

A NEW COMMANDMENT

John 13:31-35

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A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another (Jn. 13:34).

A few years ago, my family and I lived in Florida, and one of the things I most enjoyed there was the beauty of its skies. I often stopped and looked upwards, entranced by the deep blue canopy and the luminous sunshine. But the best moments were when the clouds that had burdened the sky all parted. Especially in the first moments when the sky was clear, the beauty of its color and the radiance of light refreshed and lifted the heart with joy.

Something similar takes place when there is a gathering of friends that has been burdened by the presence of one with a contrary spirit. While he is present, the fellowship is tense and strained. But immediately upon his leaving there is a lightening of spirits and an elevation of the conversation, like a symphony that has changed to a higher key. This evidently was the effect of the departure of Judas Iscariot from the gathering of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. Immediately after the exit of Judas, Jesus turned to the highest of all themes. John recounts: "When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him'" (Jn. 13:31).

GOD'S LOVE GLORIFIED

The departure of Judas not only unburdened the fellowship of Jesus and his disciples, but it also set in motion a train of events that would lead directly to the cross. Jesus foresaw his betrayal

and told Judas to do his deed quickly (Jn. 13:27). But Jesus saw beyond his ordeal to the ultimate result: “Jesus said, ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him’” (Jn. 13:31).

This plainly states that Jesus saw his coming cross as his glorification. What irony this involves! In the eyes of men, Jesus’ crucifixion was his lowest humiliation. The soldiers mocked him with the crown of thorns and scarlet robe. Matthew records how they reviled him: “‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they spit on him and took the reed and struck him on the head” (Mt. 27:29-30). Many today still think Jesus a weak and pathetic figure as he meekly embraced his tortuous murder. But the reality is that the cross of Christ is mankind’s deepest humiliation, not Christ’s. God sent his beloved Son, full of life and light, and sinful man abused him with all his deadly scorn. Here, the judgment is proved: “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil” (Jn. 3:19). Yet in the midst of that dreadful scene, Jesus found his highest glorification. “Now is the Son of Man glorified,” he exulted.

How is Christ glorified in the cross? First, Jesus is glorified because his atoning death is the central moment of all history. James Boice writes: “Nothing that has happened in the world’s history from the beginning of creation until now, or will ever happen before that day when all things will be wrapped up in Christ, is as significant as the crucifixion.”¹ In his cross, Jesus fulfilled the only hope of man’s salvation. And from his cross flow all the spiritual blessings for which man was originally created and which Christ’s own will enjoy forever.

Secondly, Christ is glorified in his cross by reversing the great calamity that befell mankind when Adam, our first father, sinned. Paul states: “As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18).

Thirdly, at the cross, Jesus overthrew man’s greatest enemy: the devil. He also conquered death and condemnation for all who believe in him. This is why the symbol of the cross has been most precious to

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1033.

all Christians throughout the long centuries of our religion. What is it that most glorifies Christ in the eyes of his people? The answer was foretold by Isaiah: “He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

Not only is Jesus glorified in his cross, but the glory of God the Father is also revealed. “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31). Glorifying means revealing or displaying, and the cross displays the glory of the Father to the world. John Calvin comments: “In the cross of Christ, as in a splendid theatre, the incomparable goodness of God is set before the whole world.”²

What does the cross tell us about God? First, it reveals God’s perfect justice, for even when it was his own Son who bore the guilt of our sins, God did not withhold the righteous sentence of death. Men might well have questioned God’s justice, for during all the long ages it seemed that people had sinned and gotten away with it. Paul admits that “in his divine forbearance [God] had passed over former sins” (Rom. 3:25). Why wasn’t David punished for his adultery with Bathsheba? Why wasn’t Moses condemned for his many sins? And why aren’t you and I suffering in hell this very moment, which in truth we fully deserve? Is it because God is not just to uphold his law? The cross of Christ displays that God is perfectly just, for he has passed judgment on his Son, dying in our place.

But God is also glorified at the cross in his perfect faithfulness. All through the Old Testament, God promised a solution to the problem of sin. Adam gave his wife the name Eve because he believed God’s promise to send a deliverer through her womb (Gen. 3:15). Abraham received God’s covenant because God promised him a multitude of spiritual offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. Year after year, the Israelites celebrated the Passover, celebrating the blood of the lamb that promised provision for the guilt of their sin. The priests daily sacrificed sheep and goats, knowing that mere animal blood could never suffice for their sins but believing in God’s promise of a better savior. There at the cross, God made good on all his promises

² John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 5:68.

of salvation, so many of which seemed hard to believe and for which God's people had so long labored in belief. Had God forgotten his promises? Would God be faithful to the only hope of salvation? At the cross, God is shown to be faithful to every last promise of his Word. As Paul declares, "All the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory" (2 Cor. 1:20).

We might go on to touch upon every single attribute of God to see how they are all glorified in the cross of Jesus: God's power, God's holiness, God's wisdom, God's sovereignty. But in Jesus' teaching here we can see that one attribute of God is glorified above all the rest in the cross: the love of God. The reason for this is that God's love answers the question of "Why?" Other attributes tell us how it is that God could offer his own Son to die for our sins. But only God's love explains why he would do it. God so loved the world that if the only way for sinners to be redeemed from the penalty of sin was for his Son to suffer divine wrath in their place, God was willing to do it. Indeed, so brightly is the love of God glorified in the cross that it is practically never mentioned in the New Testament apart from a reference to Christ's death for us. John writes in his first epistle: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). Nothing in all of time or eternity reveals the love of God so clearly as the cross of Calvary. Therefore, Jesus exulted in his coming torment and death: "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him" (Jn. 13:31).

Despite the great blessings we accrue through the cross, its greatest significance is the glory it brings to God the Father and God the Son. J. C. Ryle comments: "The Son shows the world, by His death, how holy and just is the Father, and how He hates sin. The Father shows the world, by raising and exalting the Son to glory, how He delights in the redemption for sinners which the Son has accomplished."³ This mutual glorification is essential to the inner-relations of the divine Trinity. Thus Jesus continues: "If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once" (Jn. 13:32).

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 3:50.

God the Father is glorified in God the Son, and God the Son is glorified in God the Father, a glory that shines at the cross and then in the resurrection of Jesus. Surely this makes us realize that as we are brought into fellowship with this same Triune God, the grand purpose of our redemption is that we should glorify Father and Son together. And as we become children of God, God will glorify us as he is glorified in us. As the early Reformer Wolfgang Musculus noted, “Those who glorify God shall be glorified by God.”⁴

A NEW SITUATION

As marvelous as it is to think about these things, the best way for us to glorify God’s love is not merely by contemplating it. As Jesus continues, he insists that the new situation occasioned by his departure demands the new commandment of love among his followers, according to the new priority that the world should know that they are his disciples.

This teaching marks the formal start of Jesus’ farewell discourse. The background for all the teaching in chapters fourteen to sixteen is the reality that Jesus is about to be separated from these men who had followed him for three years. It occasions a word of tender care, as Jesus begins by addressing them as “little children.” He then informs them that “yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come’” (Jn. 13:33).

All during the time of their discipleship, these men had relied on Jesus’ loving ministry for them. But now that love would be taken away by the cross. Not only was Jesus’ love departing from the disciples; his love was also leaving the world. His was the only example of true love the world had ever seen. So how were men and women to know the great love of God without the example provided by Jesus? Up to this point, the disciples themselves had hardly shown anything like Jesus’ love. One of the reasons that Jesus had washed their feet was that each of them had bypassed the water basin, refusing to minister to one another. So a new situation would be brought about by Jesus’ death on the cross and the solution would be

⁴ Cited by Ryle, *John*, 3:50.

that the disciples must direct the love that they had for Jesus to one another. William Barclay summarizes: “He was taking a road that He had to walk alone; and before He went, He gave them the commandment that they must love one another as He had loved them.”⁵

A NEW COMMANDMENT

It was because of this new situation that Jesus gave them what he called “a new commandment”: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (Jn. 13:34).

The first question is in what sense this commandment is “new”. This is hardly the first time that the Bible commands God’s people to love. After all, it was through Moses that God said, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Some people think that love is only a New Testament virtue, but they are wrong. The God of the Old Testament is a God of everlasting love and the people of God have always been commanded to love God and their neighbors. Jesus himself gave this two-sided obligation to love as the summation of the whole Old Testament law (Mt. 22:37-40). But just as the “new” covenant Christ brings does not replace but rather perfects the old covenant that preceded it, the new commandment to love brings to true fulfillment the obligation that believers have always have to be a people of love. J. C. Ryle says, “It is called a ‘new’ commandment, not because it had never been given before, but because it was to be more honoured, to occupy a higher position, to be backed up by a higher example than it ever had been before.”⁶

We can make three observations about the newness of this command to love, starting with the *new object* to which Christian love is directed. The command from Leviticus directed one’s love to a fellow Jewish neighbor. The whole context of Leviticus is that of the covenant community of Israel. But the death of Christ opens salvation for all the world, and the ancient commandment to love now includes any believer in Jesus of any class, race, or nationality. Christian love is not exclusive love just as the Christian church is not

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:173.

⁶ Ryle, *John*, 3:46.

an exclusive organization. Christians have not joined a club where they are expected to love people they have chosen to associate with. Instead, we are a community of believers of all kinds, some of whom we find more difficult to love than others. But the new commandment in Christ has a new object that is as broad as the offer of salvation that Jesus sends out into all the world. Alexander Maclaren comments insightfully as to what a difference this has made in history:

When the words were spoken, the then-known civilized Western world was cleft by great, deep gulfs of separation, like the crevasses in a glacier... Language, religion, national animosities, differences of conditions, and saddest of all, differences of sex, split the world up into alien fragments... The learned and the unlearned, the slave and his master, the barbarian and the Greek, the man and the woman, stood on opposite sides of the gulfs, flinging hostility across. A Jewish peasant wandered up and down for three years in His own little country, which was the very focus of narrowness and separation and hostility, as the Roman historian felt when he called the Jews the 'haters of the human race'; He gathered a few disciples, and He was crucified by a contemptuous Roman governor, who thought that the life of one fanatical Jew was a small price to pay for popularity with his troublesome subjects, and in a generation after, the clefts were being bridged and all over the Empire a strange new sense of unity was being breathed, and 'Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free,' male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves 'all one in Christ Jesus.'"⁷

In our world today that is as segregated as it has ever been, the fellowship of Christians is to display a love that transcends every earthly difference. Christians of every kind are bound together in love since, as the apostle Paul explained: "now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:13-14).

Second, the old commandment to love has received a *new measure* in the atoning death of Jesus. F. F. Bruce explains: "The standard of the love which the disciples are to have one for another is the love which their Lord has lavished on them."⁸ "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus taught, "that someone lays down his life for his friends"

⁷ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 11 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10:227-228.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 294.

(Jn. 15:13). In other words, our love for one another is to be marked by the same sacrificial love that Jesus has shown for us. Seldom will it be the case that any of us are literally called to die in the place of a fellow Christian. But true Christian love involves a long sequence of little deaths as we set aside our own pride, our own preferences, our own sense of privilege. Jesus laid down his rights for our salvation, and we are to lay down whatever we think we are entitled to for the sake of our fellow Christians and the church.

Paul described this new love that Christ has brought into the world in the famous words of 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Those words are usually read at weddings and applied in a romantic setting, but Paul’s primary reference was the love of Christ among fellow Christians in the church.

Third, the old commandment to love has been infused with a *new power* through Christ’s death and subsequent resurrection. The source of this power will occupy much of Jesus’ teaching in this farewell discourse, namely, the coming of the Holy Spirit. When a sinner is born again and believes in Jesus, the Holy Spirit gives birth to the life of Jesus and also to the love of Jesus in his or her heart. This is what makes the new kind of love possible that Christians are to display: the power of the God of love in our newly born hearts.

Moreover, as Christians grow this will be seen in an increased capacity to love. Increased knowledge of the Bible is not the primary mark of a growing Christian. Rather, increased knowledge of God’s Word is tested by whether or not our love is growing. Paul went so far as to say that the thing that matters above all is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). This does not mean that doctrine doesn’t matter, for Jesus and the New Testament place a very high priority on truth. But true doctrine – true faith – breeds love. If you cannot love, then you are believing lies. If you are reacting to a situation in hatred rather than in love, then you are not trusting Christ. Indeed, the two great issues of our lives are to learn more and more to know and trust the Lord and to love one another.

The key words in this command are “just as I have loved you” (Jn. 13:34). How humbling this is, because the truth is that none of us loves as Christ has loved us. This is our recurring problem in the home, the church, and the world: how little we know about Christ-like love! But if we seek to grow in love through God’s Word and if we pray for God to give us the love of Christ, then our capacity to love will grow as we become more and more like Jesus.

A NEW PRIORITY

Jesus would soon depart from his beloved disciples. His teaching therefore was given an added force as he gathered with them one last time before the cross. It would be a new situation for them, no longer walking through this world in company with their master. The new situation required that the old commandment to love be given new urgency and power. And it set before them a new priority as the church graduated from its infancy in the days of Christ’s earthly ministry. Jesus therefore concluded: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35).

What is the priority for a Christian? Is it that he or she rise in affluence and worldly power? Is good health the priority or increased knowledge? The same might be asked of a church. What is the top priority: the size of the attendance, the extent of the budget, or the excitement of the worship service? According to Jesus, addressing his own on the night of his arrest, the priority for his followers is that the world should know that we are his disciples.

So the question arises: “How is the world to know that we are followers of Jesus Christ?” A number of answers could be given. We might say, “Because we preach and believe the New Testament teachings.” That certainly is important – so important that we are not even Christians unless we believe the apostolic witness of the New Testament. But that is not how the world knows that we are Christians. Or we might say, “Because we are engaged in good works to help the poor and needy.” That, too, is important, and we are failing in our Christian duty if we are not doing it. But even good works are not the distinctive mark of the disciples of Christ.

Francis Schaeffer considered this in a famous essay entitled, “The Mark of the Christian.” Schaeffer wrote:

Through the centuries men have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. They have worn marks in the lapels of their coats, hung chains about their necks, even had special haircuts.

... But there is a much better sign – a mark that has not been thought up just as a matter of expediency for use on some special occasion or in some specific era. It is a universal mark that is to last through all the ages of the church until Jesus comes back...

Love – and the unity it attests to – is the mark Christ gave Christians to wear before the world. Only with this mark may the world know that Christians are indeed Christians and that Jesus was sent by the Father.⁹

This says that we can be Christians without showing that we are. But if we want the world to know that we belong to Jesus, and if we want the reality of Jesus to appeal to the broken and the lost in a cruel and loveless world, then we have to love one another. As the early church leader Tertullian commented, it was this that impressed the pagan world of his day: “‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another,’ for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; ‘see how they are ready even to die for one another.’”¹⁰

Perhaps most importantly, when we remember that this was the commandment to which Jesus gave priority in his last meeting with the disciples, we will realize that when we love one another we please our Lord. How will we love our Lord Jesus, who is not physically present? By giving to one another the sacrificial love Jesus has given to us.

Jesus said of his cross, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31). This prompts us to ask: “How may God the Father and God the Son be glorified in us?” The answer is that when we die to sin and to self, taking up our own cross to follow after Jesus, and love one another, God is glorified by his people. And this – the glory of God – is our highest calling as followers of Christ.

⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works*, 5 vols. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1982), 4:183, 204.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Apology*, XXXIX.