

A New Commandment

The command to love one another dates back at least to the time of Moses. But Jesus casts this duty in a new light that can transform our lives and change the world.

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



Moses taught Israel at Mount Sinai to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). In a world rife with selfishness and hate, the command to love others has great potential to fix what’s broken in human relations. Jesus labeled it the second greatest commandment in the Law (Matt. 22:37-40).

Yet here in John 13, Jesus calls the instruction to love one another “a new commandment.” What was so new about it? Hadn’t Moses already covered that ground?

As always, the context provides a strong clue. As Jesus spoke these words to His apostles, He stood in the shadow of the cross. These men had no clue what was about to go down, but Jesus was aware—painfully aware—of the fate that awaited Him. More importantly, He knew *why* He had to go down this dark path. In His farewell remarks to His disciples, His heart yearned to explain to them something they could not yet comprehend: The sacrifice He was about to suffer would upend everything they thought they knew

about serving God and being a “good” person. This new commandment was at the heart of this revolutionary program.

The Leviticus approach to love (“as yourself”) is constrained by how people view themselves. For example, if I have a low self-image, seeing myself as a worthless human being deserving of nothing good, I will struggle to view others as objects of compassion. At the other extreme, if I am a narcissist who views myself as the center of the universe and everyone around me as my personal fan club, loving others will be impossible. I love myself, alright, but not in a healthy way. In both scenarios, “loving others” will always be a challenge. Love that is based only on self-reflection will always be somewhat distorted.

Jesus’ teaching on love is different because it is based on an entirely different motivation. He wants us to love one another, not as we love ourselves, but “as I have loved you.” With this addendum, Jesus raises the commandment to love others to a new level. We are to love others, not out of a sense of cold duty, using ourselves as the standard, but out of gratitude for the love that Jesus extended to us in His sacrificial death.

The apostles had no way of knowing it yet, but they were about to witness the most astonishing demonstration of love the world had ever seen. They would come to see the suffering of Christ, not as a failure of God’s plan, but as the realization of that plan. Despite all our failures, all our weaknesses, all our stubborn rebellion, God still loves us, and in Jesus Christ that love was put on display in the most dramatic fashion possible. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). That bedrock truth transformed the lives of the apostles. It even touched the heart of early Christianity’s most feared enemy, Saul of Tarsus: “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave Himself for me*” (Gal. 2:20). Once we grasp the significance of what Jesus did for us on the cross, it overhauls our concept of love into a power that the world can only gaze upon with awe.

And therein lies the significance of this new commandment. When our love for others reflects the love that Jesus has shown us, the world will see in the disciples of Jesus a kind of love they’ve never seen before. *That’s* the drawing power of the gospel.

— David King