

Proving It  
John 13:31–35  
Sunday, May 18, 2025 (Easter 5)

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. May we have ears to hear your word, minds to understand it, hearts that are receptive to it, and lives that can share it with others, in Christ. Amen.

Just before Easter, we took the kids on a day trip up to New York City. We drove to Staton Island and were going to take the ferry across, so that the kids could see the Statue of Liberty. As we boarded the ferry and found our seats, the kids noticed all of these people coming on who were wearing black suits and black hats or head coverings, with tassels hanging out below their suitcoats, and they all had beards with long curls of hair coming out from under their hats. The kids asked about them, and we said, “Those are Hassidic Jewish people, and that is the way that they dress.” I explained the different aspects of their dress and said, “That is how they show that they are being faithful to God.” You can look at them and know who they are and what they believe.

A couple of weeks ago, I was driving here on a Sunday morning. Driving up Devon State Road, I saw a group of people picking up trash along the side of the road. They were all wearing bright orange vests. Normally, we would see that and think, “They’re doing community service.” But as I got closer, I could see that they were wearing long garments (like a tunic) and head coverings. And I immediately knew that they were Muslims from the Islamic Center. I could tell from the way they were dressed who they are and (for the most part) what they believe.

There are all kinds of other examples of how, based on the way a person dresses, you can take one look at them and know what their religion is and what they believe. The same thing obviously holds true with sports. You see people all the time walking around in Phillies shirts, hats, and jerseys, the Eagles,

whatever. You see them and instantly know what team they support. You see a soldier wearing a uniform, and you can tell which branch of the military they are in.

Now, for the most part, Christians do not dress in specific clothing. There are *some* examples, like the Amish, or when I was growing up in Pensacola, Florida, there was a school in town called Pensacola Christian College (PCC). This was a very conservative Christian school where all of the men wore khaki pants with button up or polo shirts tucked in, and all of the women wore long khaki or denim skirts. You would always see them around town, and you knew right away, “Those are PCC students.” You could tell from the way they were dressed who they are and what they believe. Some Christians wear crosses or maybe even a t-shirt that says something about their faith. But for the most part, you can’t just look at someone and know that they are a Christian.

I remember being at a ballfield once for one of our kids’ baseball or soccer games, and we were standing around talking with the other parents. At some point someone asked what I did for a living, and I said that I’m a pastor, to which *they* said, “Really? You don’t *look* like a pastor!” I said, “What is a pastor supposed to look like?” And they couldn’t answer. If I had been wearing a clerical collar or a robe they might have known. But several years ago, Jen’s cousin got married, and they asked me to perform the ceremony. It was outdoors, at a state park in western PA, and it was around Halloween, so all of the guests were encouraged to wear costumes. I found out after the fact, that most of their friends who didn’t know me had thought that I was just *dressed up* like a pastor; like that was my costume.

Most of the time, people cannot just look at us and know that we are Christians.

There’s a quote that gets used a lot, I don’t know who originally said it, but it goes like this, “If Christianity was illegal, and you were arrested and put on trial, would there be enough evidence to convict

you?” I’ve heard that a lot, and I really don’t *like* that question, because I think that it’s *guilt-driven*. We either say, “No, there wouldn’t be enough evidence,” and then we feel *bad* about ourselves like we’re not good enough Christians, or we say, “Yes, there *would* be enough evidence to convict me,” which can make us feel a little *too good* about ourselves and inflate our spiritual egos. I think a better question to ask is, “How do people know that you are a Christian?” If they can’t just *look at you* and tell, how do they know?

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Well, Jesus says to his followers here, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another.” So according to Jesus, the primary identifying characteristic of Christians is love.

Now, I always like to *define* love when we talk about this, because our culture has conditioned us to think about love primarily as *romantic* and primarily as an *emotion* or *feeling*. Love is something that exists inside of us, in our hearts or our heads.

There is a scene in the movie *Contact*, in which Jodie Foster plays a scientist who discovers extraterrestrial life in another solar system. And throughout the movie, Jodie Foster’s scientist character has this ongoing relationship and conversation with another character played by Matthew McConaughey, who is a theologian. So there’s this whole interplay throughout the movie between *science* and *faith*, *proof* and *trust*. There’s one scene in particular where these two characters (the scientist and the theologian) are talking about the existence of God, and *she* says, “Yeah, but how do you *know*? I’d need *proof*.” And he says, “Proof. Did you love your father?” Her father died when she was just a child. And she says, “Yes, very much,” to which he says, “Prove it.”

Now, I get the point that they're trying to make there. That there are some things in life that we can't prove or explain or quantify; things that we know to be true just because we *feel* it, deep in the core of our being. But the thing is, you *can* prove your love for someone. By how you *treat* them. By the things you *do* for them. The ways you *speak* to them. We prove our love all the time. I prove my love for my family by taking care of them, feeding them, spending time with them, hugging them, kissing them, laughing with them. My love for them is not just a feeling or an emotion in my heart or in my head. It is a *lived reality* that can be *demonstrated* through my *actions*.

This is what Paul stresses in his letter to the Corinthians, where he says, "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude (love does not act in *those* ways). Love does not insist on its own way ("You have to be the way *I* think you should be and do things the way *I* think you should do them."). Love is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing (love doesn't *celebrate* when someone makes a mistake and throw it back in their faces) but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Love, for Paul, is not just a feeling or emotion, something that exists in our hearts or our heads. Love is found in our *actions*. It's about the things that we do and the ways that we are with one another. Do we *treat each other* in ways that are patient and kind and truthful and hopeful? Because I can *say* that I love you, and then treat you terribly.

*That* is where love is found – in our *actions*. And Jesus says elsewhere that we are to be this way, not just with the people who love *us*, but also with our *enemies* and the people we *do not* like or get along with. Can we be patient and kind and truthful and hopeful with them? Can we love people the way that Jesus loves us? Because when we do that in a world that is not used to seeing love expressed like that, then people will know that there is something *different* about us. They will know that we are not following the ways of this world. If we love people the way that Jesus does, then Jesus says that they will look at us and know that we are his followers.

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It's like the old hymn, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

*Not* by the way we dress. Anyone can wear a cross around their neck or a shirt with a Bible verse on it and still treat people terribly. They will know that we are Christians by our love.

*Not* by our "right theology." I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say something that implies, "*Real* Christians should believe *this*...." Theology, the way that we understand and talk about God, is important *because* it informs our actions. But if your theology does not make you a more *loving* person – a more patient, kind, hopeful person – if your theology makes you more judgmental or intolerant, then it's not a good theology, and you need to find a new one. Because they will know that we are Christians by our love.

*Not* by our politics. No single political party or candidate or whatever has the corner on what it means to be Christian. Politics, while necessary, are *imperfect*. They are *incomplete*, because they focus only on *this* world and *this* life. They do not make decisions based on the bigger picture of the kingdom of God. Nor should we *want* them to. Because you cannot bring about the kingdom of God through laws and legislation. God's kingdom is a kingdom of love, and you cannot *legislate* love. But they will know that we are Christians by our love.

*Not* by our bumper stickers or yard signs or social media posts. Anyone can shout a message out to the world and not live in ways that back it up. Let me just tell you about the time I was given the finger by someone with a Jesus fish on their car. That fish might say to the world, "I am a Christian," but their actions say something different. They will know that we are Christians by our love.

As Jeremi Richardson writes,

Not by the wealth we claim to own,  
Nor by the thrones we build of stone,  
But by the grace our lives reveal,  
A love that mends, a love that heals.

Not by the banners we unfurl,  
Nor by the power we seek in this world,  
But by the kindness our hearts impart,  
A love that grows from the sacred heart.

They will not know us by word alone,  
Empty echoes from hollow tones.  
They'll see it lived, this truth we sing:  
A love that moves in everything.

When burdens crush the weary frame,  
We lift the load in mercy's name.  
When tears flow freely, unchecked, unplanned,  
We reach to hold with gentle hands.

For love is the mark, the truest creed,  
A call to serve, to meet the need.  
No pride, no borders, no vain display,  
But love that lights the darkest way.

They will know we are Christians by our love,  
A flame that mirrors the stars above.  
And through this love, the world will see,  
The Christ who dwells in you and me.<sup>1</sup>

What this world needs right now is not more banners or bumper stickers or yard signs or social media posts. The world does not need more right theology or politics. We don't need more people who *look* like Christians. The world needs more people who *act* like Christ. The world needs more people who live in love, in ways that are patient and kind and humble and hopeful and true. Not just being that way with people who are *like* us, but with people who are *not* like us. Not just with people we *like*, but we people we do *not* like. Not just with people who have prestige and power, but with the least of these.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jeremirichardson.medium.com/they-will-know-we-are-christians-by-our-love-a-poem-inspired-by-the-hymn-e5e78e4ba94a>

It is *never* too late to start loving like that. So often we *want* to, but we don't know how to start, or we don't know how to change. You can use me as an excuse! You can say to someone, "Hey, my pastor said something especially brilliant today that made me think about some things, and I want to be different with you. I want to try to be a more patient, kind, hopeful person. I know I haven't always been, and I'm sorry. And I know I won't always be perfect going forward. But I want to try." Whether we say that to our spouse or our children or a sibling or friend, a co-worker, or someone we have been at odds with, I can almost *assure* you that they will be receptive to it. Because that's what we *all* want, we just don't always know how to *do* it. And if they *aren't* receptive to it, that does not change anything about the way *you* can choose to be. Because maybe once they *see* you doing it and know that you mean it, then they will open up to it.

But even if they never do, *God* sees you, and God knows where your heart is. And when we choose to live in love, speaking and acting in ways that are patient and kind and hopeful and true, in *that*, God is glorified, and you will be showing the world who you follow. They will know that we are Christians by our love. Amen.