

A New Command

Our New Testament scripture reading is John 13:31-35 which is Jesus' speaking to his disciples of his looming crucifixion, by which he will glorify God. Then Jesus "reissues" the well-known love command as a new commandment.

Follow as I read John 13:31-35.

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Isn't it great to see the long-awaited arrival of spring? How sweet it is to see new growth and blossoms on trees, and new flowers with colorful blooms. New life is emerging everywhere! It's time to do spring cleaning and clear away winter clothing, and get out the spring and summer attire, and resume those nice walks in the neighborhood. Say "good-bye" to cabin fever and the ruts of wintertime doldrums.

Jesus brought new life to those who were mired in the rut of old religious routines and rituals that had become "old hat" and meaningless. Even the first disciples, the followers of Jesus, belonged to the traditional religion of Judaism that had lost its sense of excitement about the new. The "new" is one of the great themes of biblical revelation. God is always about doing new things, in his creation and especially in the New Covenant, that brings new life and the hope of the New Heaven and Earth. So Jesus gives his disciples, and us, a new command.

When he said this command to love one another is new, no doubt the disciples wondered just how it was a new command. The Jews were taught from childhood the verses of Deuteronomy 6, the Shema, that they were to repeat, saying the Lord God is one, and that they were to love him with all their heart, soul and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). They also knew they were to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). These two formed what was known as the Great Commandment, which Jesus said is the most important in all of the law (Mark 12:29-31). But the disciples needed to be taught about the *newness* of the Great Commandment.

This love command is a new command in its involvement. "I give *you* a new commandment." As recipients of grace and followers of Jesus, we can't love to the extent that Jesus loved us, but we're given grace to respond with the same kind or quality of agape love with which he loved us. Agape love is unique to

both God and his children—a practical, sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of others, regardless of their deserving.

Some psychologists say it's impossible to love unless we've received love. And, even church members who've not experienced the love of Jesus will be unable to obey the New Command. Followers of Jesus love God because, as John says in his first letter, God first loved us (1 John 4:19). We who're heaven-bound are aware we were purchased by the blood of Jesus. Grace enables us to experience grateful love and the desire to love God and one another.

The New Command involves loving one another. Jesus taught the disciples that "neighbor" is a very inclusive term. The disciples had been taught by a religion that had become bigoted and restrictive toward all non-religious outsiders. The Jews had a narrow definition of "neighbor" that was restricted to fellow Jews who agreed with them, looked like them and shared taboos and customs with them. But Jesus redefined for them the term "neighbor." Simply put, neighbor is anyone God puts in our pathway who has a need we can help to meet.

You know Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). An expert in religious law came to Jesus to test him about the way to eternal life. Jesus turned the tables and asked him what his answer would be. The expert religionist said the way to eternal life would be to obey the Great Commandment to love God and love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus replied that if he could do that he would have eternal life. And Jesus knew no one could obey those commands apart from his grace. Evidently the "expert" knew that too. He, wishing to justify himself, and thinking he had been a good neighbor to his fellow Jews, asked Jesus who his neighbor was.

The leaders of the Jews had watered down the teaching of the Law to the extent they could love whom they wanted to and even justify hatred toward others in the name of religious zeal. Perhaps, thought this religious expert, Jesus would say his neighbor was his fellow Jew or fellow legalist. Instead, Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

In the parable, the religious professionals (priest and Levite) failed to show love to their fellow Jew who'd been beaten, robbed and left for dead on the road to Jericho. The one who showed love, mercy and compassion was a despised half-breed Samaritan who of all people had the "right" not to love a Jew. Jesus was saying through this parable that if the expert begins to love anyone he meets who has a need, including his enemy, he has experienced the love of God and the grace of God.

God puts neighbors in our path everyday, including our next-door neighbors and casual acquaintances. Neighbors are all those that God places before us to love. God gives us "neighbors" in serendipitous ways. The New Command is a demand to love anyone, reaching out to them to meet needs.

The Good Samaritan gave evidence of saving grace through the way he loved his Jewish enemy (The enmity between Jews and Samaritans would not be unlike that between Orthodox Jews in Israel and Hamas Palestinians today). And Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount gives an ethic that is possible only for those in the Kingdom of God. Nowhere is this more evident than in his command to his followers to love our enemies.

Only those who are in the grace of the Lord Jesus can love their enemies and desire their well-being. I think of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, who while being stoned to death, prayed a prayer similar to that of Jesus' prayer from the cross, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Once again I'm reminded of the many who face persecution and martyrdom in our dangerous world and the way they consistently ask prayer for their enemies, including radical terrorists.

Loving our enemies is the most Christ-like thing we can do. Jesus loved us while we were sinners and also while we were his enemies (Luke 23:34; Romans 5:1-8). When we love our enemies, we're acting like Jesus (1 Peter 2:13-25). The gospel is the story of God's so loving us he sent his unique and only Son to die for us (John 3:16). We're called to emulate that gospel love. And the grace that saved us while we were Christ's enemies is the same grace that enables us to love and pray for and do good to our enemies, who may be inside as well as outside the church.

When Jesus said we are to love one another, I think he was saying first and foremost we're to love our brother and sister in Christ. In fact, John seemed to understand, according to his first letter, that without true and sincere love for our fellow believer we fail one of the tests of assurance of our salvation:

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

The love for one another must begin in that part of the church closest to where we live—our own homes. Even Christians divorce on the pretext of "no longer being in love." People aren't married because they're in love. You love because you're married and have made a vow to God and one another to *do* love for one another. I counseled with a couple some years ago who were claiming the hopelessness of their continuing marriage because of "not being in love." When I got to the issue of their willingness to obey God I spoke of Jesus command to love, even our enemies. Even if you think of your spouse as your enemy, God can give you grace to do acts of love—practical, caring and sacrificial involvement in meeting the needs of the enemy in your own household.

Sometimes it's most difficult to love those who've been closest to us and yet have disappointed or deeply hurt us. Jesus gives this New Command right before he warns Simon Peter that he'll soon deny him three times. Jesus loved Simon even though he knew he'd deny him. And, after his resurrection, Jesus sought out Simon Peter to assure him of his forgiveness and to restore him to a ministry of showing his love for Jesus by feeding his sheep (John 21: 15-19).

Our willingness to forgive and to be forgiven and to be reconciled with our brother or sister is at the heart of the Christian life. The Christian life has to be lived in community and union with our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. And yet, sometimes it's hardest to love those we call our fellow believers, especially if they've hurt us.

At times we can sympathize with the wag who said,

*To dwell above with saints we love,
O, that will be glory!
But to live below with those we know,
Well, that's a different story!*

The New Command is new in its intensity. When Jesus said his disciples were to love as he has loved us, he said something extreme and intense. These words of Jesus were to cost him his life. Jesus had been showing his disciples his perfect love, but nowhere had it been seen as it was soon to be seen—in the cross. This is the heart of the gospel. This is the message of John 3:16 that God loved us so much that he gave his only Son to suffer and to die for us. Only God could love his undeserving, helpless enemies (Romans 5:1-8).

Jesus' love for us was intense but also practical. Our greatest need was for his gracious salvation. We were helpless and couldn't save ourselves. What Jesus did for us on the cross is the most practical thing he could have done. His grace is what we so desperately need but could never deserve.

Jesus continues to love us in practical, gracious ways. But sometimes his love seems hidden and mysterious. Often we don't understand or easily see his love for us. But God is always good, merciful and loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:13&17). Even though his ways are higher than ours and his thoughts than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9), we can and must trust his ways are designed for our good and for his glory (Romans 8:28). We must trust that he cares about our every need and burden, and that his grace will be sufficient for us (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The New Command says we're to love in the same kind of way he loved us—intensely and practically. His love cost Jesus in ways beyond our comprehension. In our strength we can't love as he loved us. Of ourselves we're self-centered and indifferent toward others. We selfishly want to keep for

ourselves and keep to ourselves. It's natural to do good to those who do good to us. It's normal to keep what's ours and rationalize away any involvement in meeting the needs of others. It's a lot easier to ignore the needs and lost condition of our neighbors, here and also in other parts of the world. Yet God has placed around us all sorts of neighbors, enemies and brothers and sisters in Christ, and we're commanded to love them.

And, maybe some here today don't have a dramatic story about Jesus' loving through you. In fact, you're tired of praying, loving and forgiving that ungrateful, unresponsive spouse or rebellious child. Remember, the New Command says we must love as Jesus loved us—sacrificially, persistently, practically, and intensely. Jesus loved even knowing these disciples would desert him and Peter would deny him. He loved even as he prayed for our forgiveness from the cross. If you're weary of loving, you need to ask Jesus to love through you. He alone can enable you to act with love. You can never feel your way into loving but you can act your way into loving, even your enemies.

The New Command is also new in its impact: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples." The love of God's people for one another is the most essential ingredient and conspicuous component in the church. Jesus says directly that the New Command is new in its impact *on the world*. "By this *everyone* will know that you are my disciples." The world will not recognize us by our profession of faith but by our possession of love. Too many people are claiming to be Christians without living for Christ. The world isn't interested in our theology or denomination either. We gain their attention when they see us loving one another, and desire to be a part of that love for which their souls yearn. Tertullian, theologian and apologist from North Africa, wrote in the early Third Century that people were labeling Christians as those who love one another. People were saying, "See how they are ready even to die for one another."

I pray that Dale Heights will be even more the kind of place where folks can come and see how we love one another and will want to be included in that love.