

A New Command

John 13:34, 35

A man asked for a pay raise and got this note back from his supervisor:

“Because of the fluctuation predisposition of your position’s productive capacity as juxtaposed to standard norms, it would be momentarily injudicious to advocate your requested increment.”

The worker went to the supervisor and said, “If this is about my pay raise, I don’t get it.”

“That’s right,” said the supervisor.

Now, that vagueness was deliberate, but language is never perfectly precise. Different people tend to hear different things even when they hear exactly the same words. For example ...

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34, 35

That’s simple enough to understand. That is, of course, if you understand a disciple to be the same thing Jesus understood it to be. It’s crystal clear if you use words like “new” and “know” in the same way that Jesus used them. There is no vagueness whatsoever, especially, if you mean by “love” what Jesus meant. *“A new command I give you: “Love one another.” Nothing to it! Of course, if you do not know what Jesus meant when He spoke of love, you cannot possibly understand His new command to His disciples. Your grasp of the verse will rise no higher than your grasp of love.*

The reason we need to be so precise today about the words used in our text is because of what the world has done to the word, “love.” A half-dozen Greek words represent things that our culture calls love. Jesus is not calling us to a half-dozen different things but to one. Were I to ask each of you to jot down a definition of “love”, I could receive as many different definitions as there are people in attendance here this morning. Is it possible to know what Jesus meant when *HE* spoke of “love”?

An ancient disciple was not a student of his teacher’s curriculum. He studied the teacher himself. His learning was not complete at the point of understanding his rabbi’s content. A true disciple observed that content in the rabbi’s life, questioned his master for clarification and, then, embraced that content, living by it himself. Apart from this obedience and imitation, there was no true discipleship. In Luke 6:40, Jesus said, “A student (or a disciple) is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be *like* his teacher.” A disciple only qualifies as a disciple when he is becoming like his teacher. Just wearing a name is not sufficient.

Picture yourself with those first disciples of Jesus as they gathered with Him in the Upper Room on the night before He died. He has spoken of leaving them for an undisclosed amount of time, but He leaves a new command for His learners to observe in His absence. Your ears burn as you hear your marching orders: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another ...” In this day and age, when certain words can be so vague, to what precisely is Jesus calling us?

I. Love Explained (34a)

“A new command I give you: Love one another ...”

A. Without the Master's Clarification, this Command Becomes Absurd

One's personal notion of love can be less than praiseworthy as the following love letter indicates:

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

Yours forever,
Marie

P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

We use the word "love" quite loosely. We love a car until it starts to get old and the body wears out, or it starts to make strange noises and emit bad odors. Then we trade it in. But, in spite of a worn-out body, a few strange noises and foul odors, we keep Grandpa, because we love him differently. Get the point? We are absurdly vague when we speak of love. We need a more precise understanding of love as Christ meant it if we are to obey Him, much less impact our world in His Name.

If everyone lives by his or her own definition of love, then obeying Jesus' command becomes very easy. I can *love* you, but not *like* you. I can love you, as they say, "*in the Lord*" while I run the other way when I see you coming. If we only love one another as we define love, we will chew each other to pieces when our definitions of love collide. There has to be some measurable standard for love if the term is to be useful. It cannot mean something unique to every person in the world.

If I love something because of the sensual pleasure it gives me, *eros* is the Greek word of choice. *Eros* is sensual love. *Eros* was the Greek name for *Cupid*, the Roman god of love. From *eros*, we get the word "erotic" in its various forms. That doesn't mean that *eros* is always a lurid concept. It is a part of life. But, if we are determined to use the word "love" so loosely as to apply it to pizza, Taco Bell or some favorite hobby or interest, then, we are talking about the passion of *eros*.

Philia was the most common Greek word for love. It refers to the way we most commonly speak of love today. *Philia* represents the mutual love we share with family members or with our very closest friends. When this mutual flow of affection breaks down, so do families, friendships and marriages. This kind of love is admirable and necessary to human relationships, but it is not uniquely Christian.

Agape, the word for love in our text, always describes God's love in the New Testament. Originally, it was a nondescript word for fondness or affection. It was an orphan word, not belonging to any family of words, and therefore, not really connoting any unique nuance about love. This enabled the early Christians to appropriate the word and fill it with the meaning it takes on in Scripture. They drew its meaning from what could be known of God's love for us. He did not love us because we loved Him. He did not love us because of the pleasure we brought Him. He loved us in spite of our indifference towards him. He loved us by taking all the steps needed to restore us to Himself.

Agape became the highest kind of love that Christians can pursue. It described a deliberate good will that works to better others. It is always willful whether or not it is emotional. That is why the *King James Version* translated it "*charity*", not in the sense of some organized benevolence, but in the sense of doing whatever is required to permanently better the condition of someone else.

B. Disciples Can Only Master this “New Command” by Watching their Master

Each man gathered in the Upper Room that night was a Jew, who knew the Law of Moses. Each understood what life under commandments was about. Jesus identified love as His “new command.” The word “love” itself is in a command form. How do we take something so abstract as “love” and treat it as a marching order? We must live for the betterment of our fellow disciples without making that love contingent on whether we receive love as we think we should. *Agape* is not about self-interest.

What did Jesus mean by a “new command”? He had already taught them that love was the “greatest commandment” of the existing Law. Of love for God and others, He had said, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:40). If all God’s laws descend from love, then, why does Jesus now call it a “new commandment?” He had spoken of it often.

Greek had two precise words for “new”, *neos* and *kainos*. If I ask my son to bring me a sandwich, and he brings me something from the back of the refrigerator and says, “You’re in luck. I forgot to take this bologna sandwich to work last month. You can have it.” I say, “I’d like a *new* one.” If the new sandwich is still bologna, it is *neos*. If it is ham or beef, a new kind of sandwich, it is *kainos*.

Had John used *neos*, he would have depicted love as a new rule akin to every other rule. Love would be Commandment #11, but John used *kainos*. “Love one another” is a new kind of rule. The others are now superfluous. When we honor this “new command,” we need not itemize the sins we will not commit against others. It is understood that we will not slander, covet, brutalize or steal. “Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10).

In learning, we sometimes struggle with concepts that we can never really grasp until a teacher explains them to us in pictures that our mind’s eye can latch onto. We have a general grasp of *agape*. It is a kind of love, which is not contingent on reciprocation or merit. But, if the concept is still vague, as disciples, students of the Master, we might ask our good Rabbi for an example.

II. Love Exemplified (34b)

A. Many Dare to Posture Themselves as Experts on Love

According to the *Washington Post* a few years ago, ten-year-old twin girls in Vienna, Va., were awakened by an intruder. The masked man went straight to their bedroom and tried to gag one of the girls, waking the other. The two girls, who had been taking martial arts lessons, beat on the burglar. The ruckus awoke their parents, and their father quickly arrived and beat the man with a table lamp, but he escaped. Their mother recognized the man’s voice. It was the girls’ *Tae Kwan Do* instructor. It turns out he was not all that good at *Tae Kwan Do*, but he did teach it really well. In the field of love, we cannot hope to surpass our teacher, but we must strive to imitate him.

Through the years, I have known many people who were very articulate about love. Some were huggers. Some were loud and gregarious. Some were quiet, with a gentle demeanor. We prove ourselves very naïve when we confuse Christ-like love with a personality style. The biggest hugger I ever knew could destroy you with her tongue over a telephone. One of the gentlest people I ever saw could get awfully nasty when faced with the prospect of compromising. When we confound love with a specific personality type or measure it by some individual of whom we think highly, we reach silly conclusions as to who loves and who does not love, based on surface measures.

Do you want to know that you are expressing your love to others in a manner that Jesus will commend? Here's what you need to do. Submit your life to Jesus. Find out what His will is. Find out how He has gifted you to serve the Body of Christ. Then, do that with all your heart. Love in the church is not a performance. It is not parroting a style. It is loving Jesus with all that you are, and as a natural consequence of that, you will love His church as He has equipped you to do so. Jesus did not call us to judge or monitor the love of one another. He commanded us to love one another.

B. The Teacher Himself Is the Supreme Example of the Love He Commands verse 34b

"... As I have loved you, so you must love one another ..."

Earlier this same evening, the revered Rabbi of the group stripped off His outer garment, wrapped a towel around His waist, and washed the feet of His disciples. The lowliest servant in any wealthy household washed the feet of the guests. It was a demeaning job. Among peers, a basin of water was provided so that anyone who wanted to wash the dust from his own feet after a long trip or a day's work could do so. For a rabbi to so humble himself as to wash the feet of his disciples was very odd. The disciples were utterly perplexed. Only after He finished did Jesus explain Himself:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" ... "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master ..." - John 13:12-16

Without humble selflessness, there can be no Christ-patterned *agape*. This same Apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:16: "This is how we know what love (*agape*) is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. The cross of Jesus is the supreme visual aid for all lessons in love. We must "lay down our lives." If we cannot die to self, we cannot master *agape*. Where rivalry cannot be put to death, where a personal grudge cannot be crucified, where true forgiveness cannot be extended, where reconciliation cannot be pursued, where a point of view cannot be surrendered or a last word cannot be swallowed, there can be no such thing as *agape* love.

A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, age 5 and 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. "Boys, if Jesus were sitting here, I think He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake'" "Good idea," the older said, "Let's play." Then, turning to his younger brother, he said, "Ryan, you can be Jesus!"

Jesus died to demonstrate His love for us. Then, He called us to love one another by saying "No" to ourselves. After all, no disciple is greater than his Master. Love is about an act of will and not just sentiment. If such love were not a matter of willful obedience, then it seems odd that Jesus would couch it as a command. Of all the last orders Jesus might have left with disciples, why this one?

III. Love Expanded (35)

"... By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

"Know" is another precise word. It does not mean simply that the world is informed that we call ourselves Christians. It means to come to a point of full understanding. If the church lives love as Christ modeled it, the world will come to understand Jesus through His people. After all our preaching and promoting is exhausted, the world only begins "to get it" when God's people appear to have as high a regard for the needs and well-being of one another as they do for themselves. The problem is that people look at the church and often see behavior that fails to measure up to even our own standards of love. To truly love one another is easier said than done, as one limerick attests:

*To dwell above with saints we love,
That will be grace and glory.
To live below with saints we know,
Well, that's another story!*

It is another story, but it is also the command our Master has set before us. Where disciples of Jesus measure their love against the love of Jesus Himself, that fellowship will seize the world's attention.

"Now the fruit of the Spirit is love ..." John Stott comments on this link between Spirit and love:

"We hear a great deal about the Holy Spirit today. He is no longer the neglected member of the Trinity. Many people claim rather spectacular manifestations of the Holy Spirit. I sometimes think that he is positively embarrassed by the publicity he is given today. But the first fruit of the Spirit is not power, but love. – John Stott, "The Unforbidden Fruit," Christianity Today, 17 August 1992, 34.

Christians hunger for proof that the Spirit is among them. In that quest, they investigate and experiment with supernatural gifts and sensational prayer testimonies. Worship services are analyzed and altered for all the wrong reasons. Preachers stop preparing messages in the study and start relying on spontaneity, whatever the Spirit gives them, so they say. But, as Stott reminds us, "the first fruit of the Spirit is not power, but love." His biblical role, which is so easily misplaced in our various searches for a spiritual lift, is to reinforce the ministry of Jesus among us – His words, His passion for lost people, His character. It only follows that the first real proof of the Spirit's presence among His people is their obedience to Jesus' new command that they love one another.

If love identifies us as authentic Christians, then Satan must be pleased when we elevate other issues to greater prominence than demonstrating our love in the body of Christ. Doctrine is very important. Keeping our doctrine pure is a measure of our loyalty to Jesus, but Jesus never suggested that doctrine would win the world. Organization is important, but Jesus never said that our structure would prove anything to the world. Only a few things are crucial. Paul singled out three: "faith, hope and love." And do you recall which is the greatest? "But the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

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