

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. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

(John 15:12–17)

Introduction

“Talk is cheap,” they say. Perhaps this is particularly and painfully true when it comes to love. Perhaps this is why we are exhorted by John, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Perhaps he had John 15 in mind. Jesus aimed to leave no doubt as to the kind of love he expected his disciples to show to one another – the kind of love that lays its life down for friends.

As we saw previously, there are 59 “one another” passages in Scripture. Fifteen of those relate to loving one another. This should not surprise us since love is a fundamental characteristic of a follower of Christ.

Of course, the New Testament notes more than one thing as the defining mark of a follower of Christ. For example, Mark 3:31–35 places emphasis on doing the will of God. So, which is it – obedience of love? Yes!

These marks are inseparable. Doing the will of God demands loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And this, of course, leads to the second greatest commandment: to love neighbour as self. Matthew 22:37–40 makes it clear that loving God and loving people are inseparable.

George Bethune writes,

The command to man to love God with all his heart, and with all his mind, and with all his strength, is followed by a command to love his neighbour as himself, which could not be, unless love to our neighbour is included in love to God; for how else can we give all our heart to God, and love ourselves and our neighbour too?

If we love God, we will do his commandments (John 14:15), and, for the most part, his commandments have to do with how we treat our neighbour. For the Christian, our

nearest neighbour is our brother and sister in Christ. Yes, we are to do good to all people, but especially to the household of faith. We are to love one another.

Jesus was hours away from death, and his last words should be listened to closely.

The Context of the Command

Why did Jesus emphasise this at this point? Context always matters, and there are three points of context we must note here.

The Context of Conflict

Jesus was soon going away. He was heading to the cross and then, after forty days, back to his Father. The disciples would be alone, facing a hostile world (15:18–19; 16:1–2). As Judas was making clear at that very moment, the world is not a place of safety for the body of Christ.

Because of this—the world’s hostility toward the church—Peter would later write, “Love one another deeply” (1 Peter 3:8; 4:8).

In the context, these Christians were facing a deep trial. The tendency was to either turn away from one another or to turn on each other. Peter’s counsel was to turn to each other. He learned this from Jesus.

The Context of the Comforter

Chapters 14–16 are often referred to as a “treatise on the Holy Spirit.” Jesus would not leave them alone (14:18–26; 16:7). The commandment could only be obeyed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is for this reason that a church that does the will of God will be seen as an abnormal community and family. The power of the Holy Spirit in a community will be obvious.

The Context of Communion

Prayer features large in these chapters (14:12–14; 15:7; 16:23–24). This command requires the divine help. This should be at the top of our prayer list.

Jesus promised his disciples that they would not be alone. They would be given the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit would forge them into the body of Christ. They were therefore to behave like Christ. As Jesus loved them, they were to love each other. And they were to be praying together about this!

In this way, all will know that we belong to Christ. Behaving like Christ indicates that we belong to Christ.

The Practicalities of the Command

What does this look like? In other words, what is love?

George Bethune writes that love is “a holy, abiding, and vigorous spirit, which rules the whole man, ever directing him to the humble ... fulfilment of all his duties to God and man.”

Note that phrase: “a vigorous spirit.” Love is active. “Love inclines us and directs us to be kind, to forgive, to give of ourselves to one another. Therefore Peter says to us, ‘Above all, love each other deeply’” (Bridges).

Love looks like laying down your life for a brother or sister in Christ. But let’s be frank: Probably none of us will ever be in such a place where that will literally be our position. But there is something very close to this command that we will face.

We will face the loving willingness to be slandered, to be treated unjustly, to be hated on behalf of another. We call this friendship. “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

Love looks like a willingness to love even though the more you love, the less you are loved (2 Corinthians 12:15). As Jesus loved to the end, so we must persist in loving others – to the very end.

This kind of love is amazing, and the Christian desires to have it and to exercise it. So, what is its source?

The Power for the Command

What will produce this kind of love?

Clearly, the non-Christian cannot do this. But the Christian can. The Christian does. And why? Because God has loved us first, demonstrated at the cross (John 3:16; 1 John 3:16–18). The love of Christ, as demonstrated in the gospel, empowers us in this command.

Understanding Christ’s sacrificial love produces devotion to God. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). This divinely-initiated love is to be well-stewarded by those to whom it is entrusted. And a part of that stewardship is exercised in exercising this love to others.

This is the whole appeal here. Jesus was saying, as he did in John 13, that as he had made us the objects of his sacrificial and serving love, it must move us towards the same expression of love to one another.

We should note that, since this is a command, it is therefore a choice. It is a duty, but it must become our desire. Jerry Bridges makes the point: “We should do more than just decide to do acts of love, we should desire to do them.”

We must take responsibility for such growth in grace. To cite Bethune again,

While, therefore, we grow in the Christian life by divine grace, it is our duty to grow in grace. Besides, the quality of grace is such that, though it is strength from God, we must use it. Grace gives no new faculty, but strengthens the faculties which we have.... Hence the fruits of the Spirit are the qualities and actions of the renewed man, not produced without him, but wrought through him.... Let us then be ever mindful of our entire dependence upon the Spirit of God ... [but] let us be ever mindful of our duty “to maintain good works.”

Perhaps the most difficult challenges that confront the command to love one another is that of forgiveness.

Jerry Bridges writes, “The refusal to forgive is the refusal to love. And this is a serious sin.” As Packer highlights, “To recognize that there is someone I do not love is to say to God, ‘I do not love you enough to love that person.’”

In an article titled “Why Should I Forgive Someone Who Accuses Me Unfairly,” the writer appeals to the gospel, and says, “We tell ourselves the gospel so often that it’s easy to forget.” Someone commented on this, “And why it is so easy to subconsciously feel like we don’t have to apply it to *this* [whatever your *this* is] situation.”

This is the reason we need to keep near the cross. Remember, “love gives, even at great cost to itself.... God gave in order that he might forgive” (Bridges). We are to do the same. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*” (Ephesians 4:32). Bridges is again helpful: “In order to forgive our brother, we must be satisfied with God’s justice and forego the satisfaction of our own.”

The gospel is the grace that gets us to the goal of loving one another. But, how do we practically apply this? How can we fulfil our responsibility to love?

First, recognise that love is an inner disposition of the soul produced by the Holy Spirit. We should be saturated with the life-transforming word of God. Consider a few texts that point us to this kind of love:

- Romans 13:8–10—Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.
- 1 John 3:16–18—By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.
- 1 John 4:7–12—Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 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. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.
- 1 John 4:18–21—There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Second, pray that the Holy Spirit will apply this truth to your heart and your daily life. Paul prayed this for the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 3:12), and we ought to pray it for ourselves and for others. As someone has said, “As we see instances in our lives of failing to love, we should confess them to God, asking him to help us grow in those specific areas and be more sensitive to such occasions in the future.”

Finally, we must obey. We must do those things that love dictates. We must do no harm, meet needs, forgive wrongs, put others’ interests above our own, reach out and embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ. This must all be done in dependence on the Holy Spirit, who produces in us what he commands.

When you consider these practical instructions, it may seem, as Bridges points out, that it is all too mechanical. Though, of course, we might become guilty of doing so, nevertheless,

if devotion to God motivates us, then love will grow by the power of the Spirit, who uses such practical means as presented here.

The Fruit of the Command

What will this love produce? Simply, if we love one another, we can expect a harvest of Christians. The “fruit” of a Christian is another Christian.

In the context, Jesus was saying that he had chosen these men – and Judas was no longer with them (see 13:30) – to carry on what he began. He chose them to be fruitful. The fruit of Christ is Christians (15:1–11), and the fruit of Christians is other Christians.

If we are Christians, then we will obey Jesus. If we obey Jesus, then we will love one another. If we love one another, then we will make Christians of one another. We call this discipleship.

Let us all pray and seek the power of the Holy Spirit to make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ by loving one another. In other words, may our talk not be cheap.

AMEN