

A New Command I Give to You

John 13

John 13 takes us into a private intimate atmosphere. In John 1–12, John showed us Jesus in the world, the Lord’s public ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem. But in 13:2 we are at a dinner, the Last Supper, Jesus with his inner circle. We are like a thirteenth disciple, watching and listening to what happens between Jesus and the Twelve.

But John never tells us that Jesus was with the Twelve. We know that from the other Gospels, but if we just had John that would not be clear. John does something wonderful: instead of saying Jesus was with the Twelve, John says Jesus was with “his own who were in the world.” Think about that: “his own who were in the world.” By describing the disciples in this way, John deliberately includes us in this. We are all “his own who are in the world.”

The Spirit led John to speak this way so that John 13–17 bring us all into this conversation. We are all in the upper room with them, and then we are all on that evening walk past vineyards to the Mount of Olives, and we all listen to the Lord pray for us in John 17. And the overwhelming emphasis of all Jesus’ final teaching and prayer is that we would love each other and be one with each other.

1 The “Love” Heading: He Loved Them To The End – 13:1

“It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus, knowing that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father, and having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (EN)

This lines us up for everything to the end of John. In one Greek sentence we get three descriptions of the setting, and then the punch line. I’ll put it in four short sentences: it was Passover time. Jesus knew it was time to leave the world and go to the Father. He had loved his own who were in the world. And the punch line: he loved them to the end.

The Lord’s task was to love his own who were in the world, and he never got steered away from his task. When we have had employment that we know is ending, it can be hard to stay diligent to the end. We want to slack off a bit, take it a bit easier, since we’re leaving anyway. Our head is already somewhere else.

Jesus did not do that. God told him to love his own who were in the world, and he stayed at it right to the end. These last night chapters of John show us how he did that. We learn here the underlying theme of John 13-21 – he loved his own to the end.

2 He Washed Their Feet: Love in Slow Motion – John 13:4–5

He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John describes what Jesus does with seven separate actions: He got up from the meal, took off his cloak, picked up a towel, and wrapped it around his waist. He poured water into a basin, and started washing his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was around him.

No one of these actions is special. If we knew only that Jesus washed their feet, we could have guessed most of this. Why so much mundane detail? Because the act itself is astonishing. I watch sports on TV, and when something unusual happens in a game, they replay it in slow motion so we can see what actually happened. John does not have a camera, so gives us slow motion with words, slowing down the footwashing action to a crawl.

Jesus washed their feet. People wore sandals in those days, and they walked everywhere, and they walked in the same places where animals walked. So there will certainly be dust and dirt on everyone's feet, and whatever else comes out of animals, old and fresh. So feet were unclean, and they were very careful about that in homes.

The normal custom was that when guests came to your home, you gave each one a basin of water, so they could wash their own feet. That was proper hospitality. In Luke, Jesus was at the house of a Pharisee named Simon, and Jesus said, "You did not give me water for my feet." It was shabby hospitality not to give Jesus water to wash his feet. (See Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24.)

But people rarely washed each other's feet, unless there were slaves in the household. Then the lowest slave in the house would wash other people's feet. A Jewish teacher could not ask his followers to wash his feet. That was degrading to the student. Jesus washed his followers' feet. That was almost unbelievable, against their culture and custom, which is why John gave us this so carefully. This shows Jesus loving his own who are in the world, and loving them to the end.

3 Unless I Wash, You Have No Share With Me – 13:6–8

He came to Simon Peter. Peter said, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

When Jesus got to Peter, Peter was uncomfortable; more like defiant. "Lord," he said, "are you going to wash my feet?" Perhaps Jesus expected this: "You don't understand now what I'm doing, Peter, but later you will understand." "Never," said Peter, "you will never wash my feet." But Jesus would not let Peter go. "If I don't wash you, you have no share with me."

Let's reflect here. Peter can see what Jesus is doing: his Lord is about to wash his feet. Peter sees that, and that's just wrong! If Peter does not understand now but he will later, that means that there's more going on here than just the Lord washing their feet, because that much Peter already understands.

Jesus ties his coming death to his washing their feet. His death explains the footwashing. John the Baptist said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." When Jesus washed their feet, he washed away all kinds of uncleanness and filth, new and old. When Jesus laid down his life for us, he took away all kinds of spiritual uncleanness and filth, new and old. His dying for us was an act of humble service for us, to clean us. Footwashing illustrated what his death did.

"The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom," says Jesus in Matthew 20:28 (and Mark 10:45). To serve his people, and to give his life a ransom, are not two separate things, not for Jesus. For Jesus, dying for us was one more way of serving us, just like washing our feet. The conversation with Peter carries on, but we will leave it with this, because the next few lines are difficult and we have already seen the important lesson.

4 Do What I Did – 13:12–17

When Jesus had finished washing those twenty-four feet, he got dressed again and sat down. "Do you understand what I've done for you?" he asked them. "I've given you an example. I'm your Lord and Teacher and I washed your feet. I did this so you could see it and would do this for each other." "You're my servants," he went on, "if I'm not too great to do this for you, you're not too great to do this for each other. Do what I did." And he ended, "You'll be blessed if you do this."

This is not complicated. Jesus told us to live this way with one another. He gave us an example. He showed us what to do. The emphasis is not on actual foot washing, although that is fine. The emphasis is on how we live with and serve each other. In different words, Jesus said the same thing in Matthew when he told the twelve that they would be great in the kingdom if they served each other. They would be first in the kingdom if they were slaves to each other.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't not talk to them while he served them? He just did it. If Peter hadn't started a conversation, Jesus probably would have washed and dried all twenty-four feet without saying a word. We don't have to talk, just act this way.

Jesus does not use the word "love" when he explains his example. He just says, "do this; do for each other what I did for you." But the chapter began with Jesus loving his own to the end, so we know that the foot washing shows us how he loved them.

5 New Command and Last Command – John 13:33–35

My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus did not just give us an example with a blessing attached. He gave us a command. He turned that example into a command. “Do it. Love each other as I loved you. Do it: the new command.”

And this is not just the new Command, it is also the last Command. “I tell you right now, I am leaving. Here’s what you’ll do when I am gone: love each other as I have loved you.” This whole chapter of John has the feel of Jesus leaving. Verse 1 said Jesus knew it was time for him to leave the world and go to the Father. Verse 3 says that Jesus knew that he was returning to God.

So when he tells his disciples in verse 33 that he’s not here much longer, we already know what that means. The new command is also the last command. He gives it as he leaves. We should imagine the Lord coming back in our day and saying to us, “Did you do what I said just before I left?” In fact, in John this is the only command of Jesus that’s called a command.

And it is not just the last and only command, it is our mark in the world, our label, our brand. “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Jesus told us what the world needs from us. Jesus said, “the world needs to see you love each other the way I loved you. Everyone needs to see that. I want this to be your mark.”

And he says it will work. If they see this, they will know we’re his disciples. This will convince them; it will persuade them. “Trust me on this,” says Jesus. “They will know you belong to me. This evidence will work.” I don’t think we believe Jesus on this.

Jesus says much the same in the Sermon on the Mount, when he tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are a city set on a hill and people will be obliged to glorify our Father when they see this love.

When the ideal church at the end of Acts 2 lived just like this, “they enjoyed the favour of all the watching people.” Unbelievers also carry the image and likeness of God. Even if grudgingly, they admire a group that lives with each other this way, because in the world this is rare.

Not all believers think that the new command, the last and only command, to love one another as Christ loved us, is what the world most needs from us. This love of course is not exclusive. We, individually and as a church, help unbelievers around us that are in need, and we are friends to them, we enjoy them and do good to them. Love one another is not exclusive, but it is the centre.

Our relationships with each other are the most important thing that congregations have to give the world. They are not the only thing congregations have to give the world. But, our relationships with each other are the most important thing our churches have to give the world, and this “one another” love is the most important measuring stick of congregational faithfulness to God.

Let’s remember that Jesus said this first to the apostles, those he sent to preach the gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons. Surely those ministries would be their mark in the world? No. The ministry of the apostles had huge impact on the world, and that continues to this day.

But for Jesus, that was not their mark. False christs and prophets will do great signs and wonders (Matt 24:28), but they don’t treat each other like this. We are back to Matthew 20:26–27: for the twelve, the great one would serve the other apostles, and the greatest would be slave to the other apostles, as Christ was for them.

Folks, this is a very high call: humble service and laying down our very lives. Who else but Jesus talks about “love” like that? Can anyone think this is easier than private Christian disciplines or regular outreach? It scares the daylights out of me! Thank God there is forgiveness. But it helps to know what he wants, right?.

6 What shall we Do for the World?

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Here is a trick I use when I’m trying to understand Scripture: I ask myself, “what question does this answer?” Let’s read our line that way: by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. What question does Jesus answer here?

This actually answers 2 questions. 1st, Jesus wants us to do something for the world. What shall we do for the world? We persuade the world that we follow Jesus. That’s what he wants us to do for the world. Second, how will we persuade the world that we follow him? We’ll love each other as he loved us. That’s also good to know. What we do for the world is persuade it that we are his disciples, and we do that by loving each other as he loved us.

Let’s keep our eyes open this week. One, the command: *A new command I give you: Love one another.* Two, the example: *As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* Three, the result: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

This is nothing new, much of this already happens. I just remind you that it is important. It is the new command, and it is the last command. In John it is the Lord’s only command. It persuades everyone that we follow Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, we want the blessing that comes from following your example. You said to your followers, “you’ll be blessed if you do this.” Lord, we want that. Be gracious to us and lead us with your Spirit to live out what we read about today. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.