

John 13:34

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[0 : 00] We're in the dying embers of St. Valentine's weekend.

Now I'm sure that restaurants and hotels just love Valentine's Day falling on a Saturday. It's just so convenient. Well, something is certainly in the air.

I'm not sure it's love or the whiff of filthy lucre and profit. I don't know. But it's coming to the end of this particular weekend in any case.

Everybody seems to be agreed that love is a good thing. But what is love? What conception does our society have of love?

Well, it's perhaps harsh to judge a society on the basis of the timing of film premieres or film releases.

[1 : 04] And I acknowledge that it is perhaps harsh to come to a definitive judgment on that shaky ground. But nonetheless, the general release of Fifty Shades of Grey to coincide with St. Valentine's Day is hardly promising in giving us an indication of what our society understands love to be.

This is a film that glorifies sadomasochistic sex. And yet, on the Odeon website, we're told, I don't know if promisingly is the word, I quote, Arriving in cinemas just in time for Valentine's Day.

Fifty Shades of Grey is a date movie which is sure to get people talking and pulses racing. If you have no idea what this film is about, you know, you're probably in a good place.

But there's been a lot of news about it. But it's interesting. Odeon cinemas describe this as a date movie for people in love to go and enjoy, to celebrate love and romance.

The reality is that love as often portrayed, not always, but as often portrayed and even marketed in 21st century Scotland, is little more than a tragic parody of the real thing.

[2 : 27] The love displayed, the love poured out, the love modeled by the one who is love. But this famine of love, if we can call it that, provides a challenge and an opportunity to the church of Jesus Christ.

Love must be our distinguishing and most attractive feature. This is certainly the opinion of Jesus.

Let's read again words that we've read just a few moments ago in John's Gospel. And verses 34 and 35. 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.

I want us to think a little bit about this command this evening. This command to love one another. And the way in which we're going to think about it is by considering some aspects of the command.

[3 : 41] We're going to begin by thinking about the occasion when the command was given by Jesus to his disciples. We're going to think about to whom the command was given.

We've just said it was to his disciples, but we'll pause for a moment just to think a little bit more about that. We'll think about the command itself, the content of the command. What is it that we are commanded to do?

And then move on to what Jesus says about the manner in which this command is to be obeyed. And then finally, really just following the order in which these two verses deal with the matter, consider why or for what purpose we are to obey this command.

What outcome does Jesus predict if we keep and obey this command that he gives us? So let's think about the command along these lines.

First of all, when was this command given? The last sentence of verse 30 is, And it was night.

[4 : 50] And then verse 31 follows, When he was gone, Jesus said. And then there follows words of Jesus that culminate, if you wish, in this command.

And it was night when he was gone, Jesus said. We've read the chapter. We've read this part of the chapter.

And we know who is being referred to there when it says, When he was gone. The one who would betray Jesus when he was gone.

And the language that is employed by John introduces into the arena, Real drama. It's not artificially introduced.

There is real drama here. A chain of events has been set in motion that will, with quite breathtaking speed, take Jesus to his death.

[5 : 49] All apparently is tranquil and secure. Jesus enjoying a meal with his friends. But with these words, When he was gone, There is a chill in the air.

And Jesus, of course, knows full well what awaits him. He has reached a point of no return. The events that lie before him are so imminent that Jesus speaks of them in the present.

There in verse 31 he declares, Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. This is a moment of great weight, of great moment.

Every minute is precious. Every word chosen with great care. And in such circumstances we do well to give due weight to whatever Jesus deems worthy of emphasis.

I think generally we learn a great deal by considering what a man or woman chooses to say on their deathbed, as it were. Well, there's a sense in which this is what we have here.

[7 : 05] Jesus knows that his death is imminent. And so the words that he directs to his disciples carry that additional weight.

It's as if Jesus were introducing the command that we're thinking about this evening with these words, Whatever else you remember of all that I've taught you, and there's so much that I've taught you, and it's important for you to remember what I've taught you, but whatever else you remember, remember this.

This is the heart of the matter. Love one another. Well, let's show Jesus the respect that he is due by giving due weight and due attention to this command given in these circumstances.

Love one another. Let's think about who it is that he directs this command to. Well, we know that those who are gathered there with him are his disciples, but I want to notice particularly the manner in which he describes them.

In verse 33, the verse begins, My children, I will be with you only a little longer. Continues, and then the command, a new command I give you, love one another.

[8 : 22] This command then directed to those that Jesus describes and addresses as my children. Jesus is surrounded by grown men, and from what we know of the disciples, I don't think they could be described as a very touchy-feely crowd, but to Jesus, they are my children.

And this is a designation that they accept without protest, and it speaks, it reveals the kind of love that Jesus has for them.

The love that he has for them is a tender love. It's a paternal love. It's a concerned love. It's a protective love. Jesus here is, as it were, almost like a father, aware of what awaits them, aware of the trauma that they're going to go through, and he's concerned for them.

And this reveals itself in this language that he employs, my children. But this language not only reveals something of Jesus' attitude towards his disciples, it also reveals or speaks of the appropriate response from those he is addressing.

Children are to trust and obey, not to quibble or protest, not look for hidden meanings or get-out clauses, not postpone obedience or consider the pros and cons and see, well, is it in my interest to do what I'm being told?

[9 : 59] No, children are to obey. And Jesus addresses his children, for whom he has, yes, a paternal care and love and concern, but from whom he also expects the obedience that is due from them as their children and the command that he gives them, that he reasonably and rightly expects obedience to, is this command to love one another.

He addressed his disciples some 2,000 years ago in this way, and he addresses you likewise. My children, my children love one another.

But let's move on to the command itself. We've repeated it several times, but let's just think about it now for a moment. What is the command, the content of the command?

Three words, love one another. Not difficult to understand the language. It's not a complicated command really in any way at all.

Jesus loves those he is speaking to dearly. He's very aware of the trauma that awaits them, and he knows that what will hold them together and will get them through what awaits them is this, that they would love one another.

[11 : 25] Jesus also has big plans for them and knows that the fulfilling of his plans rests largely on them obeying this command. Their mission to the world will be hindered, to put it at the most generous level.

You could use stronger language if they fail to love one another. They won't be able to do what they're required to do and what Jesus will give them as their mission if they fail to love one another.

That the command, of course, takes as a given. It presupposes that these disciples are part of a single community or family as children so they are also brothers and sisters.

They can't operate as disciples independently. They're in relationship, and that relationship must be a loving one. What about us as disciples?

What about us to whom Jesus also directs these words or addresses us as my children? As disciples, as children, as brothers and sisters in this congregation?

[12 : 39] We need to know each other. We need to share time and conversation. We need to work together. We need to put up with one another in love. This is fundamental for us to operate as faithful disciples.

It's all very well as a congregation of God's people, and it's important to tick the right boxes in the matter of doctrinal orthodoxy, and that is important.

But if that is all we can do and we fail to love one another, then what we have is a lifeless shell and no more. Well, let's develop this consideration of this command further by seeing how Jesus himself explains what he means by this command, or rather how he would have us obey this command to love one another.

And that brings us to the next aspect of this, and that is how is the command to be obeyed? In what manner is it to be obeyed? Well, we have the answer there in verse 34.

For a new command I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. And really it's this element of the command, this, if you wish, explanation as to the manner in which the disciples are to obey, is what we could call the new element.

[14 : 09] But Jesus begins by speaking of a new command I give you, and that has caused some surprise or some element of difficulty for many because quite rightly people could respond to that and say, well, what's new about this?

The command to love one another is not a new command. We find it repeatedly, certainly on a number of occasions, in the Old Testament that God's people are to love one another.

In that regard, it's not a new command. So why does Jesus speak of it as a new command? Well, I wonder if the reason why he introduces it in that way is because he is expanding it, if you wish, or explaining it in this new radical way that previously nobody could have understood because nobody would have seen the manner in which Jesus loved his disciples.

But these disciples have. And so to them he can say, love one another as I have loved you. You've experienced the manner in which I have loved you.

You've seen that. You've lived that. And so you are able to understand what it is I'm asking of you. The manner in which you are to obey this commandment as I have loved you, so you must love one another.

[15 : 26] The new element is this radical model presented of Jesus' own love for his disciples. They, we, are to love as Jesus loved.

Jesus is love incarnate. He practices what he preaches. He is the ultimate visual aid that would help us understand what kind of love he is talking about, indeed demanding of us.

Just fleetingly, let's think of the love of Jesus for his disciples that's recorded for us and described for us in the Gospels.

We discover it to be an electing love, a persevering love, a committed love, a love that overcomes disappointment and incomprehension, a love that builds up and dignifies, a love that intercedes and protects, a love that involves and challenges, a love that washes their feet, a love that knows no buts, no limits, a love to the uttermost, in the very language that we find at the very beginning of this chapter, introducing the love of Jesus displayed to his disciples.

They had in verse 1, in the second half of the verse, having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love, or he loved them to the uttermost.

[16 : 58] And of course, we know that that love for his disciples would take him imminently all the way to Calvary. And Jesus is saying to his disciples, you know that that is how I have loved you.

You've experienced it. Well, as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. But where do we start in obeying this command?

Well, a good place would be to look around us here this evening. Look around those who are gathered with us. Do we, do you, love these people as Jesus loves you?

This is the manner in which we are to obey this command. But then finally, we have given to us by Jesus what we might call an outcome or a purpose, identified, for obeying this command.

Of course, there is a sense in which we ought not to need a reason or a purpose for obeying. It's right that we obey. But Jesus graciously gives us, on this occasion, an outcome that we can look forward to and cherish and expect as we obey this commandment.

[18 : 17] And the outcome or the purpose is to be found in the following verse. In verse 35, by this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Why? Or for what purpose are we to obey? Well, there's an obvious, clear, explicit answer to that question in the words that we've read. I think there's also an implicit answer to the question that we'll come to in a moment.

But if we begin with what is so evident before us, we are to love one another in order that we would identify ourselves as disciples of Jesus to those out with the family and so draw them in as they see that their longing for love can be satisfied.

What Jesus is saying is that if you love one another, you will demonstrate that you are my disciples. Others will see, they will be drawn in by the love that they witness in you and among you.

By this, all men will know that you are my disciples. All you need is love. Maybe that sounds a little naive or even trite.

[19 : 34] And yet, that is what Jesus is saying. He's saying, this is how the world will know. This is how men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. That is what you need to do and that will be sufficient.

Sometimes, we can be overwhelmed by the manner in which the barriers to presenting the truth seem to multiply in our society.

There seems to be a huge list of do's and don'ts in the matter of evangelism. What you can do and what you can't do and we're told that that's not appropriate and that doesn't work anymore and there seems to be so many obstacles.

Well, Jesus seems to suggest that the matter is really quite straightforward. Not easy, but straightforward. What we have to do is love one another. And we must stubbornly insist that this promise holds today.

This is not simply a description of an outcome. It is a promise that we're given by this. All men will know that you are my disciples. It's not just a hope for outcome, but rather Jesus is declaring this will be the outcome.

[20 : 51] The problem lies not in the promise, but in our inability or unwillingness to fulfill the condition. That's the explicit purpose that Jesus identifies.

But I think we can also, and with this we'll draw things to a close, I think we can also detect an implicit purpose behind this command. And we're going to try and get there by noting how Peter responds to the command in verse 36.

There's this very significant command given at such a significant moment and notice how Peter responds to it. Simon Peter asked him, Lord, where are you going?

How does Peter respond to the command? Well, he doesn't seem to make any reference to the command. What we find in Peter is what we could describe as a quite spectacular indifference to the command.

Peter, in his mind, has greater concerns, commendable concerns, it must be said, the concern regarding where Jesus is going.

[21 : 58] Peter's love and devotion are such that the prospect of being deprived of fellowship with Jesus is unbearable. He must know where Jesus is going. He must insist on going with him.

He can't contemplate being left alone and in many ways that is so commendable. But he's so fixed on this that he simply ignores the command that Jesus is giving.

This loving one another, it's all very well but Peter has bigger fish to fry. matters of greater moment to concern him. And yet as a result he misses the point big time because it is precisely in obeying this command that Peter will find the key to continued fellowship and communion with Jesus.

Not just with his disciples but with Jesus. You see as Jesus goes on to explain in chapter 15 and verse 10. What does Jesus say there?

In chapter 15 and in verse 10. If you obey my commands we've just been considering one of those commands if you obey my commands you will remain in my love.

[23 : 22] This was Peter's great concern to remain in the love of Jesus. To remain in fellowship with Jesus and in friendship with Jesus and his great concern is but you're leaving us.

You're going and where will you go and we won't be able to enjoy your love anymore. We won't be able to enjoy communion with you anymore because you're leaving us and you're telling us about loving one another.

Well that's not going to help me because I want to be with you. And yet in this commandment what Jesus is saying is if you do want to remain in my love. This is the way that you will do so.

Yes I am going but if you obey my commands and if any particularly you obey this command to love one another in that way you will remain in my love.

To put it this way our communion with Jesus is inextricably linked with our love for one another. Our love for Jesus is demonstrated in our love for one another and his love for us is in a very real way mediated through the lives and love of our brothers and sisters.

[24 : 33] If you with Peter very commendably want to be where Jesus is, you want to enjoy fellowship and communion with him and love one another.

And you 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.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for this command that comes to us from Jesus through your word.

This command that is ever relevant and ever urgent and ever central to who we are, certainly who we ought to be. A community, a fellowship of your people, loved by you, and as we are loved by you, so given this challenge and this invitation and this command to love one another, we readily recognize how far short we fall, and yet we would not give up, but rather with your help and knowing that you will give us your help.

Every command that we are given is given with the assurance that you are ready and able to help us obey it, and so with this command, and we need your help, we need the help of your spirit to enable us to obey this command, to love one another as you have loved us.

[26 : 13] It seems a demand that is beyond our capacity, perhaps even to consider, and yet it is not so, for as you command, so you enable, and we pray that that would be our experience.

We pray that we would discover that the promise given of the outcome would indeed be what we can witness and discover and celebrate for ourselves that as we love one another, so those who look on would conclude that we are your disciples, and would be drawn in by the love that they witness.

And we pray that this would be so, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

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