

## **This Is My Command, Love Each Other**

Years ago a South African author named Andrew Murray wrote these words:

The subject of love . . . is one of the most difficult and profound of themes. It is no easy task to ascend to heaven and there behold the heavenly glory as an ocean of holy, all-embracing love . . . and then to return to earth and see how, among men, instead of brotherliness, hatred with all of its sad results has characterized the history of mankind. Think of the state of the world at present, and then realize the power that the Evil One has to divide even God's children from each other in bitterest enmity. What a task . . . to try to recommend this love and to find an entrance for it in men's hearts! And how shall we above all persuade God's children to believe that this life, in the love of God and in love to the brethren, is not only possible but a plain duty, and worth the sacrifice of all to possess and to proclaim it.

It's tough to sing the songs of worship and read the beautiful words of Scripture and then look honestly at our lives and each other and grapple with this issue of love for one other.

What does Jesus really expect us to do? Well, look again at John 15:12, where He says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Jesus not only gives a command, but He also specifically points out that it *is* a command. He repeats the words in verse 17: "This is my command: Love each other."

### **Christ Commands His Followers to Create a Community of Love**

Of course, there is individual responsibility. We see that sense of individual responsibility in other places where, for instance, He says things such as, "Love your neighbor as yourself." But in the command to love one senses that community, shared responsibility, are also in view. We see that in the fact that He tells us together to love each other.

## **A Command Calls for Obedience**

The significance of Jesus emphasizing this as a command is that a command demands and expects obedience. Jesus makes our love for each other a moral and spiritual duty. One thing that's clear is that the certainty of God's grace in our hearts is not a reason to disregard His will for our lives.

A father wants his children to have security in their relationship with him and to know that He loves them unconditionally. But he also wants them to obey. There is going to be a problem in our relationship with God if we think that the certainty of His affection is good reason to disobey His commandments.

God saves us by His grace. We don't have to earn His love for forgiveness. Christ died to conquer evil by the triumph of His love and obedience and to pay for our sins by the sacrifice of His life. He rose again. When we turn to Him as Lord and Savior and trust Him for our salvation, He accepts us and makes us His children. He forgives our sins and gives us eternal life as a gift. He will never lose us or take that gift of grace away. But He gives us this grace not so that we can live looser lives but so that we can live deeper lives. He commands us to obey because we belong to Him and He loves us.

God gives this grace of forgiveness so that we can obey Him from a different set of motives and impulses. He promises grace so that we *can* obey--not out of a fearful, slavish attempt to earn His love but out of the fullness of a love already poured out in our hearts and promised for eternity. The grace of God doesn't provide an escape from obedience but a new motive and means for pleasing the Lord.

One of the interesting things about this particular command to love one another is that earlier Jesus had said . . .

### **This Command Is a *New* Command**

In John 13:34-35 He adds, "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." The force of that is to say, "This is something very special, something unique, for us who are followers of Jesus Christ in this present age."

It's not that there had never before been a command to love. The Old Testament included the command to love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. When Jesus said this was a "new commandment," He meant He was reasserting the old commandment with new force, clarity, and significance for His followers because of His life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

The gospel of Luke indicates that His command to love was first given in a very special setting. Jesus had gone up alone on a mountain to pray while His followers waited at the bottom. When He came down, He chose twelve apostles, and it was when He began to teach them that He gave them the command to love.

It is interesting that what Jesus did was echoing an account from the Old Testament book of Exodus. Moses went up Mount Sinai alone and received the commandments of God while the people waited at the foot of the mountain. Then he came down and gave them to the twelve tribes of Israel. When many people think of the Ten Commandments, they think of a list of ethical rules by which the individuals who obey earn salvation. But that's wrong in a couple of ways.

First of all, even in the Old Testament story, the people had already been saved from slavery in Egypt. They had been redeemed and led by the Lord into freedom. It was only afterward that they received the commandments. Thus the commandments were not the way for them to be saved but a new way of life for those who had already been redeemed.

It is also wrong to think of God's commandments primarily as a set of personal ethics for individuals today. They are that, but that's not all they are. They were not just given to control individuals. They were given in order to create a kind of community. The redeemed people were to be a holy community, a people for God, a community of His people living under His rule. God wants to weave together a new community today.

Think of thread. Thread is fragile. Our human lives too are fragile, but when you take many threads of different colors and weave them together with skill they become a fabric that is strong and beautiful and functional. Christ says, "I want you to allow My love for you and My law of love for each other to weave you into a new community that is strong

and beautiful. I am creating a new community of redeemed people, and I'm giving you a new commandment. Here it is: 'Love each other.'”

On this side of the cross of Christ everything is new. Through His death and resurrection Jesus brought to us a new revelation of the true sacrificial nature of God's love for us. Not only do we have a new understanding of the graciously radical nature of His love in Christ but we are brought into a new relationship with Him and with each other. No matter what our background, through faith in Christ we are all born again into one new family--God's family--and we are all baptized by God's Spirit into one body--the body of Christ. So in this new era of God's grace we are called to obey a new commandment, to love one another.

One of the earliest Christians writers, Tertullian, wrote that in his age the nonbelieving world looked at the Christians and saw something absolutely unique. What was it? Was it that they all had bumper stickers on their chariots that cost \$2.00 and took forty seconds to apply? No, not that.

Tertullian wrote:

It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look!' they say. 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another'" (Tertullian, Apology).

Love is not an optional extra of Christian life. Jesus says, “My *command* is this: Love each other.”

Now, with what kind of love does He command us to love each other? Look again at verse 12. “My command is this: Love each other *as I have loved you.*”

## **Christ Commands Us to Create a Community in Which Our Love for Each Other Reflects His Love for Us**

### **His Command Does Not Mean We Are to Love *Only* Fellow Believers**

Throughout history many tightly woven communities have stressed taking care of each other and loving each other. But how have they treated people who did not share their beliefs or commitments?

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Jesus says that in His community He wants His people to love each other especially but by no means exclusively.

The matter of tolerance is a big issue with people today. I spoke to a woman on a recent flight, and one of her objections to Christian faith was that it is “intolerant.” At the same time, however, she held very strong nonreligious beliefs and was intolerant of other perspectives. What Jesus offers and requires is really different from the unloving intolerance of some conservative churches toward nonbelieving and nonreligious people. But it is also very different from the so-called tolerance of those who claim to be liberal but are often actually very spiteful toward religious people.

What Jesus offers is a clear and authoritative revelation of truth combined with an equally clear commandment about love for people. He does tell us to love each other, but that does not mean we are to love only fellow Christians.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that means all others. Listen to how He put it in Luke 6. There He said that all kinds of sinful people love those who love them in return, and if that's the kind of love with which we love, there is nothing special or commendable about it. Instead, He said, “Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (verses 35-36).

When Jesus says to love one another, He does not mean we are to love only fellow Christians. He does mean . . .

### **We Are *Especially* to Love Other Christians**

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” We are to do good to all people. But that does not make it meaningless to add “especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10).

Believers in Christ share the same sovereign and saving grace. Look at John 15:16, where Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” We share the same Father, the same Savior, the same electing grace,

and the same indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God has given us all the same gift of new birth and new life. We share the same forgiveness, the same promises, and the same eternal destiny. If Jesus teaches us to love all men by virtue of creation, then how much more important it is to love our fellow believers by virtue of redemption.

There's no contradiction here. We don't have to choose between loving all people and loving one another. But we do need to recognize that believers in Jesus Christ share a special bond that calls for special love for one another. First John 4:19-21 says, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

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Again, here's what God is saying: "Love all people by virtue of their creation in the image of God and love each other by virtue of your salvation by the grace of God. Whoever loves God must also love his brother."

## **We Are to Love Each Other with Christlike Love**

Jesus says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:12-13).

It is necessary to understand several things about Christlike love. *Christlike love isn't just feeling; it's a course of action.* No place in the Bible conveys this better than 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7. Here in the Bible's greatest description of love, it becomes clear that love is not just warm feelings. It is a way of acting, living, and treating people. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

No, love isn't just a feeling; it's a course of action. But it's equally clear that Christlike love is not just a calculated course of action devoid of authentic feelings.

I've heard people say something like this: "Look, the Bible doesn't say I have to like everybody. It says I have to love everybody." But they

say this with such an edge that it appears they think it is all right to have a cold, hard, angry heart as long as they try to act correctly on the outside. Others will argue this way: "Look, the Bible commands us to love each other, but you can't command feelings, so the command to love must just mean to act a certain way toward each other." Again one senses that this person thinks it doesn't matter what he feels in his heart as long as he acts nice and does good things for others.

There are some serious problems with a love that doesn't change the heart and come from the heart.

*First, the Bible clearly tells us that we are indeed to love each other not just outwardly but inwardly, deeply, from the heart.* "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

*Second, the Bible teaches, again with unavoidable clarity, that outward actions alone do not equal love.* The great love chapter of the Bible reads, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3). You see, it is possible to do the outwardly giving thing and not have the inward reality of love.

Since we are confronted with the commandment to love and yet faced with a heart that does not feel very loving, it may seem one possible solution is to just *act* loving even though we don't feel loving. "Just do what love is supposed to do even if you don't feel what love is supposed to feel." And there is some truth in that. The fact that you don't *feel* loving is no excuse for treating people badly. So, yes, be loving even when you don't feel loving. But don't settle for that. Address the issue of your affections as well as your actions.

To love with Christlike love, one must deal with the issues of the heart in the presence of God. Of course we shouldn't be surprised at this. What Jesus has been telling us throughout the John 15 passage is that He is the vine, we are the branches, and the fruit He wants will not be found in us unless we remain in Him and rely on Him. Martin Luther said, "Even a stone lying in the sun cannot help but grow warm." So it is with our hard, cold hearts when fully exposed to the warmth of God's love in Christ.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make in the Christian life is to try to change our outward behavior without addressing the deeper, inward issues of the heart.

Would you want the children in your family to have hearts filled with indifference, coldness, hardness, impatience, and bitterness toward each other? Would you be satisfied with correct outward conduct alone if there was no inward warmth and caring? No, and that's not what God wants either.

There is no program that we can put into place to make us love each other. It takes all of us, individually and together, relying on Christ and reaching out to each other with humility and grace. But that's what we need to do and be. A community showing Christlike love.

Christ makes this kind of love possible. If He is your Savior, then you have a source of love that can heal your heart and help you to love others. You can choose to draw strength and comfort from His love for you, then take the deep affection and love that He has placed *in* your heart and love others *from* your heart. That's what it means to remain in Him and to remain in His love as you do what He says.

Let us take Christ and His love seriously. Our capacity to love others from the heart will be in proportion to our faith in and experience of God's love for us. Be careful to remain in His love. Wherever there is a failure of love, bring it to Christ in honest repentance and confession. Ask Him to pour His grace, His healing power, His presence, and His Holy Spirit into each area where there is a failure.

First Thessalonians 3:12 says, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else." The Lord can do that. He can make *your* love increase and overflow.