

A New Commandment

John 13:31-35

There are several people who stand out as having the most significant influence in my life. One of them was my pastor when I was in college. When I went to college, I had been a Christian for several years. By God's grace, I walked with the Lord all through my high school years, and so the very first Sunday after I arrived at college, I began looking for a church. My first year I attended one church rather regularly, then a second one. Toward the end of my second year of college I found a new church, and was quite happy there. The pastor was preaching from the Bible in a very straightforward way, and I continued to grow both under his teaching and with the fellowship I enjoyed there. But I was never quite at home.

But in God's providence, I quickly found a home during my third year of college in a conservative reformed and presbyterian church. I love to tell the story of the first Sunday I attended. I had been driving to my previous church, and one Sunday my car simply wouldn't start. So I walked to this new church that was meeting on campus, recommended to me by good friends whom I knew loved the Lord deeply. I never went anywhere else. I graduated about a year later, transferred to another very similar church where I had moved, and shortly after that sense an unquenchable call to the gospel ministry.

That pastor introduced me to a lot of new words. Like "reformed." And "the five points of Calvinism." He introduced me to the "Westminster Confession of Faith." Indeed, it was there, in that short year I attended that church, that the whole of my thinking theology was shaped. God used that pastor in a very profound way. I still have the collection of sermon notes on took when he preached. His name was Max. I lost touch with him

years ago. But just reminiscing a bit about that time brought me joy this week.

Max taught me a lot of theology in a short period of time. I was hungry to learn, and he was an excellent teacher, clear and concise. I learned about God's sovereignty, about election and predestination. I learned about infant baptism and even church government. I learned about the decrees of God, about providence, and justification and sanctification. All of those things were very new to me.

Some months after I graduation, I learned that Max was leaving that church for another pastorate, and I was able to visit in worship on the last day that he preached there. And I remember his text, for it is the same text which we have come to this morning. He chose this text as a fitting conclusion to what I had judged a very successful ministry. His message is one I understood and agreed with as I heard him preach that day. But it is a message I have come to understand and agree with more fully only in these past few years of my life. And it is a message I desperately want to proclaim as a foundation for my own ministry, now among you.

I want you to know your theology. I want you to understand doctrine. I want you to think straight, as I strive to give you straight teaching from the Bible, which is the literal definition of the word orthodox. I want you to learn what the Bible teaches. I want you to understand the Bible, to think consistently in terms of your doctrine. I want you to be reformed, with all the historical fullness of what that means.

But if I am going to be faithful to teach what Jesus taught, there has to be something more important than all of that. And while I am not emphasizing this in order to conclude my ministry

among you, as Jesus did, and as Max Harris did, I am emphasizing the very thing that Jesus brings to the forefront of his ministry when he had a few final words to say to his disciples.

He called it a new commandment. This new commandment rises to the forefront of all that Jesus wanted his disciples to know and learn from his teaching. A new commandment. So what is,

I. THE DEFINITION OF THE NEW COMMANDMENT.

v.34

The command to love. Now let me be sure to say clearly, this command wasn't really new at all. God had always commanded his people to love, but Jesus clearly brings,

A. A new emphasis upon love.

It isn't new in its essence, but in its emphasis. It isn't new in terms of a change or a difference with what has gone past, but in terms of priority. And it is a priority that Jesus declares clearly and openly to be of greatest importance. That's the newness!

Certainly it's not that up to this point there was no commandment to love. This commandment is not different from all that God has revealed, even in the Old Testament. Just a sampling of OT passages can make that point well.

Leviticus 19:17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

Jesus, of course, quotes that verse when he answers what had been a trick question about the most important commandment. He didn't make up something new and different. He quoted Leviticus. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I

am the Lord."

Or, Deut. 10:12 "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?"

Or with a bit more descriptive definition of what love entails, we read,

Micah 6:8 "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

There is nothing new here in terms of definitions. God's people are called to love one another, but Jesus makes that commandment new in its priority. This command to love is chief among all the commandments, comprehensively summarizing all the other commands. Love, for God. And love for people, for one another.

With a new standard.

B. A new standard of love.

What is love? Many people still ask that question, and many very wrong and false answers are often given. How is love defined? How is it measured? Now this really is new! This is the new standard which Jesus himself provided.

v.34

Don't gloss over those words because they are familiar. Rather, let them sink deeply into your mind and your heart. "As I have loved you..."

And how did Jesus love? Easy answer to that question, but not an easy example to follow. Jesus laid down his life for those whom he love! Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath and justice which we deserve because of our sin. Jesus died for us. That's love!

We hear the same idea in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Eph. 5:1 "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

Now that's new! That's new for a lot of men trying to figure out how to be a good husband. And sometimes we men think, to be a good husband I need to rule well. I need to exercise my authority well. I need to demand and require submission and obedience. And in that we forget entirely what God actually says to husbands,

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. 28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."

So love means to lay down your life for the object of your love. It means to deny yourself, even your own life, your own wishes and your own desires, for the sake and the benefit of the one whom you love.

We speak about rights so much today in our society, defending and protecting our rights. But the real definition of love

is the willingness not to demand our rights. The willingness to lay down our lives for one another.

This is how Paul defines such love in,

Phil. 2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."

We often think of love is very subjective terms, with an emphasis upon what you feel or the nature of your emotions. And while feelings and emotions are often an important element of true love, they don't define what that love is. Here is a definition you ought always to consider,

1 Cor. 13:4 "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, [it] is not puffed up; 5 [it] does not behave rudely, [it] does not seek its own, [it] is not provoked, [it] thinks no evil; 6 [it] does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 [love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails."

So beloved, love one another! Dear friends, fellow members of the Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church in Mt. Airy, NC, love one another! That's the new commandment which Jesus gives to us.

And where you fail, confess your sins freely and fully, that God might forgive you.

Notice, then,

II. THE OCCASION FOR THE NEW COMMANDMENT.

It is this occasion that further emphasizes the priority I've been speaking about.

A. Jesus' human life on earth is coming to an end.

So this is his climax. This is the conclusion to his ministry.

This new commandment is the priority, the final word he wanted to leave with his disciples. And notice his own personal affection, as he addresses those whom he calls "little children."

v.33

Those are words of endearment, not condescension. They are words of affection, words of gentle and personal interest in their well being. He needs to tell them he's leaving, because he knows they will be greatly unsettled. Even a bit dull in understanding, as that lesson has to be repeated several times. But again, no condescension. No dismissiveness. Just a patient explanation of what is going to take place. Jesus will soon be laying down his life, he will soon die. He will be with his disciples in the flesh only a short while longer, and he is going to return to his father in heaven, returning to his rightful place as the second person of the trinity. And he says, therefore, "Where I am going, you cannot come."

But this is hardly a hopeless declaration. Just the opposite. Jesus is triumphantly declaring that his work on earth is ending.

B. Jesus' work on earth is coming to an end.

And notice how he puts it,

v.31

What a marvelous way to describe the triumph of his death!
The son of man is glorified!

Jesus has used that language before.

John 12:23 But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified."

John himself adds,

John 12:16 "His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him."

But what does it mean to be glorified? For us, it will mean to be made perfect in glory, made perfect in holiness. But, of course, Jesus already was perfect. To be glorified also means to be freed from mortality and no longer subject to sickness and decay. And Jesus certainly obtained that, when he was raised from the dead and ascended to the right hand of his father in heaven. But there is even more to it here, for he not only says that he would be glorified, but also that God, his father, would be glorified in him.

In other words, Jesus would bring glory and honor to his father. His actions, his motives, his obedience, would all serve to glorify his father. And his father would honor and exalt him for it. That's what the rather repetitive wording of verses 31-32 means.

v.31-32

There is a strange irony in that, for death on the cross was a shameful thing, accursed by the law. Hanging naked for six hours between two thieves certainly gave no appearance of glory! The horribly painful agony of his suffering hardly seemed glorious! BUT IT WAS.

The crucifixion brought glory to the Father. It glorified his wisdom, faithfulness, holiness and love. It showed him wise, in providing a plan whereby he could be just, and the justifier of the ungodly. It showed him holy, and loving. And just as clearly the crucifixion brought glory to the son. It glorified his compassion, his patience, and his power.

And in those things, in Jesus, the Father was glorified. In so many ways, then, death means glorification. Jesus' life and work on earth are ending, and that's the occasion for this new commandment to love one another.

In all of that, though, Jesus' main point is,

III. THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW COMMANDMENT.

The command does not simply take priority in the declaration of the law of God, but it takes priority as the definition of Jesus' true disciples. Simply put,

A. Love for one another is the mark of Jesus' disciples.

It's the definition of discipleship!

v.34

So please make the application to yourself. This is discipleship. This is the Christian life. This is Christian maturity. Love one another.

We are in danger of creating other definitions, too often. Like being reformed. Don't get me wrong. Reformed doctrine and theology is, I believe the only consistent explanation and exposition of what Scripture actually teaches. But being reformed isn't the new commandment that Jesus gives. Love one another is.

There are a lot of other useful elements of discipleship as well. Like reading the Bible every day. Praying. Going to church. Tithing. Showing hospitality. Teaching Sunday School. Evangelism. Making meals for the sick. I could go on and on with that list. And those are all good things. But Jesus identifies one mark of discipleship to identify his true followers.

v.34

And then the emphasis upon our witness. The evidence you give to others that you are a Christian. What is that evidence? What is it that other people see that marks you as one of Jesus' followers?

B. Love for one another is the visible evidence of Jesus' disciples.

v.35

How sad it is that what people often see is the exact opposite. The absence of love. The world often sees Christians alienated from each other, separated from other. Even hating each other. They see conflict and strife. They see pride, arrogance and self-serving contentiousness. They see anything but the practical demonstration of love.

So this is our challenge. This is our goal. This must be our witness in Mount Airy. This ought to be what people see when they see us as a church. Love for one another.

v.35

John is pretty plain and pretty clear when he later writes,

1 John 3:14 "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. 16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."

James is even more explicit, emphasizing that true faith will

always be accompanied by good works.

James 2:14 “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

So let me ask you, let me challenge you—How are you going to do that? Today. This week.

This is the commandment which Jesus leaves with us. This is the new commandment which summarizes all the others. This is the demonstration of true faith. And this will be our most effective witness of the gospel to the world in which we live.

This is what matters, most of all.

v.34-35