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Sermon Summary #5

What's New about the "New" Commandment? John 13:34-35

You may not be familiar with the name *Tertullian*. I don't of anyone who has named their child after him. Tertullian lived and ministered in the early years of the third century a.d. He was one of the greatest of the early church fathers and was actually the first man to use the word "Trinity" to describe the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He lived and wrote at a time when opposition to Christianity and the Church was intensifying. Although Tertullian was an *apologist*, which is to say he devoted himself to defining and defending the Christian faith against its critics, he was quick to point out that it wasn't any particular theological or philosophical argument that would ultimately persuade pagans of the truth about Jesus. Rather it was *the seemingly inexplicable love that Christians had one for another* that initially baffled and finally captivated non-Christians. In one memorable statement, Tertullian said this:

"It is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. '*See, they say, "[see] how they love one another, . . . How they are ready even to die for one another!*' No tragedy causes trouble in our brotherhood, [and] the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. *One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another.* All things are common among us [except] our wives. (*Apology* 39).

Can we with honesty say the same thing today? I wish we could, but I doubt it. I don't think our love for one another has quite the effect on the non-Christian world today as did the love that Christians had for one another in the time when Tertullian lived. And that is profoundly sad.

Today we come to one of the most famous declarations ever to have come from the lips of Jesus. And yet, despite its fame, despite the ease with which most people can recite from memory such words, I wonder how faithful we have been in putting it into practice. I'm talking about John 13:34-35.

Before we dive into this I want you to notice something Jesus says. Our responsibility to love one another is a "*commandment,*" not a suggestion or good advice or one among many options from which you can choose. Jesus is commanding us to do something. We are subject to the authority of Jesus Christ. We are not the masters of our own lives. We are not free to live however we please. In fact, he will later declare that obedience is how it is known if one genuinely believes in Jesus and truly loves Jesus:

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).
"You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

So, if you bristle at the idea that Christians are saved by grace but still must obey the commandments of Christ, this passage in John 13 will bug you. Of course, Jesus isn't saying that by keeping his commands you receive salvation. He's saying that if you have received his salvation, you will keep his commands!

"New"?

The commandment of God that his people are to love one another is not new. Everyone in that day was familiar with Leviticus 19:17-18. There God spoke to the children of Israel and said:

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:17-18).

Clearly the “newness” of the command to love isn’t in the command itself. It is instead in the pattern or standard or model of our love for one another. It is the “way” in which we are to love that is different due to the coming of Jesus Christ. Never in the history of mankind had God appeared in human flesh and demonstrated his love for sinful and broken people by sacrificing himself on a cross so that they might live forever. Love may well have been required prior to the coming of Christ. But love to the degree and in the same fashion as was seen in the self-sacrifice of Jesus for his church is altogether new. Quite simply it has changed loving forever.

So the place where we need to begin is with the question: *How did Jesus love his disciples?* In what ways is his love for us made manifest? We must answer this question if the pattern or model of our love for one another is Jesus’s love for his people. Here is a handful of answers.

First, he loves his own by spending time with them. In Mark 2:13-14 where his calling of the twelve is described, we read this: “And he appointed twelve (who he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 2:14-15). Note the phrase: “that they might be *with him*.” Jesus did not call the twelve and commission them into ministry and then retreat to let them figure things out on their own. He wanted them to be “with him” everywhere he went, to watch what he did, to listen to what he said, and to enjoy his company and fellowship.

Second, he loves his own by bearing patiently with their struggles and stumbles and stupid responses. Not one among the twelve was ready or prepared for leadership when he called them. But Jesus was committed to helping them grow up spiritually. He didn’t let his own frustration with their immaturity undermine his determination to love them well. Consider a few examples.

At one point several of them got into an argument about which of them was the greatest (Luke 9:46). Instead of taking their cues from Jesus and learning from his humility and deferential ways, they became competitive and played the game of one-upmanship, arguing about who was more important and who would sit closer to Jesus in the coming kingdom. In response, Jesus said, “For he who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48).

On yet another occasion, after Jesus had been rejected by the Samaritans, James and John asked Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54). Jesus was disappointed by their immaturity and probably more than a little offended. The text says that “he turned and rebuked them” (9:55). But his “rebuke” was motivated by love and a desire that they learn from their mistakes. He didn’t excommunicate James and John or kick them out of the twelve and start looking for their replacements. His love for them was incredibly patient.

As if that were not enough silliness on the part of James and John, on another occasion they persuaded their mother to ask Jesus if he would put one of them at his right hand and the other at his left in the coming kingdom. When the other ten disciples heard about it they got angry with the two. Jesus said to all of them: “whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Matt. 20:27).

And who can count the number of times that Peter said something impetuous, ill-timed, or downright stupid?

Add to this the fact that Peter would deny him three times and the others would run away scared when he needed them most, and you can get a sense for the depth of Christ’s love for them.

Third, he loves them by persevering through thick and thin and not allowing their faults and failures to quench the fire of affection in his heart. We saw this already in John 13:1-2 – “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Fourth, he loves his own by teaching them the truth, even when it might be hard to grasp or be offensive to their sensibilities. He never hid things from them but clearly instructed them on what being his followers entailed: persecution, slander, imprisonment, rejection, perhaps even martyrdom.

Our world today has a terrible problem with love. They think they know what it means. *The standard definition of love is that you never do or say anything that might be upsetting or offensive to another person.* You never do or say anything that might get in the way of them expressing their own personal desires in however they choose. To

love someone is **to affirm and approve** whatever it is that they believe about themselves or choose to do with their bodies or their money or their lives as a whole. In our world today it is virtually impossible to say, “You are wrong, but you are loved.” To tell someone they are wrong, they are misguided, they are in danger, they are in the process of destroying their lives both for now and for eternity, is to hate them. To love them is to give them unqualified, unconditional approval and affirmation.

Jesus never did that. He always spoke and acted with the best interests of his people in mind. And often those best interests are served only by his speaking harsh things, things we prefer not to hear, things like:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life [now that sounds very loving; but Jesus doesn’t stop there; he goes on to say]; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

“Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24b).

“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. . . You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:42, 44).

Why did Jesus say such things? He said them out of love. He said them because they are true and apart from faith in him people stand in jeopardy of eternal damnation.

Fifth, he loved them by praying for them consistently. In fact, the entire 17th chapter of John’s gospel, the final chapter in our series of studies in the Last Words of Jesus, is devoted to the prayer of Jesus for his disciples. “I am praying for them,” said Jesus in John 17:9. “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”

Sixth, he loved them by making known the Father to them. Again, in John 17:26 Jesus said this in his prayer: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Seventh, although I could continue to give numerous other ways in which Jesus loved his own, **the preeminent expression of his love for them and for us is seen in his sacrificial death in our place, to bear the judgment of our sin in order that we might have eternal life**. More on this in a moment.

The New Commandment in John’s First Epistle

The Apostle John, who was leaning against the breast of Jesus when our Lord spoke these monumental words about loving one another, took them to heart in a way that we see nowhere else in the NT. This “new” commandment of Jesus had a profound and life-changing impact on John. We know this to be true because it becomes the most important point of emphasis in John’s first epistle. In fact, it is there that John unpacks for us eight critically important truths about this love commandment.

(1) John echoes Jesus when he says that the commandment to love one another is both “old” and “new” (1 John 2:7-8).

“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:7-8).

The commandment in view is clearly love of the brethren. In one sense it is old, insofar as they had learned it before (Lev. 19:18); they had known it from the beginning of their Christian lives. Yet, Christ had invested this command with a richer and deeper meaning. It is new because of the standard by which it is now to be expressed: we are now to love “even as I [Christ] have loved you” (John 13:34). It is one thing to love your neighbor “as you love yourself.” It is another thing to love your neighbor “as Christ loves you!”

If we listen to what John says in his first letter about what makes this commandment new, we see ***there’s more going on than imitation***. It is new, says John, “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining” (1 John 2:8).

John is saying that what makes this love “new” is not merely that we now have a new standard or pattern but that we have a ***new power!*** You are able to love others because there is the light of Christ himself shining into and through you. Do you recall how Paul describes Christian conversion?

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

In other words, when we love as Christ loved we don’t simply copy or imitate his love. ***We participate in it!*** His love is in us and then through us on behalf of others. Our loving others is more than a mere simulation of the love of Christ: it is the manifestation of that very love.

Let me say it again, lest we miss the point. It is not simply that Jesus is our pattern for how to love one another. There is a sense in which he and his Father are also the power by which we love one another. Or, to put it another way, loving others as Jesus loved us is not simply about following his example but also about experiencing his energy.

Look again at 1 John 2:8. We love as Christ loved because “the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” He’s talking about Jesus. He’s talking about the supernatural spiritual “light” that suddenly appeared and enveloped the people who responded to him in faith. We don’t simply love others because we see Jesus doing it. ***We love others by virtue of the powerful, energetic presence of the light of Jesus in us. We participate in him, and in that we receive his power to overcome our selfishness and our prejudice and hatred and disdain for others.***

(2) Jesus said that by loving our Christian brothers and sisters we show to the world that we are truly his followers, his disciples. But John goes even further and says that by loving one another we demonstrate that we are born again.

“Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 John 2:9-11).

In other words, to say that our love bears witness to our being disciples of Christ is simply another way of saying that our love bears witness to the fact that we are born again.

Here the falsity of the claim to be “in the light” (one is either in light or darkness; there is no “twilight”!) is revealed not by disobedience but by hatred. This is strong language from John. He is saying that the failure to love others is revelatory of a moral condition that is the exact opposite of what you are claiming. The one who truly knows God and truly is in the light ***will*** obey God’s commands and love his brother.

We often find ourselves asking the question: *How do I know if I'm a Christian? How do I know if you're a Christian?* Is merely saying so good enough? Is attending church faithfully good enough? Is singing loudly and praying regularly good enough? John says, No, it isn't. It actually matters little what you say and how often you attend church and how much you give of your finances; if you are bereft of genuine, sacrificial, Christ-like love for other believers, you are still in spiritual darkness. You don't know you are in darkness. You actually believe you are in the light. But as John says in 1 John 2:11 you are "blinded" by the darkness.

That sounds odd. We typically think that excessive light leads to blindness, not excessive darkness. But John is talking about spiritual darkness. He's talking about our capacity to see and understand spiritual truths. And his point is that if you are unregenerate and don't truly know Christ as Lord and Savior you are accustomed to spiritual darkness. It feels so natural that you aren't even aware that you can't see the light. The darkness of unbelief actually exerts a blinding effect on the human heart. As Paul said with regard to the unsaved, "the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4).

(3) *The presence of love for the brethren confirms and assures the genuine Christian as having passed out of death into life, whereas he in whom it is absent abides in death, and is manifested as a murderer and one in whom eternal life does not abide.* Again, this is strong language, but look at 1 John 3:14-15.

"We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:14-15).

The Greek word for *brother* is used 15x in 1 John and, with the exception of 5:16, is always used of other Christians. Therefore, it is not simply hatred, but hatred of *Christian men and women* that is in view. Eternal life is manifested not in love for mankind in general but in love for Christians in particular. That isn't to say we shouldn't display a love for all. It is simply to say that there is a unique and special affection that we must have for members of our spiritual family.

John is here setting forth a test of spiritual life. He is telling us that ***a present, on-going practice points to a past reality.*** Love for the brethren now, in the present, is an indication or sign of regeneration then, in the past. Note: it should be stressed that active love is the ***sign*** of life, ***not its procuring cause.*** Our love for the brethren is evidence that we have been regenerated, that we have passed out of death and into life. It is by no means the condition for life. The person who does not love the brethren is exposed as yet abiding in death. Note: John does *not* say that if he does not love he *will* die, but that he does not love *because he is already dead; death is his natural state.*

(4) *This love is certainly an internal affection, a feeling of compassion, a desire for another to experience what is best and most beneficial. But it is far more than an internal passion. It is also the sort of love that expresses itself in external deeds of material, concrete kindness, the most explicit of which is a willingness to give one's life for another.* This we see in 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 3:16-18).

Sadly, many are happy to say that they would lay down their life for another Christian brother or sister, precisely because they know they will never be required to do so. Here in the U.S. it is very rare indeed to find yourself in a situation where you are called on to literally lose your life physically so that another might live. But in third world countries where it is a crime to follow Jesus, this text rings all too true.

I say this because we all too often profess our willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for another believer at the same time we refuse to take them a meal when they are bedridden. We declare that we would happily give up our life but then do nothing to lend a hand or give a substantial amount of money when someone is weak and helpless and close to bankruptcy. That is why John says here in 1 John 3:17-18 that genuine, Christian, Christ-like love is more than a verbal declaration: it entails a practical communication of worldly resources to those in need.

Note the shift from the plural “brethren” in v. 16 to the singular “brother” in v. 17. We must be careful not to use “loving everyone in general” as an excuse for “loving no one in particular”!

(5) Christians are obliged to love one another because of the nature of God as love (1 John 4:7-8).

“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” (1 John 4:7-8).

Although we are now and always will be human and will never ourselves become God, still by the power of the Holy Spirit the virtues and perfections of God's personality are to be reflected in how we think, feel, and act. God's moral character is to be reproduced in us. Here John says that since true love is only from God, the one who manifests such love shows himself to have been born of God and to be one who truly knows God.

A Christian is one who has been born of God and thus received of his nature. God's nature is love. Hence whoever does not love shows that he has not been born of God and does not know him. The argument is plain and compelling:

“For the loveless Christian to profess to know God and to have been born of God is like claiming to be intimate with a foreigner whose language we cannot speak, or to have been born of parents whom we do not in any way resemble. It is to fail to manifest the nature of Him whom we claim as our Father ('born of God') and our Friend ('knoweth God'). Love is as much a sign of the new birth as is righteousness” (John Stott, 161).

(6) Don't ever think that merely loving other Christians is enough, as if it can be separated from loving and trusting and believing in Christ himself. Today we often hear it said: “It doesn't matter what you believe. It only matters that you love. As long as your belief is sincere and enables you to experience genuine authenticity in who you believe yourself to be, what you believe or whom you believe is irrelevant.” Now, what would Jesus have to say about this? We know the answer because John the apostle, who recorded for us the words of Jesus in John 13:34-35, provides us with this explanation:

“And this is his commandment [singular], that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (1 John 3:23).

As far as John was concerned, the command to believe in Jesus and to trust him and to embrace him alone as the Savior of our souls is inseparable from the command that we love others who in like fashion embrace and trust Jesus as Lord and Savior. There is only one commandment. The word “commandment” here is singular. People won't

know you are a follower of Christ if you don't profess and make known your belief in him. But neither will they know or care if you don't love others in the way that he loved us. Your love for others provides concrete, visible, vocal proof that your trust in Christ is real and saving.

(7) In keeping with what Jesus himself said in John 13, we are to love one another because of the historical manifestation of that love in Christ's death for us (1 John 4:9-11).

“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” (1 John 4:9-11).

How do we know God loves us? Because he sent to us his **Son**, the most precious gift possible; not an angel, but his **Son**. The word “only” is sometimes rendered “only begotten.” It is *monogenes* (9x in the NT) and is better rendered “unique” or “one and only” (NIV). See Luke 7:12; 8:42; 9:38; Heb. 11:17. It is used 4x in John's gospel (1:14,18; 3:16,18). The stress in each instance is on the uniqueness of Jesus as God's one and only son (the word “begotten” is a poor rendering).

He sent his Son to **die**; not primarily to live or to teach or to exhort or to be an example but to **die**. He sent his Son to die for **sinners** (Rom. 5:6-8); not for righteous people or loving people or kind people or pretty people, but **sinners**. Listen again to how Jesus unpacked this truth in John 15:12.

“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” (John 15:12).

The love of Jesus for us was far more than a line in a speech, far more than a mission statement, far more than a verbal declaration. It was real and he meant it. He suffered in our place and in doing so took upon himself our guilt and the condemnation we deserved and thus satisfied the justice of God.

(8) We are to love others as Christ loved us because therein we see and know the abiding presence of God in us and the purpose of his love for us reaches its perfect consummation (1 John 4:12).

“No one has seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

John says that “no one has ever seen God” (cf. 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; Ex. 33:20; John 1:18). But if God cannot be seen, how then can he be known? In John 1:18 the answer is given: “the only God [a reference to Jesus], who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.” Fine, but why is such a theological declaration included at this point in John's argument? The answer is that

“the unseen God, who was once revealed in His Son, *is now revealed in His people* if and when they love one another. God's love is seen in their love because their love is His love imparted to them by His Spirit. . . . The words do not mean that when we begin to love, God comes to dwell in us, but the reverse. Our love for one another is evidence of God's indwelling presence” (Stott, 164).

In other words, although God cannot be seen in himself, he *can* be seen in those in whom he abides! The full height of God's love for us and the purpose for which it was manifested is perfected or achieved only when we love one another. John's point is that the ultimate end for which God's love as manifested in Christ was designed is not merely our salvation, but *our love for one another*. Loving one another as Christ loved us is evidence that “God abides in

us,” that he lives in us and exerts his power in and through us, and equips and enables us to do what is utterly contrary to our nature apart from him.

Conclusion

So, how might we begin to love one another as Christ loved us?

- We love by ***forgiving*** each other as Christ forgave us.
- We love by ***servng*** one another in humility as Christ served his disciples by washing their feet.
- We love by generously ***giving*** to those in need from our financial and physical resources.
- We love by ***patiently bearing with*** one another when mistakes and immaturity are manifest.
- We love by ***deferring*** to one another in humility and seeking their best interests above our own.
- We love by ***speaking the truth in love***, not by compromising simply because we fear they might be offended.
- We love by ***refusing to isolate ourselves*** from others but by seeking relationships of love and affirmation and encouragement in community.
- We love by always being willing to ***suffer inconveniences and interruptions*** in our schedules if that is what is called for to serve and help and encourage others.
- We love by ***not turning away from or scorning*** those who differ from us on secondary theological matters.
- We love by striving at all times to ***preserve the bond of the unity*** of the Spirit.
- We love by ***praying*** for one another.
- And above all else, we love by laboring in God’s grace to ***enable others to enjoy Christ as their supreme treasure***.