

Member

The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time Sermon 7

John 13:31-35

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³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:31-35, ESV)

How do you know if you're the real thing? Sure, you seem to be a good person. Kind. Considerate. Loving. But how do you know you really are good, kind, or loving?

When I was first out of college, I was the assistant varsity basketball coach at University City High School in West Philadelphia. We were the Jaguars, competed in the Philadelphia Public League, and had a team full of personalities! I remember well a lesson that I learned early in my first season. The head coach signed us up for a tip-off tournament to start the season, but against teams that were far better than us. We got beaten badly the first night, and I lamented the loss to him on the bus ride home. He surprised me by saying that this was exactly what he wanted to happen. He said something to the effect of—and he could be gruff: “These boys think they are elite players, but they aren’t. They think they know team basketball, but they don’t. The best thing we can do for them is to drop them into a situation that reveals just who they really are. Now we’ll see how they respond.” The boys did respond. We made it to the city semi-finals that year.

The lesson I learned was this: the caliber of the basketball player is revealed in a real game. A similar lesson is at work in Jesus’s teaching in John 13:34-35. *How does a disciple know if they're the real thing?* By being thrown into the community of God’s people and told to love them. Jesus instructs His disciples,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

*How do we know if someone is a real disciple? By how they love other disciples. The quality of a disciple is revealed by how they love other disciples. Here we arrive at the seventh mark of a disciple: **A disciple is someone who loves other disciples.** John 13:35 makes this clear. But we need to get more specific than this. We need to pose some questions to this passage:*

Who, precisely, are the other disciples we are called to love? Who is this “one another” that Jesus speaks of? What will loving them entail? And why does Christianity include this communal element? Doesn’t the community just slow us down? How is this good news?

As we take these questions to John 13:34-35 today, we will discover that this seventh mark of a disciple, the call to love other disciples, takes the form of becoming a committed member of a local church. This will become clearer as we turn to our passage. Let’s consider our first question.

I. Who Must We Love?

In verse 34, Jesus says to His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). Nothing is shocking to us modern people about a call to love others. We know we’re supposed to love humanity—all 7.5 billion of them. But if a call to do something is too broad, or too vague, it’s hard to know if you’re doing it. If you tell your son to “do good” in life, it’s hard for him to know what this actually means. Perhaps you could be more specific—do your best in math class this week and talk to your mom and sister with respectfulness.

Jesus’ command here is not broad or vague. He is not merely telling His disciples “to be loving.” He’s specific. He says this is a new command and it involves loving a specific group of people—whatever Jesus’ means by “one another.” *What exactly is “new” about this command?* Jesus’ first disciples were Jewish and already had commands about love; In Deuteronomy, they heard, “Love the Lord Your God will all your heart, soul, and strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). In Leviticus, they read, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

So, what is new about Jesus’ love command? There are several new things. It’s love with a new source; it’s made possible because Jesus has died for us (John 13:31-32). And it draws from the incredible revelation that God’s love toward us “did not spare His own Son” in saving us (Romans 8:32).

I want to highlight, however, not its new source, but this love's new object: it is a love aimed at specific, and new, people. To see who these new people are, we need to step back and consider the context of John 13, which is the Last Supper. Just prior to our passage, Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples and washed their feet. Luke records something Jesus said during that meal, as He lifted the cup of wine:

“This cup is the **new covenant** in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20).

There is that word “new” again, this time speaking of a “new covenant”. For the disciples, this phrase would have called to mind one of God's great promises. God had promised the people of Israel that He would renew His covenant relationship with them one day, forgiving their sins and transforming their hearts so they could truly love and obey Him. It had been foretold in the prophet Jeremiah:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.** And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

By using the words “new covenant,” Jesus says to His disciples and us that God's promise of restoring His relationship with His people is happening—and through Jesus. Two things to notice from this context of our passage:

- **A People:** First, God's plan involves a community, not merely individuals. At the time of the new covenant, God says, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). “My people” speaks of a community.
- **A New Law in the Heart:** Second, at the time of the new covenant God will write His law inside people, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” Jesus follows this formula precisely: He announces the New Covenant at dinner (Luke 22:20), and next announces a new law: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). This new command to love will be written into the hearts of disciples by the Holy Spirit.¹

As we move forward in the Bible, who does this new covenant people turn out to be? **The church.**

When writing to groups of disciples in different towns, such as Corinth, Paul addresses them: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:2). When Jesus says, “love one another,” He means to love the new covenant people of God. The local expression of this is a church. A church is a gathering of people around their shared faith in Jesus, who faithfully proclaim the Gospel, submit to the authority of God’s Word, and keep Jesus’ commands to baptize, share the Lord’s Supper, and love one another.

We can now answer our first question: *Who is Jesus commanding us to love when He says, “love one another?”* He is commanding us to love, specifically, those brothers and sisters who make up our local church. This answer draws us immediately towards a second question: *If we are commanded to love others in a local church, then how, specifically, do we practice this love? What form might it take?*

II. How Do We Love Others in the Church?

Jesus gives us a clue in verse in verse 34 with the phrase, “just as I have loved you.”

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: **just as I have loved you**, you also are to love one another (John 13:34).

Jesus’ love for the disciples is the template for the love the disciples should have for each other. We might summarize this love by saying that it takes the form of a commitment that is concrete and sacrificial. Jesus’ love is never abstract. It’s not expressed through “likes” on social media or bumper stickers on cars. It’s concrete. In John 13 Jesus washes the feet of twelve actual men who He has spent three years getting to know deeply. They aren’t generic parts of a group—they aren’t Jews or Gentiles, or Blacks or Whites, or Republicans or Democrats, or Americans or Africans, or rich or poor: they are real people: Peter, John, James, Philip, and Andrew. He knows their wives, their siblings; He’s been in their homes. And Jesus has been fiercely loyal, fiercely committed, to them—even when one is betraying Him (Judas, John 13:27, 31). In His prayer in John 17, Jesus says, “While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction” (John 17:12).

Our love of a local church must take the form of commitment that is concrete, made to actual people, and expressed in actual ways. This commitment is also sacrificial. Jesus loves by laying down His

life. If we are to “love as he loved us,” we will find in these concrete commitments opportunities to set aside self-seeking self-centeredness and learn the freedom of living for the sake of others.

Love as concrete and sacrificial commitment happens through a deep connection with a local church. Drawing from Paul’s language, many have called this membership. Paul says to the Christians in Rome: “We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). The local church is God’s household, and we are members of it (Ephesians 2:19); the local Church is Christ’s body, and we are members of it (1 Corinthians 12:12-24). Our love for the church must in some way take the form of concrete commitment. A friend once told me how different people on his block treated him after he switched from being a renter to buying. People suddenly took him more seriously, and wanted to invest in him more—why? Because he had committed to them.

How commitment is made concrete in a local church should have organic and institutional aspects. It should involve regularly attending, and the sharing of your time and resources with others. It should involve some type of accountability and responsibility. No matter what language or form church commitment may take, it is important we understand Jesus’ command to love “one another” are pointing to a concrete commitment to a local church.

How are we to fulfill Jesus’ new command to love God’s new people? **Through a commitment to a local church.**

Before turning to why this is good news—where we will consider with more specificity how a disciple’s love is revealed and refashioned within a local church—we need to pause to acknowledge some tension and pain at this point. Talking about the church and our relationship to it is not an easy topic. For some, church seems boring, even irrelevant. We’re more efficient when we craft our own spiritual journey. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis recalls his early opinions of church:

But though I liked clergymen as I liked bears, I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo. It was, to begin with, a kind of collective; a wearisome ‘get-together’ affair. I couldn’t yet see how a concern of that sort should have anything to do with one’s spiritual life. To me, religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters. And then the fussy, time-wasting botheration of it all!

For those who feel particularly strong, smart, and able, church may feel like it will slow you down—it's full of people who don't move at your pace. Perhaps God would call you here to help speed us up? Others are convinced of the goodness of church but have another problem. They've been hurt or let down. Whether due to incidents of the church behaving badly, or frustration over a previous church's shifting vision, the idea of commitment to a church stirs apprehension or painful memories.

The church is not perfect at present, but it is part of God's perfect plan

We'd all love a church composed of fully sanctified saints. But that's never existed. Jesus was clear in His teaching that during this epoch in history, the wheat and the tares grow side by side.² Within His own fellowship of the Twelve, there was one who would betray Him. And even a glance at Paul's letters tells us that from the earliest days we saints still have a lot of sin in us.³

This past year or so has been particularly hard on churches. In talking with other pastors, I've often felt like we are in a big game of Boggle, where you shake all the pieces up and see where they land—and some of these pieces are people. Many people are considering transitions from churches they've been part of for decades. It's not uncommon for God to call us to a new church—calling us to new people to serve and love. This is a good thing. But in some cases, a move between churches may be because we feel let down or confused and frustrated with leadership.

For anyone here going through or pondering church transition now, I don't want you to feel in this sermon a harsh word. If you feel pain in this area, it's likely because you're the type of person who wants to make a deep commitment—and wants it to be to a healthy church. I believe at a time such as this it is crucial that churches remain focused on their deepest calling: to proclaim the Gospel, regularly gather under the Word and worship, and strive to love one another. And it is crucial that individuals take seriously their commitment to local churches.

Watching a church service online is a great gift when health concerns keep us from gathering. But it is not a replacement for actual church—gathering regularly with the people of God. Engagement with the complex issues of our world cannot happen if we launch into it from weak foundations: the engine of Christian witness is healthy local churches. The church at present may not be perfect, but it is an essential part of God's perfect plan. Aware of some of the pain points about commitment to a

church, I want to ask a final question: *Why is this command to deeply commit to God's people good news?*

III. How Is the Command to Love the Local Church Good News?

Let me suggest three reasons the local church is still something good to commit to.

1. Assurance

A deep commitment to a local church assures. It assures you of your standing with God and your progress in the faith. *How do you know if you're really a Christian?* The local church doesn't save you, but it is that place that marks you out and regularly reminds you of your standing with God. The local church is where we are baptized—marking birth into God's people. The local church is where we receive the Lord's Supper—a sign we are in good fellowship with God and His people.

A deep commitment to a local church will also assure progress in the faith. You are saying that you want to be held accountable, want to be known. You are saying you need help and support for your walk with Christ. *Are there other disciples in your life who could answer questions about how healthy your spirituality is?* If so, this is a good thing. If not, then you are going it alone.

2. Dispels false narratives

Commitment to a local church also helps dispel false narratives. I've heard more than one person describe the church as a bunch of hypocrites. Or as a place filled with self-righteous people, worried that someone somewhere might be having fun. But this has not been my experience of Christians. *Why don't you commit to your local church, and be part of dispelling these storylines?* Be part of making your local church healthy, authentic, fun, joyful, and loving. The best antidote to the church's failures in the past, and false narratives about it in the present, is healthy, vibrant, local churches.

3. Edification

The church is the place where God will break you down and build you up. Deep commitment to a church is like a mirror—it's a group of people who can hold up a real image of you, to you. The same C. S. Lewis who abhorred the church growing up later wrote:

[A]s I went on I saw the great merit of [attending church]. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns ... were ... being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.⁴

The people you meet in church are the people God has chosen to be His. They are from all sorts of ethnic and social and experiential backgrounds. They are of all types of opinions and temperaments. But they have this in common: Jesus Christ is everything to them. And you, dear friend, have the privilege of being called to love them.

Along with deflating your ego, the local church gives you a noble responsibility: love and build up these people. Make their spiritual and physical well-being your aim in life. Love them not merely in sentiment. Love them with your feet, hands, money, words, and time. Love them with an aim to do them spiritual good. After all, the Bible's measurement for love is not how much you get, but how much you are willing to give.⁵

I recently heard a story of two young men who'd spent a few years volunteering to work with our youth group. These men not only mentored high school boys, but after these boys graduated and headed to college, these men took road trips to visit them and encourage them. These men had taken responsibility for the spiritual well-being of other men. That's a noble thing. That's something worth getting out of bed for on Sunday morning.

Friends, the shape of Christian discipleship is congregational. *Do you want to know if you're really a disciple?* Then jump into the life of a local church. **This is where the love of a disciple is revealed and refashioned—in the fires of a local church.**

Take a step in commitment to your local church this week. This might look like giving or praying, or attending, or serving. But take a step towards loving your local church. It is Christ's "New Commandment" to His new people. Amen.

Endnotes

1. For the regeneration of the heart, and the love of God being placed into the heart, see Rom 5:5; 3:29; John 3; Ezek. 36:27.
2. "Let both of them [the good seed and the weeds] grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn" (Matt 13:30).
3. Paul's pastoring of the Corinthians is evidence to this: these early Christians were fighting about which leader they follow (1 Cor 1:12, ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."), dividing into cliques according to social status (1 Cor 11:18-22, "I hear that there are divisions among you... When you come together...one goes hungry, another gets drunk....do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?), and even using spiritual gifting as reason for pride (1 Cor 12:24-25, "God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.).
4. See C.S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 61-62.
5. I learned this aphorism from the work of pastor Tim Keller, who writes, "When the Bible speaks of love, it measures it primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourselves to someone" (Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*, 78).