

The Love Command

THE CHRISTIAN'S TASK

John 13:34-35; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Bethany Church

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A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year-old class. After explaining the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," she asked "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat one little boy (the oldest of a family) answered, "Thou shall not kill."

Thou shalt not kill may be all some of can manage at times. There are times when we are deeply hurt, and controlling our anger is like taming Jaws. At times it may be beyond us; and when it is, a lot of damage is done. There's no doubt that periodically we feel hurt, and periodically we are thoroughly tested. Christian believers live under a more rigorous command; however, than "Thou shalt not kill." At Christ's final supper, he said to his disciples:

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. (John 13:34-35, NIV)

Maundy Thursday gets its name from this commandment. We Christians are people who live with a Maundy or a mandate. We live with a particular command. Christ has laid upon us a *must!* Our *must*, our great task, our great calling is to love. It is not a suggestion. It is not an invitation. It is a Maundy, a mandate, a must. We are to love God and we are to love others; and that is the test of our mettle; that is the proof that the Spirit of God is leading us. “By this all people will know you are my disciples.”

People have so many ideas about love. In many cases, love is nothing but selfish manipulation. We treat people well so that they’ll meet our need to be respected and loved. In other cases, love is wishful thinking. We think we love people because we are polite and treat them courteously. Christ gave us a completely different standard. Christ said that we are to love one another as Christ loved us.

How did Christ love us? **First, he made our needs his agenda.** Christ didn't travel around to have a good time, or to build a personal empire. He focused on the needs of people like you and me. Christ's Spirit is here among us today, not because he's trying to get something from us. His Spirit is here to deal with your needs. He's here to deal with needs you feel and the ones you are not even aware you have. We respond to His Spirit when we accept that love, and in turn focus on how we can add value to others, how we can benefit others. Christ's love is a serving love. Have you tasted it? Are you eager to serve? **Second, Christ loved us despite our faults.** All of us have things about ourselves that we don't like. We know, if we are honest—and that often is our problem, we have great difficulty being honest—that some of our actions cause harm. Christ doesn't indulge our behavior. He doesn't say, “There, there, you're only a sinner; or you're only a human.” Christ was fully human. Sin is inhuman. It is inhumane. Christ doesn't indulge us, but Christ loves us. He intercedes for us, pleads with us, and even suffers for us. That's love. It's not “doormat” love; but it's not “there's the door” love either.

Has God given you the Spirit to patiently suffer and endure the faults of your brothers and sisters? Not necessarily with your mouth shut. Christ's mouth isn't shut. His Spirit convicts us of our harmful acts if we'll listen. His love, however, forgives. Will you? Will you cast your lot with people who bring you pain? Christ did, will you? His Spirit does, will you? Christ suffered because he loved us. Will you suffer for one another because you love them? **Third, Christ not only suffered because of our faults, Christ sacrificed because of our faults.** The Bible tells us in Romans chapter five that God showed his love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The Bible teaches in 1 John chapter three that we know what love is because Christ laid down his life for us. The Bible exhorts us to do the same for one another. Are you willing to lay down your ambitions and reputation for one another? Are you willing to love the very people you feel rejected by? Will you sacrifice for the benefit of your Christian brother or sister who hurts you?

It's pretty easy to like people from a distance. It's pretty easy to like people who totally agree with you, and it's pretty easy to find people who agree with you as long as you keep things superficial and light. It's pretty easy to like people as long as you avoid

conflict and stay on their Good side. But you can't love people unless you are willing to get close, unless you are willing to suffer from their bad side; and you can't love people until you are ready to forgive them of their sins which hurt you. That's why Jesus said, *Whoever comes after me, must deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.* The cross always involves putting your interests aside. It always involves the embrace of rejection. It always involves the choice to forgive. It always involves loving people who do you harm. That's the only way we love as Christ loved. That's the very thing that's distinct about people who follow Christ. That's the Christian's Task. That's the *mandate* and the *mark* of walking with Jesus.

Churches often betray this calling over building programs, worship times, church music, pastoral changes or financial decisions. The church of Corinth divided over leadership issues. The atmosphere of conflict poisoned their worship. What's more, it is difficult to know if that conflict spilled into their civic life or if it was vice versa. Whatever the case, spiritual brothers were taking each other to court. They were suing each other.

The familiar passage we read from 1 Corinthians was addressed not to couples preparing for marriage, but to these believers who were wounded by one another and living in factions. God moved Paul to write:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3, NIV)

God was speaking and saying: *it doesn't matter how spiritually gifted you are, love is the task; it doesn't matter how knowledgeable or wise you are, love is your task; it doesn't matter how fruitful you are, love is the point; it matters not how committed you are, love is your call.* Fail to love one another, no matter your grievances, no matter your gifts, no matter your understanding, no matter your success, no matter your genuineness, no matter your sacrifice, and you've failed. You've achieved nothing.

In verse 4, we learn “*Love is patient*” rather than demanding. Love believes in a God who works for our good in every situation; and therefore, it is patient. *Love is kind* rather than harsh. It seeks to contribute, not to control. Love never concentrates on others getting a better deal. *It's not envious.* It trusts God. Love doesn't focus on what people think of you, *it doesn't boast.* It's not concerned that people value you, *it's not proud.* It doesn't demand that people listen to you. *It's not rude, self-seeking or easily angered.* It forgives, for *it keeps no record of wrongs.*

A record of wrongs is a double-edged sword. The one edge can help someone recognize his or her need for repentance, forgiveness and help to overcome some habitual problem. We use a record of wrongs when intervening in people's life to help them confront their problems with drugs, alcohol, marital infidelity, financial impropriety and so on. However, the sword's second edge kills. Once the sword is used, it is forever bloodthirsty. If not discarded immediately, it will indiscriminately maim and kill. Quickly, it becomes *your record* of wrongs. You may not follow Christ and keep a record. You must always forgive, always protect, always trust, always hope and always persevere... for that's love, the measure of our task!

I don't have a nice, three step process for fulfilling our task. I don't measure up. I fall short here and there and sow harm where I intended to heal. When I'm ruthlessly honest and not excusing or defending myself, or lowering God's measure, then I taste love. When I recognize what I am doing and repent, I become increasingly aware of the love that is extended to me, the love that is patient with me, the love that is kind to me, the love that is constantly forgiving me and keeping no record of my wrongs. The more I recognize and welcome that love, the easier it is to express it to others. So believers, here's our task.

This sermon is continued next week as part of a series.