

12 Disciples Series: John: The Beloved Disciple
1 Corinthians 13 and John 19:25-27
By John Gill

The disciple we will be thinking about this morning has a very good name! For some reason, I have always been a little partial to this disciple because anyone with a name like, "John," has to be a pretty good guy!

Perhaps John is your favorite disciple, as well. If so, it could be that you are partial to this disciple because, more than any other disciple, John has been associated with "Love." In fact, the Gospel and the three letters which bear John's name contain almost all the beautiful passages about "Love" which we treasure most (with the exception of the beautiful "Love Chapter" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians). Just listen to some of the beloved passages found in the writing of this disciple:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life..."

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than a man lay down his life for his friends."

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."

Yes, John was a very "loving" disciple. But this was not always so.

What do we know about John from the scriptures? In fact, we know much more about this disciple than about most of the others.

The two disciples, James and John, were brothers, the sons of Zebedee. Zebedee was a man with a prominent fishing business in Galilee. We know he was well-off because, when John and James were called by Jesus, Mark tells us that they left their boats (plural) in the care of their father- and his employees, and followed Jesus.

Their mother is also prominent in the Gospels. Her name was Salome. She may have been the sister of Jesus' mother Mary, which would make John and James the first cousins of Jesus. It seems that she may have been one of the women who financially bankrolled Jesus' itinerant ministry. We find her as one of the four women at the Crucifixion and among those who discover the empty tomb on Easter morning.

Yes, John and James came from quite an outstanding family! But that didn't mean they were perfect. No, they were far from perfect!

We can get a hint about their personality by the nickname they have in the Gospels... “The Sons of Thunder!” You can imagine the kind of disposition John and James must have had to be called “The Sons of Thunder!” In fact, the scriptures give us several examples of incidents where these two brothers live up to their nickname:

In Mark and Luke, we have the story of the time John spoke up and said, “Master, we saw a man driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop because he doesn’t belong to our group.” And Jesus corrected John by saying, “Whoever is not against you is for you.”

Then, when a Samaritan village would not receive Jesus and the disciples, it was John and James who reacted with anger: “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy them?” And again, Jesus rebuked them.

On still another occasion, John and James tried to claim positions of glory for themselves, asking to sit at the right and left side of Jesus in his Kingdom. And once again, Jesus chastised them.

You see, John was no saint. In fact, he had some rather unsaintly characteristics and personality traits: He was arrogant, belligerent, self-righteous, ambitious, and judgmental.

Yet, despite these unflattering characteristics, John was one of the three disciples closest to the Master. He, along with his brother, James, and Peter, were often singled out by Jesus to accompany him on special occasions. This trio of disciples, this “inner circle,” are the ones Jesus brought with him when he raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead. These were also the three who witnessed the Transfiguration of Christ on the mountaintop, when Jesus – glowing with divine light - spoke with Moses and Elijah. And it was John, James, and Peter who Jesus took farther into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with him the night before his Crucifixion, and who failed him by falling asleep.

If all we knew about John stopped there, we would never think of him as a “man of love.” That’s about the last word we would use to describe John.

But something remarkable happened to John as he walked with Jesus those few years they had together. Jesus loved John, in spite of John’s short-comings, and that Love changed John’s heart.

James Thurber has written a contemporary fable about how hearts can be changed by Love. He calls it, “The White Deer.” It seems there was a beautiful princess who came under the spell of a witch, who transformed her into a white deer. The king of a neighboring kingdom, and his three sons, were out hunting one day and they saw the white deer. They started to shoot it, but, just at the last moment, she turned back into a human princess. They took her back to their castle with them. However, she was unable to remember where she came from or who she is.

The court psychiatrist tried to help her remember by delving into her subconscious past, but he was unsuccessful. So, the court philosopher took his turn to help her regain her memory, but his efforts were also in vain. Finally, it was revealed that the only way she could remember would be to receive “a love that will not fail.”

In the fable, the youngest of the king’s sons bestowed that love upon her – a love that will not fail. And the evil spell was broken. She remembered who she was, and her heart was opened, and she fell in love with her prince.

John was like that princess, unaware of who he was, until Jesus came along and offered him unconditional love – a love that never fails – and awoke in his heart a love for others.

But don’t take my word for it. Take the word of John himself. In his own Gospel, John seldom refers to himself by name. When telling of incidents where he was present, John uses this lovely phrase to describe himself: “The Beloved Disciple” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

What a beautiful tribute to the power of the Love of Christ to transform lives! For, in John’s Gospel, especially during the final week of Jesus before his death, we see the new John – a John who has been changed by the love of Christ.

We find him at Jesus’ breast in the Upper Room during the Last Supper, a place of intimacy and affection showing the love which existed between these two men. We also see his love during the trial of Jesus. We all know that, when Jesus was taken to be interrogated by the High Priest, Peter stayed in the courtyard and denied even knowing Jesus – three times. However we may not remember that John actually accompanied Jesus into the room where the accusations against Jesus were made. And most beautifully, John seem to be the only one of the Twelve who stayed at the foot of the cross, along with the women, bravely showing his devotion, when all the other disciples had fled.

And, as we read in our scripture for today, it was John whom Jesus entrusted with the care of his own mother.

And then on Easter morning – which disciple was the first to see the empty tomb? John tells us that he was the first see, and the first to believe.

Yes, this “son of thunder” had become “the beloved disciple.” The Love of Christ had awakened love in John – a love he spent the rest of his life sharing with others.

So, what ever happened to John? Scholars have debated how many “Johns” are represented in the various writings in the New Testament which bear that name. But tradition has always assumed that all of them are from the hand of “John, the Disciple.” It is believed that after the resurrection of Jesus, John fulfilled his pledge to Jesus. He took Mary to live with him in Ephesus, a city on the western coast of what is now Turkey. It is believed that Mary resided in

Ephesus with John until her death. And it is from Ephesus that John wrote the Gospel and the Letters that bear his name.

While in Ephesus, John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos, a penal colony on an island off the coast of Turkey, where he is said to have written his "Revelation." When he was finally released, he returned to Ephesus to live out the remainder of his life.

Unlike most of the other disciples, it seems that John died a natural death at a very old age. In fact, he may be the only one of the 12 to die of old age.

Yet his life was no less significant than those who were martyred for their faith – for no one other than Paul has had more influence on our New Testament than the "beloved disciple," John.

Perhaps the most beautiful tradition about John is the story which is said to have taken place near the end of his life. It seems that, while living in Ephesus, John was so feeble and old that his disciples had to carry him to the church. At these meetings the old apostle would say only one thing over and over: "Little children, love one another! Little children, love one another!" After a time, his disciples got so tired of always hearing the same thing, that they asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"

John's reply? "It is the Lord's command, and if this alone can be done, it is enough!"

You see, John knew the power of love – a love that can transform lives: for it transformed HIS life! And it can transform yours, as well.

So, what is John's legacy to us? John tells us in his own words:

"Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

After all: "It is the Lord's command – and if this can be done – it is enough!"