

A New Commandment

Love without limits

Summary: To stay on track toward becoming a healthy, functioning, and safe community of faith, with members known for integrity, we choose to follow Jesus' example. We choose to love one another as Jesus loves us because that is our covenant with him and our commitment to each other.

Scripture: Revelation 21:1–6; John 13:31–35¹

Date: Sunday, 15 May 2022 (Narellan CCC)

Introduction

Why Should We Expect Closure?

On the May 10 episode of the *Apologies & Explanations* podcast, theologian and pastor Greg Boyd answered the question, “What do I do when evil rocks my world?”² This question was asked by a listener whose faith was in crisis due to not being permitted, by the authorities, to visit a loved one dying of COVID-19. The listener felt a good God would not allow this suffering, knowing how much pain it would cause him. He did not “get closure” and was thus very angry.

It might seem heartless, but I could not help but wonder why should he expect such closure and why this situation would become a crisis of faith?

People die all the time and sometimes those who die are people we love. It is a great blessing to be with them when they die, but this is simply not always possible. We don't have to like this painful reality, but it is a fact of life.

God is good and whatever suffering we experience in life is not, nor has it ever been, his will for us. That he had to send Jesus to become a human person and to suffer was not his eternal purpose, but became the only plan capable of dealing with our fallenness and sin.

God, in his love for us, did not lose hope for us. Why should we lose faith in him when we are not able to find closure with those we love?

Jesus provided a better example of how to love.

What & Why?

There will be many times when the people close to us will disappoint and disturb us, offend and hurt us. Do we stop loving them? No.

What about if those people are members and friends of our community of faith? It would be easy to, but, no, we love one another because Jesus commanded it and provided us

To stay on track toward becoming a healthy, functioning, and safe community of faith, with members known for integrity, we choose to follow Jesus' example. We choose to love one another as Jesus loves us because that is our covenant with him and our commitment to each other.

Let's look at why this command was so important to Jesus and is now important to us.

Explanation

The Context

Our reading from *The Gospel of John*, took place during Jesus' last supper with his disciples and friends.

Judas had just left to betray Jesus (Jn 13:21-30). Jesus knew what this meant for him. Despite the fact he predicted his betrayal and death at least three times to his disciples, Jesus knew they were not going to understand the implications of what was about to happen. In fact, the disciples are going to fight and resist, and then, eventually, abandon him and run away—most notably, Peter would betray him three times (Jn 13:36-38; 18:15-18, 25-27).

Jesus' last supper with his disciples was his last opportunity to say what he wanted to say to them before his death.

That makes the immediate context of this passage one of betrayal, both by Judas and by Peter. And these dynamics of betrayal heighten the character of both glory and love, as described in this passage by Jesus.

The season after Easter, however, is the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension, when he returns to God's side. We then need to consider this passage not only in the context of those betrayals, but in the aftermath, when forgiveness and restoration were offered, when the evidence of Jesus' glory and love were fresh in the disciples' experience and memory.

How did the Crucifixion Glorify Jesus and God?

Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so now I tell you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

(John 13:33)

"Little children", Jesus said to his disciples, "I am with you a little while longer" (Jn 13:33). In the midst of his own anticipation of suffering, he began to prepare the disciples for his death. He spoke tenderly to them, knowing his death would leave them feeling orphaned. While he will promise, in John 14:18, not to leave them in that state, but to return to them, his encouragement here calls attention to the despair that is about to engulf them. It will not feel like a glorious victory, nor an act of love, for him or for them, when it happens.

After the resurrection, the disciples would not revel in the crucifixion, but would come to understand why it was the moment of **Jesus' glory** and an overflow of **God's love**. It would remain a bittersweet memory, though one packed with meaning and the power to transform the human condition.

When he had left, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once."

(John 13:31-32)

In this passage from *The Gospel of John*, we see that Jesus viewed his approaching death as the moment of his glory, as vivid proof he was the promised Messiah. For him, his crucifixion would be the moment when the work of his Father was completed (Jn 13:31-32; 17:4).

According to commentators,

At its root, glory means reputation, and to be glorified means to acquire good reputation. When glory refers to God and even to the status of followers of Jesus, it takes on aspects of heavenly splendour and the wonders of God's kingdom. Thus, when *The Gospel of John* refers to the glorification of God and Jesus, it is probably referring to the manifestation and recognition by the world of their proper heavenly status.

However, there is a powerful irony in *The Gospel of John* around the notion of glory, because it is in the cross that Jesus (and God) are glorified ... Given this, it is fitting that this passage, after announcing the coming glory, immediately announces Jesus' departure.”
(Lewis R. Donelson)³

After his resurrection, Jesus spent time, not seeking fame and fortune, nor securing a publication deal, a spot on *Big Brother*, or a social media following for himself. Instead, Jesus spent time with his friends to make sure they understood his glory and his love, so that their own fallen and sinful condition would be transformed. They would then be emboldened and commissioned to take that good news to the ends of the world (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:18-20).

A Covenant of Love

I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.
(John 13:34)

In verse 34, Jesus' declaration of a “new commandment” is clearly the focal point of our reading.

The commandment to love one another draws on both the clear tenderness of Jesus toward his disciples, as well as the implicit suffering expressed in the preceding verse. The disciples may not appreciate how his predictions of his death were about to come true, but we do. The reader can't help but feel Jesus' pain, which makes his affection that much more palpable.

We would be making a mistake if we were to hear Jesus' new commandment as if it had the status of a legal or military order. Witnessing his tenderness and affection here, we can appreciate Jesus' words as a profound plea and a hope the disciples will “abide” in his way of life and love (cf. 1 Jn 5:2).

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
(John 13:35)

Turning our attention to the final verse of our chosen passage, and imagining the setting, we can't help but notice how it resembles **a covenant ceremony**. Jesus announced his departure, gave a new command, and then noted obedience to this command is the public mark of the new community. This is the new covenant spoken of by Jesus at the Lord's Supper, as reported in Luke's *Gospel* (Lk 22:20).

The command to love one another then is both the organising principle and the sign of the Jesus community. This context of covenant is why Jesus calls the commandment “new”; it is new in the sense that a new community emerges from its gift.

A New Kind, or Degree, of Love

Among early church leaders, Jesus' new commandment raised important questions.⁴ Some were well aware Leviticus 19:18 already commanded Israel to "love your neighbour as yourself". Therefore, what, they asked, was *new* in Jesus' love command?

Some, like Augustine of Hippo, thought the difference from the Jewish command lay in the *kind* of love Jesus commanded. Maybe he commanded a spiritual kind of love, in contrast to a worldly or fleshly love. This could be a spiritual love between those who belonged to God.

Others, like Cyril of Alexandria, argued for a difference in *degree*. While the law of Moses made it clear we are to love God's people *as ourselves*, our Lord Jesus clearly loved us far more than he loved himself. Otherwise, he would have never willingly set aside his exalted status in favour of humiliation, a torturous death, and other sufferings too numerous to mention. No, this required something new for love to go that far!

Who to Love Like This?

Whether it is a new *kind* of love, or a new *degree* of love, Jesus commanded, later theologians noted a tension between the qualifier in John's *Gospel* of "love one another *as I have loved you*", the Greatest Commandments in Matthew's *Gospel* (Matt. 22:34–40) —love God and love your neighbour— and the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's *Gospel* (Lk 10:25–37). There Jesus asked who was the neighbour to the wounded Samaritan? To which the answer is, the one who showed mercy to him. Jesus delivered then the final blow, "Go and do the same".

There is a tension between these three concepts. We are to love one another *as Jesus loved us* **AND** we are to love everyone *as ourselves*. The controversy is not so much who are our neighbours as who **EXACTLY** did Jesus die for?

The issue arose, and continues to this day, because of the way some theologies deal with the question of "election" (e.g., Rom 8:28; Eph 1:4). Did Christ die for "his own" (i.e., the elect only) or for all humanity (i.e., the stranger or the neighbour)? Our answer to this question then determines whether Christians should be concerned only with loving one another or with loving "the world".

In my humble opinion, that **Jesus directed this command to his disciples** means "one another" refers to them, and the community that would form around and because of them (cf. Jn 17:20–26). So, the love of one another is a different love, whether by kind or degree, it is a different love than that directed toward God and that directed toward our neighbours. These are three different kinds of relationships that engage us to different degrees.

Therefore, they are three separate, but equal, commands: Love God; love one another; love your neighbours. Which comes first is not important, as they each feed into and flow out of each other—for example, loving God provides the impetus to love one another, and loving one another demonstrates our love for God. The same can be said for the interrelatedness of all three of these separate, but equal, commands.

For our part, though, it is only honest to state practising the way of love among God's people, is more difficult, for we are a spiritual family, even as doing so makes it easier for us to love our neighbours. Indeed, loving each other, according to Jesus, is the evidence our neighbours need to see so as to identify us as followers of Christ (Jn 13:35). Loving each other is a context in which we practice for loving our neighbours.

In these few verses then, we better understand that Jesus saw his crucifixion and resurrection as the moment of his glory and the complete revelation of God's love. His "new" command then calls together a people who place their trust in him and are willing to live a lifestyle that follows Jesus' example and his way of love. And if we are practising the way of love, that love will overflow to anyone and everyone because we won't be able to help ourselves, nor would we want to.

Application

As one modern New Testament scholar observed:

[This] new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorise and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice. (D.A. Carson)⁵

If he is correct, then it shouldn't be too hard for us to find ways to apply this command, should it?

Lifestyle Over Beliefs

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35)

It is important to note that when Jesus stated our neighbours will know we love God by our love for one another, he did not talk about the importance of the Bible or our adherence to a carefully constructed creed. It seems Jesus wanted us to know that although his people would fight wars over who held correct beliefs, **this was not his primary concern.**

Jesus' way of love is **the way of little children**, not the way of learned theologians and intelligent preachers. The commandment is not about **what you believe**; it is about **how you live**.

Our neighbours will know we are friends of Jesus not because of what we say we believe or because of what truth we purport to know, but because our lifestyle reflects our love for God and for our neighbour in how we love one another. Put another way, we love one another not because of what another person believes but because he or she has chosen to be in communion with Jesus and in unity with us.

Let us pause and consider: Do we love each other, those who are members of this spiritual family with us? How then do we show it?

Do we show our love for each other in our assertions of the rightness of our belief? Or do we show our right belief in our demonstrations of our love?

Love Without Limits

In Karen Dinesen's book *Out of Africa* there is a story about a boy named Kitau. He appeared at the author's door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him but was surprised when after three months he asked her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town. Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but money was not his interest. Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see, up close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for Dinesen and seen the ways of Christians,

he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave; then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her.⁶

The boy wanted to compare the lifestyle of a Christian with that of a Muslim. That's fair enough, I guess. He was not nearly as interested in comparing religious beliefs as we would expect.

What I find saddest about this story is the author wished the boy had been open about his purpose in the job. My question to that regret is, what would she have done differently? Would she have acted more loving toward him because he was investigating her Christian lifestyle? No, her lifestyle should not have changed at all but should have always been characterised by a love for God and for neighbour at all times, in all places, for and toward everyone.

In our reading from John's *Gospel*, Jesus did not give details concerning the content of love; he simply pointed to himself as the model: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another". This is what Jesus does; he lays down his life for his friends.

Having Jesus as a model undoes all the limits. Whatever love might mean in a given moment, it asks for everything from us. Love does not calculate the costs.

If a member or friend of our community does not have the correct beliefs, do we then cast him out? No. Do we bear with what he believes until he comes to believe something better? Yes.

If a member or friend of our community has a tendency to lash out at others when she is upset or offended, do we cast her out? No. Do we bear with her until she learns a better way to interact with others? Yes, of course.

And I could list so many other practical applications of this way of love, but I am sure you can easily imagine your own examples, from your own experience.

Conclusion

To stay on track toward becoming a healthy, functioning, and safe community of faith, with members known for integrity, we choose to follow Jesus' example.

We choose to follow the way of love.

We choose to love God, to love one another, and to love our neighbour.

We choose to love one another as Jesus loves us because that is our covenant with him and our commitment to each other.

Let us pray...

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 *Reknew.org*, 12-May-2022, <https://bit.ly/3wshlXJ> (accessed 13-May-2022).
- 3 Lewis R. Donelson, “Exegetical Perspective on John 13:31–35”, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pg 469–471.
- 4 Joseph A. Bessler, “Theological Perspective on John 13:31–35”, *ibid*, pg 470–472.
- 5 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, England: APOLLOS, 1991), pg 484.
- 6 Gary D. Jones, “Pastoral Perspective on John 13:31–35”, in *Feasting on the Word*, pg 472.