

"This Is How They'll Know"

Rev. Peter Bynum

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³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:31-35)

Sitting around the table at the Last Supper, Jesus knows that these are his final private moments with his disciples. Terrible events are about to begin falling like dominoes in rapid succession, so these last quiet moments with the group are precious. And Jesus uses this precious time to give the disciples what he calls "a new commandment."

At first blush, it does not seem all that new. The charge to love one's neighbor had always been part of the Jewish covenant law. But what is different – very different -- is HOW they are commanded to love. "*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*" In order to figure out how to obey this commandment, the disciples are instructed to think about how Jesus loves, and emulate how Jesus loves. The life of Jesus is meant to be the pattern for their love, and that is a much higher bar than any kind of love they had known or given before.

Think about it this way. Just seconds before, Judas had gotten up from the table and left the room to turn Jesus over to the people who wanted him dead... and even so, Jesus is still talking about love. Jesus will soon be denied three times by Peter... and even so, Jesus is still talking about love. Jesus is about to be wrongly accused, unfairly convicted, and brutally killed on a cross... and even so, Jesus is still talking about love. In that moment, the disciples understand that, in learning how to love others, they will need to remember all that they have heard Jesus say and seen Jesus do. What they do not yet fully understand is that their greatest lesson in how to love will come in watching Jesus choose love even in the face of great pain, suffering, and death.

It took only seconds for Jesus to utter the words, but these words form the emotional and spiritual core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Three simple sentences hold everything together, and they are now known simply as the Love Commandment. "*I give you a new commandment,*" Jesus says, "*that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" Three sentences that can be summarized in three key words. What is the core of Christ's teaching on love? It is a command. It is a choice. And it is a promise.

First, this teaching is **a command**.

"Jesus didn't say, 'Here is some good advice.'" This is not a suggestion in a self-help book, although we might wish it was. Christ says, "This is my *commandment*." In the eyes of God, loving other people the way that Christ loves us is a non-negotiable, foundational characteristic of what it means to be a disciple. His message is like the old Nike ad: "Just do it."

It also bears noting that this command does not focus on the kinds of things we usually focus on when we are trying to be good disciples. He doesn't say, "Go to church every Sunday," "Read your Bible regularly," or "Worship in this particular way." He doesn't even say "Believe the right



things." His command begins with ethics. Love one another. Period. You want to do something helpful and important for me? Just do that.¹

That being said, the Love Commandment is still **a choice**. We have the freedom to accept this way of life or to reject it. We have to choose to obey this way. We have to choose to love this way.

If you remember the iconic Disney movie "Cinderella," you probably remember that things began to get interesting when **everyone** was invited to the ball. The invitation did not say that only the smart ones, or the pretty ones, or the ultra-privileged ones could to the prince's ball. By royal command, everyone was invited to the party.

That, however, did not stop Cinderella's wicked relatives from imposing some conditions. When the wicked stepmother opened the invitation, she instantly pictured her two awful daughters dancing at the ball. But when Cinderella says out loud, "That means I can go, too," the stepmother immediately begins to think of ways to keep that from happening. With a wicked grin, she says "Well, I see no reason why you can't go... IF you get all your work done."

"Oh, I will. I promise!" Cinderella responds joyfully. But the stepmother wasn't finished. "And," she adds, "IF you can find something suitable to wear."

As Cinderella runs off to get those things done, the step-sisters cannot believe what they just heard. "Mother," one of them gasps, "do you realize what you just said?"

"Of course," the Stepmother says with cruel confidence. "I said, 'If.'"²

The "if" said it all. The stepmother had no intention of letting Cinderella get to the ball. She would make sure Cinderella could never get all her work done in time, and the nasty step-sisters would go to shameful lengths to ensure she had nothing suitable to wear. The "if" was the out.

If we are honest, we create "ifs" like this all the time. "I would donate to that cause IF money wasn't so tight right now." "I would help out with that project IF I wasn't already so busy." We come up with all kinds of conditions... prerequisites... rationalizations to justify not doing things we know we should do. I think that is why the "if" in what Jesus said stands out so prominently. "*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,*" Jesus says, "**IF** you have love for one another." The result is conditioned, conditioned upon our choice to love. And a lot of the time, we simply choose not to love like that.

The New Testament scholar D.A Carson once wrote that Jesus' command to love "*is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and yet it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice.*" What he is saying is that it is not difficult to understand what the love commandment is or what it means. What we find difficult is actually making choices to lead with love -- actually choosing the path of love when we know that other options are easier and more expedient. The faithful philosopher G.K Chesterton put it this way: "*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.*"³

That may be hard for us to hear, but the third characteristic of the command to love is much more hopeful. This is also **a promise**. While we tend to use the word "if" as an escape clause, Jesus uses it as a promise, an assurance. There is a guarantee built into the command to love, because IF we can make the choice to live this way... IF we can commit ourselves to embracing and emulating the kind of sacrificial, self-effacing love that truly serves others, then the world will know **for sure** that we truly are disciples of Christ... that we are neither fakes nor posers... that we are the real

¹ Debie Thomas, "If You Love," <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2216-if-you-love>, May 12, 2019.

² "Cinderella." DVD (2005). Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Productions, 1950.

³ Debie Thomas.

deal. Christ promises that, if we have love for one another, everyone will see it, and everyone will know it.

Back in 2014, when I was a pastor in Rocky Mount, NC, the city was rocked by a series of shootings that killed several teenage boys. The violence was related to gang activity, but the community knew that poverty and lack of opportunity were also to blame. One evening a group of concerned citizens and faith leaders gathered at Greater Joy Baptist Church, and the most powerful part of the discussion was when State Trooper Clee Atkinson spoke on behalf of law enforcement about the plight of young people in that community. He knew there was plenty of blame to go around, but what he wanted to talk more about was compassion. He wanted people to understand what these kids were up against, the odds that were so overwhelming against them.

While Officer Atkinson was speaking to us, right in the middle of his speech, his cellphone rang. He looked at the screen and told the audience that he needed to take the call. He stepped aside for just a few moments, less than a minute. And when he came back to the microphone his demeanor had changed. He had been animated and passionate before, but now he was more contemplative. He explained to us that the call had been from a high school student who knew him well. He was calling to see if he should come to the gathering where Clee was speaking, because he knew it was important. But he also had a shift at his job. He couldn't be two places at once and he didn't know what to do, how to choose. Clee said he had told the young man not to worry, that he should go to work. In real time, Trooper Atkinson was doing what he was saying we all needed to do for these young people. Show up for them. Care about them. Be someone they could trust, someone they could depend upon.

That in itself was remarkable. But what was truly amazing to me was the fact that later on I learned that the young man on that phone was, at that very time, a member of one of those gangs that had participated in the recent violence. Clee Atkinson had known that, but he never said, "I will love you IF you leave the gang." He placed no condition on love he gave to that young man. There was no escape clause, no prerequisite. Trooper Atkinson simply saw in him a child of God, a vulnerable human being who really needed a friend and a mentor. Atkinson hoped there would be plenty of time to confront what needed to be confronted, and work whatever needed to be worked out. But the love had to come first, and if it did, that young man would know. Everyone would know.

That was eleven years ago. That young man would be 25 or 26 years old today. I have no idea where he is or what he is doing. But I do know that the chances that he is happy, healthy, and productive in his life are exponentially higher because Clee Atkinson, who is now the Sheriff of Edgecombe County, dared to love that young man just as Christ had loved him. I know it.

That is the thing about love. When it is real, you know it. When it is authentic, everyone can sense it, because there is no denying that kind of love. The opposite is also true. When words are empty, people can tell. When love is fake, it is obvious. Love that is genuine cannot be faked. When you see it, you know it, because there is nothing else in the world that can do what love does – "bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things."⁴

So Christ gives us this command, this choice, and this promise, simple enough for a toddler to understand, and yet profound enough to occupy us for a lifetime: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:7.