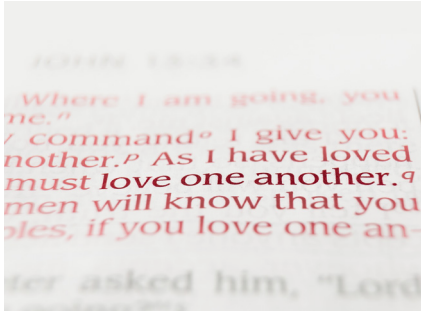


What was Jesus' Greatest Commandment?

By Marco Scouvert



Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world. So, like a wise and loving father who assembles his young children around his deathbed to prepare them for life without him, Jesus gathered his disciples to equip them to be his effective witnesses in the world following his departure. In this affectionate discourse, we find the greatest commandment Christ ever gave: “A new commandment I give to you, that you *love one another*. Just as I have loved you, you

also are to *love one another*. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

The Source of the Commandment

At Mt. Sinai, God gave commandments to his holy community *through Moses*. As the Old Covenant (OC) people of God, Israel was under the binding authority of the Law of Moses. On the evening Jesus gave a new commandment, the New Covenant (NC) was about to be inaugurated *through Christ*. And King Jesus gave his commandment to his holy community. As the NC people of God, the church is under the binding authority of the Law of Christ.

The Essence of the Commandment

Under the OC, Yahweh gave approximately 613 commandments to the nation of Israel. However just as water is the essence of life, Jesus said the essence of Mosaic law could be expressed in two requirements: love for God and love for neighbor (Mark 12:30-31). Therefore, Jesus' apostles taught that love for each other is the fulfillment of God's law (Romans 13:8-10). In the NC, we could say that King Jesus fundamentally gives only one commandment to the Church: *love*. Love is the heart and soul of the Law of Christ. Jesus' law is fulfilled in any situation when we use our freedom to lovingly serve another and bear his burdens (Galatians 5:13-14; 6:2). This is liberating and challenging.

The Breadth of the Commandment

We are to love one another. This doesn't mean that we should not love unbelievers. A man may love people in his neighborhood but will have a peculiar love for his family members. And Jesus' focus here is on the way believers lovingly relate to one another in the household of God. So, if you ask, “Lord, what is my duty toward my brothers and sisters in Christ?” Jesus answers simply, “Love them.”

The Novelty of the Commandment

This commandment is not new in the sense that God has never told his people to love (Leviticus 19:17-18). Matthew Henry said, “(I)t is like an old book in a new edition corrected and enlarged.” Its newness consists in that we are to love one another *just as he has loved us*. And the greatest display of Jesus' love was when he literally gave his life for us on the cross. Christ brought our duty and his dying example together in John 15:12-13: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.”

The Nature of the Commandment

What does it mean to love? Biblical love inevitably leads to a resolved choice to take action to ensure what is best for another person, even at a great personal cost. This is how God loves: “For God so *loved* the world, that he *gave his only Son*, that whoever believes in him should *not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

What does it look like to love? In Scripture, we have the example of Jesus, his teachings, and the instructions of his Apostles. These flesh out love by either specifically telling us what love requires in a situation or generally guiding us to know and do the loving thing. More practically, our love for each other must differ from the world's love for its own. It has to have the flavor of Jesus. It must be a humble, self-denying, others-focused, sacrificial love with no regard for social status, cultural divides, or what the person we are loving does or doesn't do back to us.

The Result of the Commandment

What does Jesus say will be the result of our love for each other? Unbelievers in the world will know that we are his followers. When we sacrifice our lives for each other, such Christlike love will be a strong testimony to the fact that Jesus is alive and has made us children of God.

This is exactly what happened in the early church of Jerusalem. After they repented and believed in Jesus Christ, the apostles instructed them to love one another as members of a new family. They did so in radically sacrificial ways: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:44-46).

What was the result? “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Let's take Christ's yoke upon us and love one another as he has loved us, that it may be a compellingly beautiful magnet that the Spirit uses to draw people to Jesus and the church.