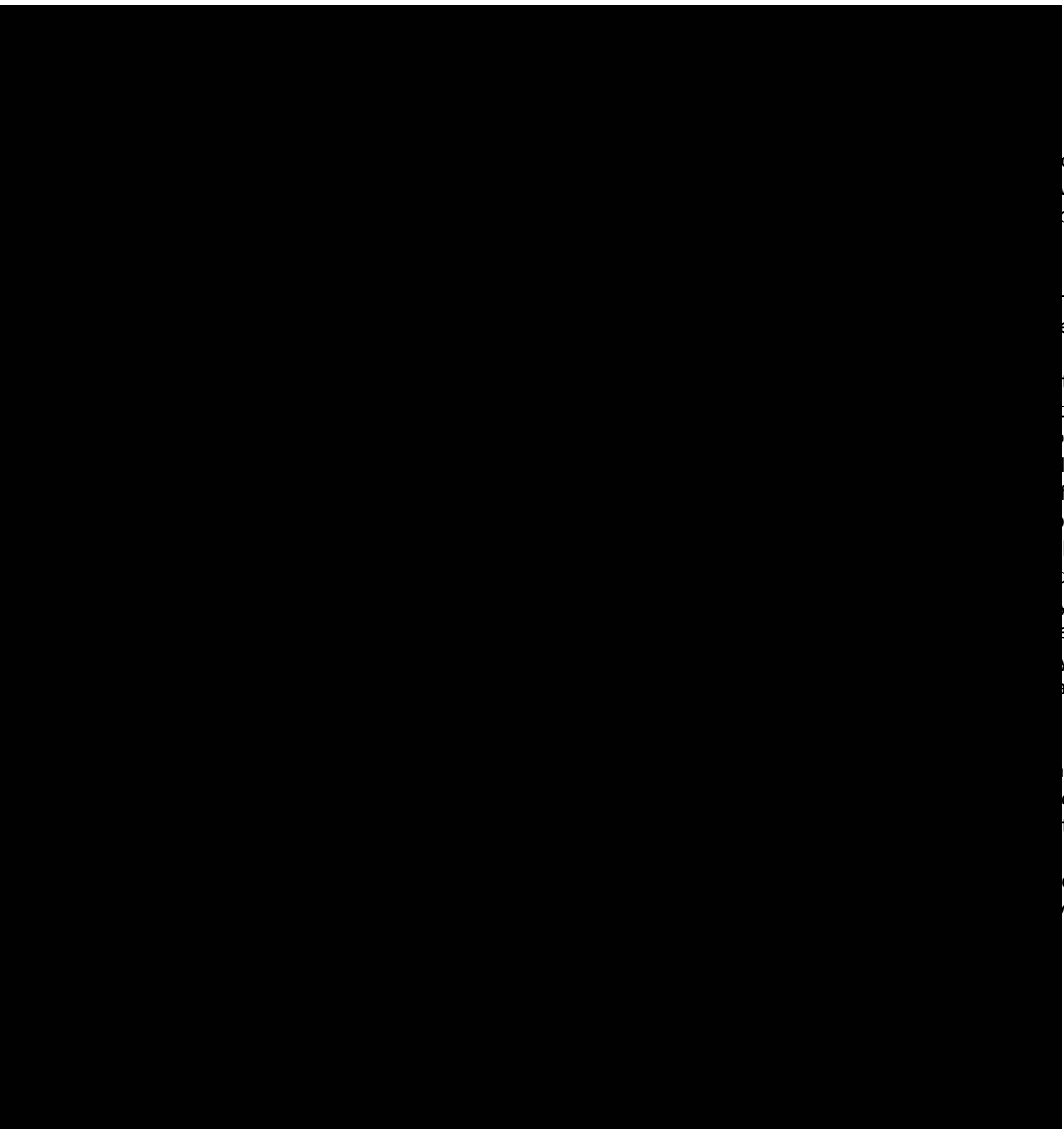
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We Die a Thousand Ways in Love



Article by Marshall Segal,
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The night before Jesus was betrayed, he sat with his closest friends. He looked them in the eyes, and told them what was about to happen to him for their sake. His body would be broken for them; his blood poured out for their sin ([1 Corinthians 11:23–26](#))

Then he told them the one thing that would set them apart from everyone else in the world. “By *this* all people will know that you are my disciples . . .” ([John 13:35](#)). This one thing would mark them as true followers, and emphatically punctuate the gospel they preached. This one thing . . .

The world may have changed a lot since that night, but followers of Jesus still stand out in the same way: “. . . if you have love for one another.” We will be noticed and known by our love for one another.

But there’s an awful lot that looks like love in the world, and a whole lot of it isn’t Christian. So what did Jesus mean? If it’s still applicable today, how do we live out our loyalty to him in ways that draw others to him? If this love is the distinctive, unmistakable nametag of faith, there must be something distinct about it, something unusual.

Love Going Public

It’s important to note that our love for another will not tell anyone about Jesus if it’s not lived out in front of other people. Due to our weaknesses, even Christian love can have a tendency to become isolated and insular. Before long, all our friends are Christian, and all our free time is spent with Christians. Jesus wasn’t casting vision for a glorified clique when he spoke to his disciples that night. He spoke about a contagious love that compels people to come and see.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” ([Matthew 5:14–16](#))

“Jesus didn’t cast Christianity as a glorified clique, but as a contagious love that compels people to come and see.”

For sure, Christian love happens behind closed doors — in families, in small groups, in one-on-one discipleship, in crisis. It must. But it’s not meant to stay there. Jesus intends for our love to be too loud to go unnoticed, too bright to hide entirely behind the scenes.

Love Goes Low

But what makes love *Christian*? Why would people see our love for one another and think, *That has the mark of Jesus*? Jesus’s words come between two stunning real-life pictures.

In the first, the King of kings shockingly kneels down to wash the dirt from his disciples’ feet. Jesus lowered himself to humiliating levels to demonstrate his love for the disciples. One by one, he soaks, rubs, and dries their feet. He says,

“You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” ([John 13:13–15](#))

If God himself was willing, in love, to wash even feet, why would we refuse to lower ourselves, in love, for one another? Christian love sets aside social status, cultural norms, and the comfort of convenience to joyfully meet the inconvenient needs of others. That kind of love looks like Jesus — the sinless God-man on his knees before the sinful men he came to save.

Love Dies

The same word for love appears earlier in John 13: “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*” ([John 13:1](#)). Jesus wasn’t done showing us how to love one another when he finished washing feet. No, he also put down the basin and the towel, and took up his cross — thorns in his scalp, nails in his hands and feet, his lungs collapsing slowly and painfully.

“How will we break through this present darkness? We will be noticed and known by our love for one another.”

Christian love suffers for the beloved. It costs us something. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” ([John 15:13](#)). You probably won’t be asked to literally lay your life down for someone, but we die a thousand other ways in love.

- We give a little more than we thought we could — time, money, energy — knowing God knows everything we need.

- We cancel plans in order to be with someone in need, or make last-minute adjustments to fold someone else in.
- We keep initiating the necessary hard conversations with a loved one, even when the conversations seem to only be getting harder and harder.
- We have someone stay with us for an unexpected night or more.
- We set aside our preferences to bless someone with different desires.
- We consistently consider others' interests and needs as important to us as our own.

Those two brackets — dirty feet being washed clean and sinless feet being nailed to a cross — bring the love in [John 13:35](#) into greater light and clarity. This kind of love involves servant hearts and hands that are unexplainably humble, intentional, self-sacrificing, and free from the world's standards and expectations ([Galatians 5:13](#)).

Love Hurts

But what if we choose to love, and receive less than love in return?

Almost all love comes with the regular fees of disappointment, heartache, and sometimes betrayal. What does Christian love do when it collides with the realities of our sin-wrecked relationships here on earth?

“When you choose to love and are wronged in return, rejoice that Jesus will look even more real and beautiful in you.”

In between kneeling to wash the disciples' feet and telling them to love one another ([John 13:35](#)), Jesus's sermon takes an unsettling twist. “After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me . . .’” ([John 13:21](#)). One of the men he had loved the most would be the one to hand him over to his killers — one of the men at the table with him right now, one of the men with freshly washed feet.

Why did Jesus turn his attention to Judas now? And why did John choose to put it here in chapter 13? Because servant-hearted, sacrificial love like his is prepared for betrayal, but it speaks even louder when we are wronged in response. When Jesus dropped to his knees with a washcloth before his betrayer, or hung naked on a cross because of him, did his love look stupid? Or did it look other-worldly?

When you choose to love, and are wronged in return, Jesus will look even more real and beautiful in your love.

Have you given up on loving someone in your life because you haven't been loved well in return? The foot-washing, soul-cleansing Savior reminds us that we have already been loved infinitely well, and that well is deep enough to sustain a lifetime of love in any difficult relationship or ministry.

[Marshall Segal \(@marshallsegal\)](#) is a writer and managing editor at [desiringGod.org](#). He's the author of [Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness & Dating](#) (2017). He graduated from [Bethlehem College & Seminary](#). He and his wife Faye have a son and live in Minneapolis.

