

How The World Will Know We Belong To Jesus  
Beautifully Exemplified In The Life And Martyrdom Of  
Eleanor Chestnut

John 13:34-35

Introduction: Jesus gave us what we call the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. He also gave us what we call the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:37-40. Both are captured in John 13:34-35 in words He spoke on the night he was betrayed at the Last Supper. Both also are captured in the life of his superlative servant, a medical missionary named Eleanor Chestnut, a woman whose love for Christ and others would be witnessed and sealed by her blood.

I. We must love others like Jesus has loves us 13:34

The word “love” appears only 12 times in John 1-12. It appears 44 times in John 13-21. Jesus calls it a “new commandment” because it is new in Him and the new messianic community He is forming. Concerning this new command Don Carson says, “the new commandment is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice” (484).

Finding our way to loving others like Jesus loves us is a difficult path, especially for those who have been called by God to travel a difficult and painful road.

This was true of missionary Eleanor Chestnut. She was born in Waterloo, Iowa,

in 1868. Her father left the family about the time Eleanor was born. When she was three, her mother died, too, leaving her in the care of neighbors. Eleanor grew up knowing that she was a charity case. And as she grew, so did the gnawing resentment she felt over her unfortunate and unfair situation.

Eleanor would later learn about a school called Park College and Academy, a school with a work-study program that would allow her to earn her way through both high school and college.

Friends later described Eleanor as odd, forlorn, unapproachable, proud and eccentric when she arrived at Park. She was 15 years old, had very little money, and was forced by necessity to wear clothing donated for poor students. She accepted these with much resentment. Because of her pride, she could not feel any gratitude. She was a “problem student” –outwardly brave and quiet, but inwardly troubled and unhappy. “Nobody cares where I go or what I do,” she said. “It makes no difference about me.”

Park College was a firmly Christian institution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Students went to chapel three times a day, and were expected to attend church. Though no record remains of the particulars of her conversion experience, Eleanor joined the church during her eight years at Park, and, more importantly, we have a record of the gradual change in her character that is a sign of true faith. The painful experiences of her childhood, instead of causing bitterness, now caused

her to have great love and sympathy for others who were suffering.

Eleanor graduated from Park in 1888 at the age of 20 and enrolled in the Women's Medical College in Chicago. Her dream, was to become a medical missionary. Her poverty continued as she began her training; she lived in an unheated attic and cooked her own meals – mostly oatmeal – and nearly starved the first year. She worked as a nurse during the summers to pay her expenses. Interesting fact of history: she cared for Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in his last illness.

After medical school, Eleanor briefly attended Moody Bible Institute in preparation for a life on the mission field. In 1894, at the age of 26, she sailed to her first post in China.

During her time in China, she would live out daily and sacrificially vital aspects of loving others as Jesus has loves us. We see 3 of these in John 13.

1) Serve others            13:1-11

- Jesus modeled service and humility by washing the disciples feet, including Judas. This was a task reserved for Gentile servants or slaves. Warren Wiersbe says, “Jesus was the Sovereign, yet He took the place of a servant. He had all things in His hands, yet He picked up a towel. He was Lord and Master, yet He served His followers. It has been said that humility is not thinking meanly of yourself; it is simply not thinking of yourself at all” (*Be*

*Transformed*, 16). Philippians 2:1-11 provides the appropriate commentary.

He humbled Himself to serve others, even to the point of death on a cross.

Eleanor would walk in the steps of her Master.

- The last year of her life, Dr. Chestnut treated 5,479 patients at the Woman's hospital in Southern China. It is said that due to her work and that of the other missionaries, "Converts multiplied until in the city of Lien-Chou there was a church with an adult membership of over 300." What mindset put her here?
- In 1893, she had applied to the Presbyterian Foreign Mission Board in New York. She wrote, "I am willing to be sent to whatever location may be deemed fittest," she said. "But being asked if I had a preference, my thoughts turned to Siam... I do not, however, set my heart on any one place, but rather pray that wherever it may be will be the appointed one, that what powers I possess may be used to the best advantage." And in a letter to a friend just before she left for China she said, "I have had developed in me a liking for medical study, although I did not seriously think of the matter until late. It seemed to me such an utter impossibility to carry out the design, as I am without means and without friends to assist. "But I do trust that I am by divine appointment fitted for this work. My age – twenty-one next January. Oh! I just long to do this work."

2) Be an example

13:12-15

- Read the text.
- Eleanor Chestnut was stellar in the way she followed in her Savior's footsteps. In an article entitled, "A Bathroom, a Leg and \$1.50", author Jon Clayton writes, "On August 7, 1893 Eleanor was appointed a medical missionary and assigned to south China. Her work there was complicated by a poor grasp of the language and by impoverished conditions, and she continually found herself in arduous straits. She on one occasion told her supporters back home that a local doctor gave her the following prescription for healing ulcers: "You must catch some little rats whose eyes are not yet open, pound them to a jelly, and add lime and peanut oil. Warranted to cure any kind of an ulcer." (Joshua Project). On one occasion she became responsible for a demented patient who had ruined his brain with opium. "He thinks he is continually being pursued by demons," she wrote a friend. "I have no place for him but my study. He is sometimes violent and has to be carefully watched. So I am sitting here on guard now." But her affection for the people of Lien-Chou was boundless. She used her own bathroom as an operating room, and once used skin from her own leg as a graft for a coolie whose own leg was healing poorly following surgery.

She established a women's hospital in Lien-Chou, living on \$1.50 a month so the rest of her salary could be used to buy bricks.”

3) Remember who you are

13:16-17

- We are servants of a great Master. We are messengers of a great Sovereign. We love as He loves. We serve as He serves and we are happy to do so. We trust Him as to where He sends us. We trust Him as to whom He sends us.
- The same day she died, the Presbyterian Foreign Missions Board received a letter from Dr. Chestnut which she had written weeks earlier. In it she wrote a poem concerning her own questions concerning divine guidance:

Being in doubt, I say

Lord, make it plain!

Which is the true, safe way?

Which would be in vain?

I am not wise to know,

Not sure of foot to go,

My blind eyes cannot see

What is so clear to Thee;

Lord, make it clear to me.

Being perplexed, I say,

Lord make it right!  
 Night is as day to Thee,  
 Darkness as light.  
 I am afraid to touch  
 Things that involve so much;  
 My trembling hand may shake,  
 My skillness hand may break-  
 Thine can make no mistake.

Jesus served His disciples because of His humility, love and trust in the Father. Eleanor Chestnutt did the same.

II. Our love for others will show the nations we are Jesus' disciples 13:35

- C. S. Lewis well said, “It is probably impossible to love any human being simply ‘too much.’ We may love him too much in proportion to our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the man, that constitutes the inordinacy.” (*Four Loves*, 170).
- Eleanor Chestnut loved her Savior and because she loved Him she beautifully loved others, even those deemed unlovable by many. Immersing herself into the world of the needy, she gave no regard to race, ethnicity, gender or any other social or cultural distinction.

- “My life is lived so much among unlovely and unlovable people that I have learned to have great sympathy and great love for them.” (E. Chestnut)

### 1) Our love for others is missiological

- Do you see it in our text? “All people.” The nations are in view here. All people will know by the way we live and love, by the way we serve and die. They will know that we belong to Jesus. That we follow and trust in Jesus.
- “I don’t think we are in any danger, and if we are, we might as well die suddenly in God’s work as by some long drawn-out illness at home” (E. Chestnut).
- One year she asked the Board to send another physician to take her hospital at Lien-Chou and to permit her to move to an out-lying city where no work was being done saying that she was not afraid to live alone. But the Board felt that the plan was unwise. It indicated, however, her splendid courage and zeal. During her furlough she heard Dr. Fenn of Peking in an address on China say that if he had many lives he would gladly give them all for that country. She turned to a friend and said, “I honestly believe that I could say the same.”

### 2) Our love for others is irrefutable



- We are known to belong to Jesus by the way we love others. This kind of love is a risk, but it is worth it. C. S. Lewis said it like this, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.” (*Four Loves*, 169).
- Eleanor Chestnut loved like this: In *Christ-like love (Dr. Eleanor Chestnut)*, the “Free Jordan Missions” wrote, “Dr. Eleanor Chestnut was a medical missionary to China, and her heart was almost literally implanted in those she served. Dr. Chestnut beautifully exemplified Christ-like love. A beggar came to the hospital badly burned, but there was no skin to use for a graft. The next morning the nurses learned that the operation had been performed. When they noticed that Dr. Chestnut was limping, they realized that she had surgically cut and removed a large patch of her own skin to save the victim’s life. They were shocked at such a sacrifice, for they couldn’t understand why she would do that

for a total stranger. Later, during the Boxer rebellion, when thousands of Christian missionaries and Chinese Christians were massacred, this servant missionary showed a selflessness that profoundly impressed the Chinese people. As she was being led to prison, she saw a little boy bruised and bleeding. She broke away from her captors, and knelt down to bind up the child's wounds. A few hours later they murdered her for her faith. More than fifty years later, people in China still talked about the foreign doctor whose loving care for others made them think of her Jesus." Tertulian the early church apologist noted how the pagans of his day marveled at the way Christians lived, especially when facing persecution and martyrdom. He simply wrote, "see how they love one another... how they are ready even to die for one another."

### Conclusion

In John 15:12-13 Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." He loved us. He served us. He died for us. Eleanor Chestnut paid the ultimate price as she followed in the footsteps of her Lord and King.

- On October 29, 1905, at the height of anti-foreign sentiment in China, three new missionaries arrived at the Lien-Chou hospital; a single woman, and a married couple with their 11-year-old daughter. Less than 48 hours later a Chinese mob attacked the hospital. The little girl was stabbed to death and thrown in the river. Her parents and the single woman were clubbed to death. Eleanor might have safely escaped, but she returned to the area of danger to help her fellow missionaries. Four men from the mob threw Dr. Chestnut into the river then one of them speared her with a pitchfork – “once in the neck, once in the breast, and once in the lower part of the abdomen.” The other men jumped in the water and held Dr. Chestnut under till she drowned. She was only 37 years old. One account of her martyrdom notes, “The last act of Dr. Chestnut, one of characteristic thoughtfulness and unselfishness, was to tear off a portion of her skirt and bind up an ugly gash on the head of a Chinese boy who had been accidentally struck by a stone. Her last words were a plea for Mr. and Mrs. Peale. She told the mob to kill her if they desired to do so, but to spare the new missionaries who had just arrived and who could not possibly have offended them.” Her words went unheeded.
- The death of Eleanor and the others was reported in the *NY Times* on November 2, 1905. Reverend Arthur J. Brown, in summarizing their deaths

said, “All of these beloved missionaries had unreservedly consecrated themselves to the service of Christ. They were ready to go at any time that the Master called. They were faithful unto death, and they have received the martyr’s crown. May God give unto us all like fidelity! In the immortal words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, “We should ‘be dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.”

- Back home, the story of the courage of the missionaries caused others to wish to follow in their footsteps. The church decided to redouble their missionary efforts in Lien-Chou. Several men stepped in to take over the work. Funds were raised for the mission as a memorial to the martyrs, and in 1907 Dr. Elizabeth Carper arrived to administrate the women’s hospital in Dr. Chestnut’s place. In 1915, 300 believers worshiped at the Lien-Chou church. The work went on, and we still remember the courage God gave to little orphan girl from Waterloo, Iowa.
- On the wall of one of the rooms of the Presbyterian Foreign Missions board, in New York City, is a bronze memorial tablet bearing this inscription:  
 In Loving Memory  
 Of the

Missionary Martyrs

Of Lien-Chou, China,

Eleanor Chestnut, A.I.D

Mrs. Ella Wood Machle

And her little daughter Amy

Rev. John Rogers Peale

Mrs. Rebecca Gillespie Peale

Who, for Christ's sake, suffered cruel death at

Lien-Chou, China, October 28, 1905.

“They loved not their lives unto the death.”

Rev. xii.11.

“They climbed the steep ascent of heaven

Through peril, toil, and pain;

O God, to us may grace be given

To follow in their train.”

- John Piper sums it up perfectly: “this is what Jesus is calling for among us...Go low in foot-washing-like service to one another. Lay down your lives, your privileges, for one another. Love your brothers and sisters across all racial and ethnic lines. Love the weakest and oldest and youngest. Love

the disabled. Love the lonely trouble maker...How blessed the church...  
that loves like this" ("As I Have Loved You, Love One Another", 3-17-12).