

John 13:34-35

Introduction

Last week, we heard Jesus say to His disciples:

- John 13:33 — “Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’”

When Jesus said this same thing to “the Jews” there was judgment in His words. Jesus’ return to the Father was the signal of their final condemnation.

- John 7:34 — “You will seek Me, **and will not find Me**; and where I am, you cannot come.”
- John 8:21 (cf. 12:35) — “I go away, and you will seek Me, **and will die in your sin**; where I am going, you cannot come.”

But when Jesus says to His “*little children*” (His “*dear ones*”), “Where I am going, you cannot come,” there is no judgment. For the disciples, in the midst of the grief of this separation there’s also *good news* because Jesus’ return to the Father—to be glorified in God—is to be the signal for them of their final salvation. *Why* did Jesus descend from heaven? Jesus descended from heaven *in order that* He might ascend *back* into heaven now as the crucified and triumphant *Son of Man* (Jn. 3:13; 6:62; 7:33; 13:3). And so it’s not until Jesus ascends *back* to God that there can be any place for us where He is going or that the way can be opened for us to follow Him there.

Until now, Jesus says, you’ve followed Me wherever I have gone, but now You cannot come where I am going *because now I am going to the Father* (cf. 14:12, 28; 16:5, 10, 17; 20:17). You cannot come where I am going because as yet there isn’t any place for you where I am going. You cannot come where I am going because the way has not yet been opened for you to follow. But this is precisely why Jesus must leave them now. The coming separation is only the necessary prelude to their final reunion (Jn. 14:1-6). This is what explains how even as Jesus looks to His coming departure He can go on to say in verses 34-35:

- John 13:34-35 — “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Why should we bother with being Jesus’ disciples if we’re never to come, ourselves, where He has gone – if we’re never to be, ourselves, in the place where He is? Why should we bother with loving one another as He has loved us if His love for us is the kind that leaves us separated from Him forever? But as it is, immediately after announcing His departure to a place where His disciples cannot follow, Jesus gives them a new commandment — that they love one another, even as He has loved them, that they also love one another. Our love for one another is to be the visible sign, during this period of separation, that we are the ones looking forward to our final reunion with Him. But now let’s reflect on these words a little more. Jesus says: “A new commandment I give to you...” But what is it that’s “new” about this commandment?

I. What is so NEW about the new commandment?

We read already in the Old Testament:

- Leviticus 19:18 — 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.

When asked by one of the scribes which commandment was the foremost of all, Jesus could answer:

- Mark 12:29–31 — “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is *no other commandment greater* than these.”

Obviously, then, the newness of Jesus’ commandment is not to be seen in being “greater than these.” The Apostle Paul could still write some 20-30 years later to the churches in Galatia and in Rome:

- Galatians 5:14 — The whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Romans 13:9 (cf. Gal. 5:14) — 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 neighbor as yourself.”

Is Paul reverting to an outdated commandment? But if he’s not, then how can Jesus say here in John chapter thirteen: “A *new* commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” There are three clues in these verses that help us to answer the question: How is this commandment a *new* commandment?

II. “Even as I have loved you”: A NEW motivation and context for our love

First, see how Jesus emphasizes “*even as I have loved you... you also [are to] love one another.*” Is Jesus saying that whereas before God commanded His people to love each other *much* (“love your neighbor *as yourself*”), now Jesus is commanding His disciples to love each other even “more” (“*as I have loved you... you also [are to] love one another*”)? We know this can’t be true because this would imply a “greater commandment.” The point isn’t the better quality or the greater extent of the love that God now requires but rather the brand new *motive* for that love and the brand new *context* for that love.

The love that was commanded and required in the Old Testament has now been perfectly fulfilled and even embodied in the person of Jesus Christ and the life that He lived. So now the Apostle Paul can say something that would have been impossible to say at any time prior to Christ’s coming and walking among us:

- 2 Corinthians 5:14 — The love of Christ controls us...

- Ephesians 4:32 — Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*.
- Ephesians 5:2 — Walk in love, *as Christ loved us* and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Paul isn't calling us to a brand new kind of love or to a greater kind of love, but to a love that has now been perfectly lived out and demonstrated to us in Christ. So the Apostle John can write:

- 1 John 2:6, 10 — Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk **in the same way in which he walked**... Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.

Prior to Jesus, there had never been any man who had ever walked as Jesus walked – who had ever perfectly fulfilled the law of love. But now *Jesus* has done just that in the love with which He has loved *us*. And so now our love for one another has been elevated not necessarily by becoming deeper or purer or better than it used to be, but rather by being motivated now by the perfect revelation of that love in Christ – by being lived out now within the context of the perfect embodiment of that love by Jesus. Our love for one another has become now, in the fullness of time, not just our obedience to a divine law, but our imitating of one who has fulfilled that law, and so now we can even say that *our love for one another* is an extension, as it were, of *His love for us*. The Apostle Paul says in Galatians:

- Galatians 2:20 — I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but *Christ* who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in *the Son of God*, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Here is the “newness” of that “new” commandment that Christ has given to us: that this commandment has been fulfilled and embodied by the very one who gives it to us and therefore that we love one another, even as *He* has [*now*] *loved us*. Do we fully realize the privilege of being able to see the “walk” God’s people have always been called to from the very beginning now as the life that Jesus has already lived? Do we grasp the redemptive-historical “newness” of not simply obeying the divine law, but now following in the footsteps of the one who has fulfilled that law even to the point of laying down His life for us? Do we see the law *apart* from Jesus or do we see the holiness of God’s law now fully manifested and revealed to us *in Jesus*?—The very Jesus who says to us:

- Matthew 11:28–30 — “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Do we see the law apart from Jesus or do we see the holiness of God’s law now manifested and revealed to us *in Jesus*?—The Jesus who says to us: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, *even as I have loved you*, that you *also* love one another.” Here is the “newness” of that “new” commandment that Christ has given to us.

III. “Even as I have loved you”: A NEW way of displaying and manifesting our love

If our love for one another isn't just our obedience to a divine law, but our imitating and following in the footsteps of Jesus who has fulfilled that law, then we have to ask exactly *how* it is that Jesus loved us. Remember how we saw a few weeks ago that it's the *person* of Jesus as the incarnate Son and the enfleshed Word that has objectively redefined the *definition* of “greatness” in His kingdom. Jesus has symbolically represented this meaning of His *person* and therefore also of the *living of his whole life* by dressing as a slave and performing the task of a slave, washing the feet of His disciples. And then Jesus said to His disciples (and He says now to us):

- John 13:14–15 — If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you an example, that *you also should do even as I have done to you*.

In other words, the “greatest” among us is now the one who doesn't just have a subjective attitude of humility (as all the Old Testament saints did) but the one who assumes the objective status and station of a slave toward those around him. This can only be true because of the unique and unparalleled nature of life in Christ's kingdom – a life which is rooted in the unique and unparalleled nature of Christ's person. The point, therefore, isn't a “greater love” than was previously required, but the display of the same “old” love in a radically new way because of this radically new kingdom context. We love, now, by becoming even as Jesus was to us: willing slaves to one another (cf. Phil. 2:3-8). “A *new* commandment I give to you, that you love one another, *even as I have loved you*, that you also love one another.” Do we see ourselves as willing slaves to one another? Do we rejoice in this new *way* of loving one another because this is the way that Jesus loved us?

So far we've seen two reasons for the “newness” of the command Jesus has given us. First, our love for one another is motivated now by the perfect revelation of that love in Jesus; it's lived out now within the context of the perfect embodiment of that love by Jesus. Our love for one another is not just our obedience to a divine law, but our imitating and following in the footsteps of one who has fulfilled that law. Second, our love for one another is displayed now in a radically new way because of this radically new kingdom context – a kingdom where the definition of “greatness” has been redefined because the eternal Son of God took to Himself the form and the station of a slave. And so now we love one another even as Christ loved us by becoming willing slaves to one another. But these reasons for the “newness” of Christ's command assume yet another wonderful reason for its “newness.”

IV. A NEW object of our love

What did the Law say?

Leviticus 19:18 — 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.

Notice the particular focus of this love: “*the sons of your own people... your neighbor.*” The emphasis, here, is love within the bounds and within the confines of the covenant community (that’s the meaning of “neighbor”). God wasn’t saying that it’s fine if His people bear personal grudges against people from other nations or that it’s fine if they harbor personal hatred for those who aren’t their “neighbors.”* What He is saying is that there should be something different—something deeper—about the love of His covenant people for one another. We can see why this is if we remember that the members of God’s covenant community were to love each other uniquely even as God had uniquely loved them. God’s electing love for His covenant people is different from that general love that He has for all people.

- Malachi 1:2–3 (cf. Jer. 31:1–3) — “I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.”

Again, the point isn’t a personal, vindictive hatred, but the fact that God had set His special electing, saving love on Jacob (Israel) and not on Esau (Edom). And so it’s the particularity of God’s love for His own covenant people that required the particularity of a Jew’s love for his “neighbor” and the “sons of [his] own people.”

But now we need to remember that God’s “Old Covenant love” was given to an *ethnic* people consisting of both believers and unbelievers – an ethnic people who were not all born again. Can you see what this means? The Old Covenant “love commandment” emphasized by default not only love for the regenerate believers *within the covenant community* but also—and equally—love for the unregenerate unbelievers *within the covenant community*. Can you see, now, the “newness” of this “new commandment” that Jesus has given to us? What does Jesus say?— “...even as I have loved *you*, that you should love *one another*.” Who has Jesus loved? This is not the electing love of God for an Old Covenant *ethnic* Israel, but the electing love of God in Christ for a New Covenant *regenerate* “Israel.” This is that special “love” of Jesus for “*His own*” that doesn’t include Judas and that doesn’t include “the world.

- John 13:1 (cf. 13:10–11) — Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of *this world* to the Father, having loved *His own* who were in *the world*, He loved *them* to the end.

When Jesus says that even as He has loved *us*, so we are to love *one another*, He’s speaking now of a love within the bounds and within the confines of a regenerate and believing covenant community. Here is the “newness” of this “*new* commandment that He has given to us.

No doubt there was a special kind of love that existed among the believing remnant in Old Covenant Israel. But this special love couldn’t be the defining mark of the Old Covenant community because the Old Covenant community included both the believing and the unbelieving – because God’s electing love under the Old Covenant encompassed both the regenerate and the unregenerate. But now it’s the particularity of Jesus’ love for “His own” that requires the particularity of that powerful and special love that we have for one another – for our born again “neighbor” with whom we worship; for the regenerate “sons of our own people” who

* Jesus drives home this very point in the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Lk. 10:25–37; cf. Mat. 5:43–44).

are co-heirs with us of eternal life. Furthermore, now it's the particularity of Jesus' love for "His own" that makes our love for one another—for all who are "His own"—*the* defining mark of this New Covenant community. Jesus says: "By *this* all men will know that you are *My disciples* [*My own*], if you have *love for one another*." If we don't love those who are "His own" how can we claim to be His own? If we bear grudges against His disciples, how can we claim to be His disciples?

Of course, the very fact of a New Covenant community assumes a body of truth and doctrine that we all confess from the heart. It's this heart confession of the truth that provides the *boundaries* of this New Covenant community. But *the* defining *visible mark* of this New Covenant community is nothing more and nothing less than the love that we have for one another. "By *this* all men will know that you are *My disciples* [*My own*], if you have *love for one another*." Can you see yet again what's so wonderfully "new" about this "new commandment"?

Conclusion

We saw, first, that our love for one another is motivated now by the perfect revelation of that love in Jesus; it's lived out now within the context of the perfect embodiment of that love by Jesus. Our love for one another is not just our obedience to a divine law, but our imitating and following in the footsteps of one who has fulfilled that law, and so our love for one another is an extension, as it were, of His love for us.

We saw, second, that our love for one another is displayed now in a radically new way because of "this" radically new kingdom context – a kingdom where the definition of "greatness" has been redefined because the eternal Son of God took to Himself the form and the station of a slave. And so now we love one another even as Christ loved us by becoming willing slaves to one another.

And now we've seen, third, that the particularity of Jesus' love for "His own" requires the particularity of that powerful and special love that we have for "His own," for one another – for our believing "neighbor" with whom we worship; for the believing "sons of our own people" who are heirs with us of eternal life.

This is the wonderful "newness" of this "new commandment" – a newness that's bound up with the culmination of all of redemptive history in Jesus Christ. So let us live, then, in diligent and joyful obedience to this command that He has given to us:

"A *new* commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By *this* all men will know that you are *My disciples*, if you have love for one another."