

Characteristics of Animals

The Old Testament lesson from Genesis reminds me of a trip Kendra and the girls took last weekend while I was doing prep work for the Course of Study class I'm working on. They went over to the Columbus Zoo. They saw kangaroos, stingrays, birds, manatees, a hissing cockroach, a tiger, bats, and an orangutan. I suspect the cacophony of the zoo animals sounds fairly similar to what Adam must have heard when the Lord God presented all the animals to him to be named.

Animals are pretty cool. A few minutes ago, the kids looked at some different animals in a picture, including an elephant, a giraffe, a lion, a rhinoceros, and a zebra. We can easily identify these types of zoo animals by some distinguishing characteristics. Elephants use their trunks like a hand, to eat, and to drink. Giraffes are the tallest animals alive today – and can run 35 miles per hour. That's as fast as a car is legally allowed to go on some of the streets in Sidney. Rhinos have horns on the tops of their noses that's made from the same stuff as our fingernails. A zebra looks like a striped horse – but they are different – you can't crossbreed them and get fertile offspring. And then there's the lion – the "king of beasts." They're a top-level predator in the wild. We probably won't be seeing any of those types of animals next week – at least, I hope we don't see them!

Each of these animals have distinguishing characteristics – something notable about them that clues us into what they are. How could someone identify us as followers of Jesus just by looking at us? This is the question that we're going to address this morning, as we look at a Scripture from the Gospel of John and consider to how Jesus tells us to do this. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 13:31-35. I'm reading the New International Version today. **Read John 13:31-35.**

The Last Supper

As we look at the Gospel lesson this morning, we find some amazing things. First, this is a conversation of Jesus with His disciples while they are gathered in the Upper Room. Judas has just left to go betray Him to the priests. That's who they're speaking of at the opening of verse 31, "When he was gone," (John 13:31a), they mean Judas. He had left the Last Supper scene.

The rest of the passage, if your Bible has Jesus' words in red letters you see this – is a direct quote from Jesus. Jesus is talking about Himself here. He says, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in Him," (verse 31b). In the Gospel of John, Jesus frequently refers to Himself as the Son of Man. In the other Gospel accounts, He refers to Himself as the Son of God. It's the same general idea.

Jesus is making the point here that He is the Son of God. That was a hard thing for the religious people to hear when Jesus was going around doing His earthly

ministry. It's still sometimes a hard thing for people to take – even in some churches. Jesus and God the Father, along with the Holy Spirit, is One God. They are the same God.

There are a lot of people – church-going Christians even – who get so caught up on the way we've segmented the Bible into "Old Testament" and "New Testament" that they fail to see the connection between the two. Jesus is in the Old Testament of the Bible, as much as He is in the New Testament. The difference is that before His birth in Bethlehem, people didn't really see Him. When they did see Him, they thought He was an angel, or God – again, Jesus is God.

The Angel of God

Remember the story of Hagar and Ishmael in desert? She's crying, because Abraham and Sarah have sent her and her son off to die in the wilderness, and they've run out of water. What's that story say?

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink, (Gen. 21:17-19).

See, when you read through the books of the Old Testament and you find the phrase, "the angel of God," or "the angel of the Lord," instead of "an angel of God," they're talking about Jesus. Here's another example. Remember the story of the three friends who were thrown into the fiery furnace by an angry King Nebuchadnezzar? It was Jesus in the fire with them, keeping them from getting burned up. Listen to what Nebuchadnezzar says when they come out of the fire alive: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued His servants!" (Dan. 3:28). Nebuchadnezzar says "His angel," not "an angel." It's Jesus.

Since the sin of Adam and Eve, Jesus has been working hard to deliver – to save – His people. You and I – we – are His people, New Hope! Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God never changes!

Jesus Christ Is Glorified

So, it's only right, in verse 32 of our Gospel lesson, that we should see Jesus say, "If God is glorified in Him, God will glorify the Son in Himself, and will glorify Him at once." All the glory belongs to God. If Jesus were not God, and only just an ordinary human like you and me, He would have no glory. But – and I've said this at least twice already this morning – Jesus is God. And, He has been glorified. Church, do you know how Jesus was glorified? He raised Himself up from the dead, after being crucified, and in the tomb for three days. No human can do that. Only God can do that. He deserves all our praise!

Another amazing thing is what Jesus says next. He says, “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for Me, and just as I told the Jews, so now I tell you: Where I am going, you cannot come,” (John 13:33). Since we know the whole story, we know where Jesus was going. On that night in the Upper Room, though, the disciples didn’t have a clue what Jesus was talking about. Jesus was trying to prepare them to face a new period in their lives as His followers – without Him. He knew – we know – He was going to the garden later that night, would be betrayed, and then put on the cross in the morning.

He knew He was going to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world, and He wanted His followers to be ready, and to know how to show other people that they were genuine, true-blue followers of Him. And so, He tells them how they’re going to prove they’re His followers. Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another,” (verse 34). Why is that something important for us today? Because He wants us to love people.

Loving Is Tough To Do

If I only love myself – if you only love yourself – are we doing what Jesus wants us to do? Of course not! If I only love people – if you only love people – who do things for us, is that doing things the way Jesus wants us to do them? Not hardly. Jesus wants us to love people who don’t deserve it. He expects us to do this, without question or complaint, if we are truly living lives as His followers. Pay close attention to what He says there, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

That’s a tough thing to do sometimes. Jesus loved us to the extreme of dying on the cross in our place and expects us to do the same for others – even people who right now may be enemies of ours, just like we used to be enemies of God. As Paul writes in Romans, “God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Rom. 5:8). I love that verse. It challenges me to love my brothers and sisters who do not yet know they’re my brothers and sisters with the unconditional love of God – even if it hurts me to do so.

I want you to really think deeply about this. It’s hard to love bullies. It’s tough loving people we don’t like. It’s hard to love people who hurt us, or are mean to us – and yet, that’s exactly what Jesus commands us to do. We can’t just tolerate – we are commanded to love. So, we either obey and love them, letting Jesus be King of us, or we disobey, and let who lead us? The devil. In a nutshell, that’s the choice we make every single day when we get up and go about our routines. We either follow Jesus and what the Bible says, or we don’t. And if we don’t, then we’re not following Jesus – we’re following Satan.

By This Everyone Will Know

Hear again what the last verse of our passage today says. “By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another,” (John 13:35). In loving other people – even those who can’t yet love us back – we make it known to all people that we are followers of Jesus. We present a visible sign – through our actions, of what it means to be a Christian.

In today’s world, we need to do a better job of loving all people. We have to start looking beyond what we think, and what society thinks about people, and start looking at what Jesus says about people. Believe it or not, He tells us what He thinks in all 66 books of the Bible. When we hold hurtful views about various people, we need to pray for them – and for ourselves – that we would be more like Jesus. When we start looking at other people through Jesus’ eyes, we see people of incalculable worth. They are so precious that God Himself would die the worst death imaginable on the cross to build a relationship with them.

Earlier we talked about the distinguishing characteristics of various animals. Do you remember that question I asked when we were talking about being Christians? How could people identify us as followers of Jesus? Love is the distinguishing mark of a true Christian. They look at what we are doing, and how we treat other people to see if we measure up with what the Bible says we ought to be doing. In closing, as an individual, how do you do with showing people that you are a die-hard follower of Jesus Christ? Is there someone in your life that you need to show the love of Jesus Christ to?

Prayer: Sovereign God, You make us for each other, to live in loving community as friends, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, wives and husbands, partners and companions. Teach us to choose love that is committed and devoted; teach us like little children to wonder and to trust, that our loving may reflect the image of Christ. Amen.