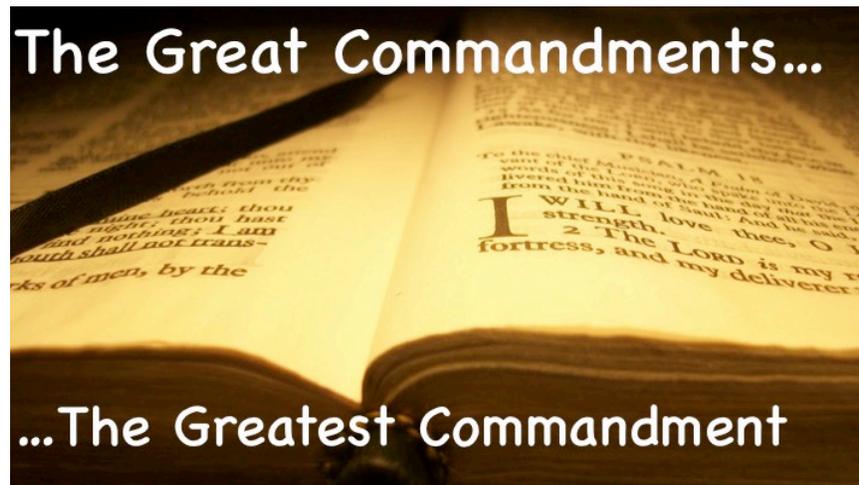


August 13, 2017
John 13:34-35
John 15:9-17



This week we complete the series of messages titled *The Great Commandments*. Next week we begin a series of messages titled *I Love the Church Because...*

I've done a lot of funerals over the years, and one of the most touching was several years ago. The person was someone I had known a long time and she asked me some months before her funeral if I would officiate. I said I would and then she had an interesting request of me; she was going to write her own eulogy and asked if I would mind reading it. That was the first and only time I officiated a funeral where the deceased had written their own eulogy. It was really beautifully written, and made everyone there, I imagine, wonder, *what would be my final words?*

This morning's Scripture text is that kind of passage. It comes from the latter part of John's gospel, at the Last Supper, and these are some of the "last words" of Jesus. When you get down to your last words, they are words that matter. You don't talk about the weather at that moment, and Jesus took his opportunity to share the core of his message with his disciples; it was a summation of everything he had sought to instill in his followers.

Today's message is *The Greatest Commandment*. Our Scripture text is two portions of John's gospel, both taken from a long passage devoted to the Last Supper. In that longer passage Jesus is offering his final words to the disciples. As it is the final moments that he has with them, and the final opportunity to offer teaching, Jesus uses that time to share what is at the heart of his mission, and that is, unsurprisingly, love. So I have saved the greatest command in all of Scripture for the final message of our series of *The Great Commandments*, with today's message *The Greatest Commandment*.

Follow along with me as I read this morning's text –

John 13:34-35

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

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

John 15:9-17

9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

14 You are my friends if you do what I command.

15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

17 This is my command: Love each other.

Anyone who has heard me preach for very long knows that I, like any other minister, has particular themes that I favor. One of my regular themes is that of the primacy of love, which was a theme of Jesus, thus it is mine as well. In these final words that he offers to his disciples, love is the theme that Jesus really emphasizes.

1. You Can't Command Others to Love, But Sometimes You Have To.

I know that sounds strange, and contradictory, but doesn't it also sound strange to command people to love? In these passages Jesus refers to love as a command. In 13:34 he says, *a new command I give you: Love one another.* In 15:12 he says, *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* Jesus uses the word *command* six times in that passage. Issuing a command is an interesting way to encourage people to love one another, isn't it? Is it possible to command people to love one another? Can we be coerced into love? Isn't love, by its very nature, something that must come about through free will, and not a command? By its very nature, love is voluntary, not commanded or coerced. I am not disagreeing with Jesus, certainly, but I find issuing a command to be an interesting way to talk to people about love. Imagine if you had to command your family to love you. If you have to issue a command for them to love you there are some very serious issues in your family that must be addressed.

Here's what I believe Jesus means, and it goes back to the passage that was our text last week, where Jesus said in Matthew 5:46 – *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* Obviously, there are people we love, and people who love us. No command is needed to encourage that love; we just naturally and easily love some people and they naturally and easily love us in return. But what about the people for whom our love does not come naturally or easily? And what about the people who have no interest in loving us? That's where the command comes in. That's where we need a command that becomes a push to encourage or compel us to step out of our safety zone, out of our area of security, out of what is known. Sometimes love needs a bit of a nudge; sometimes love needs more of a push, and that's why Jesus issues a command. We don't need a command to love some people, but we certainly do for others. If Jesus desires that we love our enemies, we probably need a push to do so.

When we consider the events in Charlottesville, Virginia this weekend I think we understand the necessity of a command to love. Do those white supremacists understand the harm of what they are doing? Do they understand how their bigotry diminishes the humanity of others, as well as their own? It takes blunt language to counter that level of bigotry and hatred, and certainly we must say *don't ever use the name of God to justify your hatred and bigotry!* If we ever hope to see such bigotry and hatred disappear in the world it is going to have to come from a command, and this is why Jesus issued a command. Left to our own ways, it is rare that we will cross the boundaries that must sometimes be crossed in order to counter hatred and bigotry with love.

Jesus certainly knew this. Jesus faced a great deal of hatred as well. His enemies had no love at all for him. No, they had only hatred for him, and that's why Jesus was so often very blunt with them. When you confront hatred of that magnitude a command must be put down as a marker that says *I'm not suggesting that you love the people you hate; I'm commanding it!*

2. *We Must Choose Love Over Law.*

When Jesus talked about love, which was so often, I also think he meant that we need to choose love over law. There are two elements within faith, and often those two elements are in conflict with one another. Those two elements are love and law, and we must always tip the scale in favor of love. Laws and commandments, as important as they are, must not be the preeminent aspect of our faith; that is reserved for love.

That is the message at the heart of the conversation Jesus had with some Pharisees when one of them asked, *teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?* In answering that question Jesus gave his famous answer, *love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments* (Matthew 22:36-40; a text I referenced two weeks ago). That last sentence is particularly instructive, as Jesus says that all the law and all the words of the prophets are filtered through the primary command of love. In other words, laws and commands are not of much meaning if they are not subservient to, and based upon, love. Jesus never intended to diminish the importance of the Law, but he did seek to put it in its rightful place. In Matthew 5:17 he says *do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* The Law, unfortunately for some, was raised to a level above love. This is seen in the exchange Jesus had with some Pharisees, when they criticized the disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath. Jesus reminded them that *the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.* When we forget the intent of the Law and elevate it to a place where it is placed above love, we have become trapped in legalism, and Jesus always railed against legalism.

Paul echoes this sentiment in the book of Romans, as he struggles with the way in which the Law does not bring righteousness to him, but merely demonstrates how unrighteous he is. He reminds us that Abraham was justified not by his works but by his faith, saying that whatever we do, in terms of trying to fulfill law, is only what we should have done in the first place (Romans 4:4 – *when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation*). This highlights the difficulty for those who fall into legalism and who want to raise laws and commandments above love – there is never enough that we can do in order to satisfy laws. Laws, commands, and regulations, as helpful as they can be in giving us a framework of how to live, will ultimately fall short because we can never do enough to satisfy those commands. Love, however, is the better guide, because it does not make us subservient to rules and regulations and all of the frustrations and failures that come with trying to be perfect in following them. Seeking to follow laws ultimately becomes a dead end for us because it does not lead us to love, but only into legalism. Jesus wants us to act out of love, not legalism. Paul highlights this in his letter to the Galatians, when he writes in chapter five about not being so bound to the law that love is forgotten. In 5:6 he writes, *the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love*, and in 5:14 adds, *the entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

It is a great tragedy that some churches are known more for their pronouncements about law than about love and their attitude of judgment than acts of mercy. Such behavior and attitudes are absolutely contrary to the way of Jesus. I understand the temptation to make those pronouncements about laws and commands, because we like the security they offer in times that are anything but secure. The more uncertain our world becomes, the more we crave certainty, and laws and commands can provide us with a sense of certainty. Laws and rules also make life simpler in some ways, as they attempt to give an answer for what to do in every conceivable situation. Read the Old Testament and you will find the laws there cover a multitude of possibilities. Love does not do that. Love says, basically, *work it out*. It's easy to prefer the specifics and the security of a law over the complications that come along with love, but that is not the way in which we are called to live.

Our church is not a legalistic, law-bound church. We are not a church that pronounces judgment upon people; rather, we emphasize love. Where some churches desire uniformity, we do not. Some

churches want everyone to be a square peg, and if you are not a square peg you will not find a home there. Some churches want everyone to be a round peg, and if you are not a round peg you will not find a home there. We're not a church of only square pegs. If you are a round peg, that's okay; you are welcome here. We are not a church of only round pegs. If you are a square peg that's okay; you are welcome here. You are welcome if you are an octagonal peg. Or any other kind of peg. Or even if you're not a peg. And, to be honest, sometimes that costs us, and that's okay. Not everyone wants a church like us. Some people want a church of all round pegs. Some people want a church of all square pegs. Some people come and check us out and decide we are not what they are looking for in a church, because we recognize that not everything is black and white; sometimes there is a good deal of gray. Some people want more certainty than what we offer. We sometimes ask more questions than we offer answers.

I am growing more and more disturbed with two developing trends in our society, the first of which is that we seem intent upon tearing ourselves apart and the second is that we are dividing into factions and groups that insist upon accepting their particular orthodoxy and their group to the exclusion of other groups and other ways of thinking. Too many people are succumbing to the pressure to align with a particular group and not veer from it, and once a part of a group one cannot associate with someone in another group.

Love, however, does not divide us in that way. Our orthodoxy should not be the Republican or Democratic parties. Our orthodoxy should not be liberal or conservative. Our orthodoxy should not be urban versus rural, or north versus south, or east coast versus west coast, or, if I could be so bold, UK or UofL, or any other. Our orthodoxy should always be by Jesus and his love. And I'm not saying that if you favor any of those aforementioned categories you are not following Jesus; what I am saying is, don't put any of them above Jesus; don't let them become points of division.

3. *Love Is Super Tough.*

When I'm driving in my car, which is quite a bit of the time, I am always listening to the radio. I used to spend a lot of time pushing the buttons to see what songs were on. I might like a song, but perhaps there is a better song on another channel, so I would keep pushing buttons. Now that SiriusXM radio has a Beatles channel I push the buttons a lot less. I love the music of the Beatles. Yesterday evening, as I was driving, one of my favorite Beatles songs came on – *All You Need Is Love*. Isn't that a great song? I love that song. But let's be honest, on one level it's not really true, is it? Try taking love to the bank when you're behind on your mortgage and see what happens. Try applying some of that love to a down payment on a car and see what happens. Will it work? Of course not. Obviously, love isn't all you need.

But we understand what the sentiment means. But here's also a problem with that sentiment – we've arrived at a point, I think, where we have so over-sentimentalized and so over-romanticized love that we forget just how tough love can be. I Corinthians 13:4-7 says that *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.* There is nothing easy about those qualities of love. They are tough. They are super tough.

Love never fails, that is true, but sometimes we fail love. Sometimes we fail love because love is tough. Love is super tough. Love is incredibly super tough. Love is really incredibly super tough. At least it is if you want to step beyond only those who love you. Here's how tough love is. Love can get you killed. It got Jesus killed. That's a scary thought to consider, isn't it?

My older brother Ed, and his wife Jodi, are co-pastors at Old Union Church in Jamestown, Indiana. Back in the 80s, Ed was the pastor at a church in Lafayette, Indiana. I still remember a newsletter he wrote back in the mid-80s. He wrote about our tendency to see faith and love as a bit like a vaccination

against a disease. If you are familiar with biology, you probably now that a vaccination actually gives us some of the cells of the disease that the vaccination is designed to prevent. By receiving a little bit of the disease, our body's natural immune system can prevent us from receiving the full blown disease. Ed compared this to how we can be about the power of God's love. We want a bit of that love, but not the full blown effects of God's love. We prefer an inoculation; enough to give us a bit of God's love but not enough to make us do anything crazy, such as love our enemies or pray for those who persecute us.

Love is tough. Love is super tough. That makes it understandable why we only want a little bit of it, because we don't want our lives made more difficult by living love in the way that Jesus did; it would simply be too difficult and too complicated to live love to that extent.

But God wants to give us the full measure of his love, and he wants us to live the full measure of that love. That is, after all, his greatest commandment.