“A NEW COMMAND”

John 13:18–38

Key Verse: 13:34

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

What are you known for? Some people are well-known as funny, or smart, or strong, or serious. Sometimes we’re embarrassed to be known for our bad qualities. Christians can be known as legalistic or “teachy” or judgmental. But today Jesus tells us to be most known as people who know how to love. Wow! It’s not a concept; it’s seen in the way we actually treat others. People can see.

As we saw in the first part of chapter 13 at this Last Supper Jesus took the opportunity to show his love for his disciples. Though he was their Lord and Teacher, he humbled himself to wash their feet, and he taught them to do the same thing. In the second half of the chapter his example of love gets even harder. He loves even his betrayer Judas Iscariot to the end. And he commands his disciples to love each other not with limited human love but with his kind of love. Finally, Jesus shows his love to Peter in a painful way, helping him get to know himself. In this study we want to think more about the nature of Jesus’ love. We also want to think about why he commands us to love, and how we can keep his command. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

After teaching his disciples to wash one another’s feet, Jesus goes on to another subject. Look at verse 18. Jesus is singling out only one person from among his twelve disciples. And he’s quoting from Psalm 41:9, a song of David. Just as David had experienced the pain of betrayal, Jesus was about to experience the same thing, but in an even worse way. To share bread meant to be as close as two people can possibly be. But such a close, trusted person was about to turn against Jesus. In his last moments with them he was quietly struggling with this. It was hard even to bring it up. Why did he do it? Look at verse 19. He knew how they could be affected by this betrayal. It could cause them to lose faith. By predicting it ahead of time, and telling them it fulfilled Scripture, Jesus wanted to actually strengthen their faith in him. And he took this opportunity to teach something important. Read verse 20. Judas couldn’t accept Jesus because he had a different idea of what the Messiah should do. Judas was hoping for financial gain by following Jesus, but when Jesus made it clear he wasn’t going to do that for his followers, Judas lost all hope and all motivation. He might have also despised the other disciples for not being as smart as he was. To accept Jesus may sound simple, but it’s not so easy. Accepting Jesus is directly related to accepting his followers. We’ve got to learn to accept the real, live people in whom Jesus is working. To do that, we’ve got to overcome our own ideas, prejudices and our own dreams.

Look at verse 21. Here Jesus finally tells them plainly about it. It says he was troubled in spirit. Though he knew it was supposed to happen, he still struggled with it. It shows he was fully human. It’s always hard to be hurt by someone we love. We get hurt when we’re not appreciated, or worse, when the relationship is suddenly cut off. But it’s especially hard to be betrayed. It means the person actually works to bring us down. It’s shocking to experience such treachery. Even great people can be crushed by a betrayal. Some even die unable to get the hatred and grudges out of their hearts. Even our Lord Jesus was troubled when he had to bring up this painful subject. So why is he talking about it? It’s not just helping his disciples overcome the bad influence of betrayal. He’s sharing his agony with them. And even more, he’s giving his betrayer one last chance to change his mind.

How do the disciples respond? Look at verse 22. Except for Judas, who knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, all the others were stunned and dumbfounded. That they had no idea who it was shows both how clever Judas was to disguise his real motives and how little they actually knew each other. But it also shows how genuine they were in following Jesus. Betraying him never even crossed their minds. Look at verses 23–26. These are details only a person who was there would recall. Peter wanted to know which one it was. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, asked him privately. Then Jesus gave him the signal—he would give a piece of his own bread to the one who would betray him.

It was more than a secret signal. By giving him a piece of his bread Jesus was showing personal love for Judas even now. He was trying to get Judas to open his heart and change his mind. It’s hard to love a person we know is critical of us. It’s even harder to love someone who’s about to betray us. But Jesus showed genuine love for Judas Iscariot to the end. With this one small act, sharing a piece of bread, Jesus won over evil by doing good (Ro12:21).

How did Judas respond? Look at verse 27a. For a split second Judas had the chance to repent, seeing how Jesus loved him. But he chose instead to harden his heart. When he only took the bread without accepting Jesus’ love, Satan didn’t miss the chance—he entered into him to get him to do the unimaginable. We’d like to think we’re in control of ourselves, but actually we’re all vulnerable to the power of evil. That’s why Jesus taught us all to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Mt6:13). When Judas gave in to the devil’s temptation, Jesus told him to go ahead and get it over with (27b). The other disciples misunderstood that Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor (28,29). Look at verse 30. It shows the tragic end of someone who refused to receive the love of Jesus. The darkness overtook him and eventually devoured him.

Look at verses 31,32. Most people would have seen this situation as just the opposite: Jesus was betrayed and about to be arrested, humiliated and killed. But Jesus saw it all in light of what God was doing. He saw it all as his glory, and the way to glorify God. He was so sure of it, he said God would do it “at once.” We can see God’s glory most clearly in the suffering and death of Jesus, because it reveals God’s great love for people lost in sin. Instead of focusing on negative things, we need to see God’s glory in the cross of Jesus.

At this moment Jesus continued to be totally selfless; he wasn’t worried about himself at all; he was worried about his disciples who would have to live in this world without him (33). At this moment he wanted to give them the best direction he could give. What was it? Read verse 34. He told them to love one another. Even in a dark world full of evil and betrayal, he told them to love. He especially said to love “one another”—not far away people they didn’t really know, but fellow followers of Jesus whom they really did know. Why was it so important? Read verse 35. Jesus wanted to draw everyone to himself through them. Jesus wanted everyone to know real love, his love, through seeing it lived out in his followers. So loving one another isn’t just so that we will have a nice fellowship to enjoy—it’s to help people currently living in darkness to see the real love of Jesus being lived out in action. Let’s think about two things here.

**First**, “a new command.” In verse 34 Jesus *commanded* his disciples to love. Usually when we think of love, we think of saying “I love you” or of having a feeling. But Jesus isn’t talking about words or feelings; he’s talking about actions (cf. 1Jn3:18). The word “command” implies that loving one another first means making a decision to do it. If we wait to feel it, it likely won’t ever happen. How can we love someone we don’t really *feel* like loving? We *choose* to do it because Jesus commanded it. It may seem contradictory, but if we live by our feelings, we won’t actually learn how to love. We have to *do* loving things for one another even when we don’t feel like it. We *show* love not because we hope to get love in return, but by faith, because our Lord Jesus said to. We may have many good reasons to withhold our love: The person isn’t worthy of our love, or doesn’t appreciate it, etc., etc. But Jesus doesn’t say anything about the other person; he only commands us to love. And he commanded us to love after he himself loved Judas Iscariot to the end. It means there’s no good excuse not to love. It applies to all areas of life—to couples, families, and especially to fellow church members. We choose to love each other not because we are alike or naturally get along, but especially when we’re really different—simply because our Lord Jesus commanded it. To obey his command, we have to repent of our pride, our grudges, our clever ideas and our own thinking and just decide to do it.

**Second**, “as I have loved you.” Read verse 34 again. Why is this teaching to love called “a new command”? Actually long ago in the Old Testament God already commanded his people to love. But Jesus made the command new. How so? Because no one ever loved the way Jesus did. Even David, known as a man after God’s own heart, prayed that God would break the teeth of his enemies (Ps 58:6). But Jesus prayed for God to forgive his enemies (Lk23:34). Jesus gave his life even for those who crucified him. Romans 5:6–8 reads, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus loved us when we did not and could not love him back. He loved us first. It was the most selfless, the highest love the world has ever seen.

But Jesus doesn’t just give us his great love; he tells us to love like him. What? We’re so sinful! How can we possibly do it? The words “as I have loved you” are so important. They tell us that Jesus didn’t just teach us a high ideal or a theological concept of love; he actually showed us how, very personally. When we experience his love for us, we’ve already learned how to love. I can love with the love he gave me. That’s where it all starts. Sometimes we feel like we’ve got no more love to give. But if we remember the love of Jesus for us, we again have something to give. If we’ve been disappointed or hurt, we need to come back to the cross of Jesus, reflect on how he suffered there in my place, for all my ugly sin, and open my heart to his love, and then we can find the way to love again. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” It’s very challenging, but it’s the most beautiful way to live, and he’s the source of all the love we need to do it.

Look at verse 36a. At this moment Peter couldn’t pay attention to the command to love; all he could think about was that Jesus said he was leaving (33). Jesus said he couldn’t follow him now, but would do so later (36b). Then Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (37). It seems like he loved Jesus so much. He really wanted to stay with Jesus no matter what. But Jesus knew him better than he knew himself. Read verse 38. Jesus spoke the truth in love to Peter, not to crush him, but to help him come to know himself, and know his grace, so that he could truly start loving him.

Read verse 34 again. May God help us accept Jesus’ command to love by faith. And may he help us remember how much Jesus loved us, so that we can be filled with his love, love one another, and draw others to him.