

Living the New Commandment

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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When we began our family, we inherited the old black-and-white TV set I had grown up with. It wasn't much but it was all we had. One summer evening I was slouched upon the couch watching the evening news. Our two year old waddled through the door. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her look at me, then she glanced at the TV and then back to me. Without saying a word, she grunted and finally hoisted her little carcass up on the couch. Then she scrunched down into a posture that mirrored her father. I became aware that I was being copied. My kids would grow up to do as I did whether for good or ill. It was both a frightening and humbling moment for me.

Jesus wants to be our example. He says John 13:15, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." The most powerful sermons are not preached with words but with lives. This is the lesson we should take from the story of Jesus washing the disciple's feet. In ancient times, people did not eat meals using tables and chairs. Instead they lay on their sides around a low table. This brought your face into close proximity to your neighbor's feet—a particularly unpleasant place to be in a world without sox. So it was the custom for the host to offer water and towels for the guests to wash their feet before dinner. If there were servants, it would fall to them to perform this duty. Jesus humbles himself and takes the role of a servant and washes the feet of his disciples. Imagine that! Jesus knows he has come from God and is going back to God, yet he stoops to wash feet. It is utterly amazing. This would be like having Barack Obama show up at your house tonight to scrub your toilets, run the laundry and take out the trash.

On this night we celebrate the New Commandment Jesus gave us: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." This is important because he repeats it to them two more times in John 15:12 and 17. Later on John would repeat it in his first letter, 1 John 3:11, 16, and 23:

3:11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

3:23 This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us."

It remains for us to ask, how did Jesus love us? Let us count the ways tonight!

1) He loved us in complete humility. He didn't seek attention for himself. In fact he often told people whom he healed not to draw attention to him. Jesus was not about seeking applause, ego strokes or even thankful recognition. He came to serve.

2) He loved impartially. He knew what was in Judas' heart; but still he washed Judas' feet. He still had hope that Judas could be redeemed. Jesus loved across lines of race, religion, class and gender.

3) He loved in deeds, not just words. James absorbed this lesson well from Jesus for he wrote in James 2:16-17, "If one of you says to a brother or sister without clothes and food, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed..." What good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead." That's our Jesus—a man of action, not words.

4) Jesus met people's needs, not their wants. When a paralyzed man was brought before him, Jesus was able to see that what he really needed was forgiveness for his sins and so he told him, "your sins are forgiven." This is why some people don't experience the love of Jesus. They only want him to fill their wish list but Jesus sees our deeper needs and he stands ready to meet them.

5) Jesus loves us sacrificially. He gave up heaven. He laid aside his power and status as God. He emptied himself. He became a servant. He laid down his life on the cross. A Muslim terrorist will sacrifice their own lives to kill innocent people. But Jesus sacrificed himself to serve people, to save people and to give life to others.

6) Jesus loved freely and without measure. This is what the Bible calls "grace" the free, unconditional love of God. Jesus offered it to people who did not deserve it, could not earn it and sometimes they didn't even ask for it. It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us, this proves God's love towards us.

I have a tool box at home with a really nice magnet in it. I've notice that when the nails and screws that float around the tool box stick to that magnet, eventually they too acquire a magnetic charge. It is weaker to be sure, but clearly visible. In the same way if we attach ourselves by faith to Jesus Christ, some of his love is going to empower us and flow through us. We can't ever duplicate the love of Jesus but we sure can become magnetized by it. We accomplish this by abiding in Christ: studying his word, waiting upon him in prayer, following the Holy Spirit and stepping out in faith to keep his new commandment.