

ONE ANOTHER

Cultivating Christ-Centered Community

LESSON TEN



LOVE

ONE ANOTHER

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

– John 13:34

Love one another with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.

– Romans 12:10

You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love one another deeply with all your heart.

– 1 Peter 1:22

For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

– 1 John 3:11

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

– 1 John 4:7-8



THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS US TO TREAT ONE ANOTHER WITH LOVE, HUMILITY, AND RESPECT. WE ARE ALSO TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER AND BE UNIFIED.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:35

Read Mark 12:28-34; John 13:34-35

- In Mark 12 a teacher of the law asks Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (28). Jesus replies: **Love God. Love your neighbor (29-30), and he says “There is no commandment greater than these” (31)**. Mark includes the response from the teacher, quoting back to Jesus what Jesus has just said, adding that these two commands are “more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (32-33). Jesus affirms his reply, and tells him that “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (34).
- In John 13, during his farewell address to the twelve disciples, Jesus says: **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)**. Jesus commands us to love, but not in the way we ordinarily think about love. He intensifies the call to love by saying we must love not as the world teaches us to love, but as he has loved us.
- **The commandment to love is not new (see Lev. 19:18); what was new about Jesus’ command was the fresh perspective he placed on how to love one another.** As opposed to the standard from which people generally operate, Jesus calls for us to extend love to enemies, outsiders, people who don’t love us in return, and even those in our own communities whose behavior toward us merits no positive treatment. This love is modeled in the foot washing and enacted fully in his death and resurrection, and his disciples are to love one another the same way. Jesus’ willingness to become a servant, to give up his own divine privileges, to lay down his life for all humanity is the supreme example of this love.
- **The conventional understanding of love is that we restrict our love to people we like and enjoy, and especially to people who love us in return. The problem, however, is that such love lacks the power to change anything; it can’t make anything new.** Rooted in the ways of Christ, the practices of love are unconventional, but also innovative and hopeful, because they have the power to move us beyond the comfortable and familiar boundaries of love in order to create something new. Because God transcended the conventional limits of love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we now can love in more creative and hopeful ways. God’s love alive in Christ becomes the pattern for human love, and the “body of Christ” is called to embody this very love to one another. We may like some people more than others, and certainly feel closer to some more than others, but we cannot choose to love some while ignoring or dismissing others. **To be sure, Jesus does not say he hopes that we love our neighbors or that he would prefer that we do; rather, Jesus commands us to love our neighbors.**
- Love for one another, like the love Jesus has demonstrated, is to become the defining mark of those who follow Jesus. **Jesus promised that our love for one another would be a sign to “everyone” (John 13:35) that we are Jesus’ disciples.** The disciples will stay behind, yet they are called to model their behavior on his.
- **Like that first community of disciples, we too learn the ways of God’s love by becoming part of the community committed to being continually formed by God’s love.** Together we root our lives in the fertile soil of God’s love, growing in faithfulness, justice, mercy, truthfulness, patience, and forgiveness. Within our communities, friendships, and families we can love as Jesus loved, however fragile and imperfect our efforts may be, because God’s love for us makes such love possible. **We know we are happiest not when our lives are guided by excessive self-concern, but when we are part of loving relationships and communities where people care for one another, watch out for one another, support one another, and are faithful to one another.**

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another” (Romans 13:8)

Read Romans 13:8-10

- On the heels of his commands about paying one's debts, Paul writes: **“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another...” (v. 8).** This seems to indicate that we cannot love enough to somehow owe no more love to others. This is why it's a **“continuing debt.”** This context breathes life into the metaphor, giving force to the command to love: This is a debt, owed to everyone, that can never be discharged. To owe nothing but love to one another is to own the reality that we all are completely dependent on God's grace for not only our forgiveness, but for our very existence, and it reframes how we live in relation to one another in our everyday interactions.
- **The one “who loves others has fulfilled the law” (v. 8).** Paul explains what he means by saying that love fulfills the law. First he simply states that all the commandments are in fact summed up in the command to love (v. 9). Loving one's neighbor is itself, of course, a command in Torah (Lev 19:18, quoted here), though not part of the Ten Commandments. Paul was not the first to see it as a summary of the whole law; this is one of several passages in Romans 12-13 where we hear echoes of the teaching of Jesus himself (Mark 12:28-31). Citing four of the Ten Commandments, Paul believes that “love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27) is an accurate summary statement for all the above commands.
- **“Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (v. 10).** If love seeks the highest good of the neighbor, it will certainly do no wrong to him or her. **Working out what that means personally and collectively, and putting it into practice, is one of the most urgent tasks we currently face.** Gathered together as one body, our love for one another and (perhaps especially) those outside of our community shows the world how God has loved us.
- **As Jesus said in John 13:35, our love will be a sign to everyone that we are his disciples, but in a world driven by fear, vengeance, and violence, it's easy to think that imitating the love of God is idealistic.** We know how hard it can be to love those who love us, so how can we really love those whose differences make them not only strange but threatening? How can we reach out to and welcome anyone whose nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, politics, or religion make us uneasy? Jesus' radical command of love is the way to a truly human future for the world, and the church exists to witness to it. Put differently, if the church fails to acknowledge and participate in the undeniable *social dimension* of love, a life of friendship with God and imitating Christ is uselessly sentimental. There must be a people committed to embodying and practicing the way of love among themselves and toward others in order for the beauty, hope, and power of that life to be visible and credible.
- Obviously, the way of life envisioned by love is not easily achieved. The hurt, betrayal, and disappointment we experience and inflict teach us to love cautiously and guardedly; they teach us to narrow the circle of love, not extend it. We learn not to trust, not to befriend, but also not to risk and, therefore, not to grow. **Loving one another as God loves us can open us to further hurt and disappointment because of what it will ask of us, but what is the cost of not taking that risk?**
- A life of love is not a safe and cautious one. It is a challenging way of life precisely because it commits us to fashion our lives according to the risk-taking love of God that we see embodied in Jesus. But it is also a joyous and hopeful way of life because it is guided neither by the hurts of the past nor the shortcomings of the present, but by a vision of the future reign of God, that community of perfect and eternal mutual love.

GOD'S LOVE AND OUR LOVE

What do we learn about God's love that is meant to guide and inform our own love? Although there are numerous characteristics of God's love, several seem most essential. Paul Wadell beautifully articulates many of these in his book *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (pp. 210-13), some of which are excerpted below for us to consider.

☑ **God's Love is Creative and Affirming**

First, God's love is creative and affirming. **In the most general sense, to love something is to find it good, which is what God declared about everything God created.** To love something is to delight in its existence; it is to say, as Josef Pieper puts it, "It's good that you exist; it's good that you are in this world!" **Love is the most basic affirmation we can give another person because it is to rejoice in the fact of their existence. A love modeled on God strives to continue what God's love began.** If to be loved by God is to be creatively willed and affirmed into existence, to love another person is to delight in their existence and to devote our energy and attention to making them be. Indeed, the only way truly to affirm another's existence is to do what we can to bring them more fully to life.

Our love is like God's love anytime we affirm and uphold the goodness of another's existence. When husbands and wives love one another, when parents affirm and encourage their children, when friends support one another, and when any one of us reaches out to a stranger, we are not only imitating and continuing God's love, but also helping bring it to completion. Human love carries forward and enriches what God's love began. We need God's love for us to be met, confirmed, and extended by the love and affirmation of others. God's love may give us life, but authentic human love continues to bring us to life. All of us have witnessed the dramatic transformation that can happen when people experience being loved. They visibly come to life in ways they were not before. There is joy, spirit, and hope marking their lives. To see this happen is not only delightful to us and them, but it is also delightful to the God who gives us the exalted vocation to love.

☑ **God's Love Is Insightfully Directed to the True Well-Being of Others**

Second, God's love is insightfully directed to the true well-being of others. Love seeks the beloved's good. **This is witnessed throughout the scriptures, as Yahweh sought the good of Israel, as Jesus sought the good of all who came to him in need, or as the apostle Paul sought the good of each of the communities he founded.** **To love is wish that everything regarding a human being may truly be good. To love is to want others to flourish and to prosper; it is to wish the greatest goodness and excellence that is possible for them.** It is easy enough to avow love, but much harder to sustain it in practical, insightful, and steady ways. That is why love is best understood not just as an attitude or disposition, but as **a heartfelt commitment to seek, work for, and be faithfully involved in promoting what is best for another.** For love fully to come to life, a disposition or attitude to favor the good of another has to mature into dependable action.

☑ **God's Love Is Steadfast, Patient, and Faithful**

A third fundamental quality that should characterize Christian love is that, like God's love, our love should be steadfast, patient, and faithful. **God's love never stops and God's love never fails,** even if it means being so intimately involved in our lives that love brings suffering and loss to God, a fact that the death of Jesus vividly attests. **We can refuse to love God, but that doesn't keep God from loving us. We can be unfaithful to God, but that doesn't weaken God's faithful, persevering love for us. God's love lasts, and human love should too. But the only way love can last is if we're willing to be patient, steadfast, faithful, forgiving with one another.**

Persons entrusted to our love are strikingly like ourselves, individuals hobbled by imperfections that a lifetime of love will never erase. **In fact, sometimes loving another person is so difficult we do it only because we have promised to do so, only because we know we are obliged to or, as the Gospels remind us, commanded to love the person.** Spouses know moments like this, parents certainly do, and it is also part of the history of any real friendship. Every relationship feels the stresses and strains that come from dealing with one another's flaws, imperfections, and shortcomings. Nonetheless, we make promises to love because we know there will likely come a point where love asks more than we think we can give. **Like God with faithless Israel, it is only through patience, fidelity, forgiveness, and reconciliation that we can move beyond the dark moments of love and re-envision love's original promise.**

DISCUSSION

1. Jesus commands us to love, but perhaps not in the way we ordinarily think about love. He intensifies the call to love by saying we must love not as the world teaches us to love, but as he has loved us. What narratives of love does the world offer (e.g. consumerism or entertainment), what lessons does it teach? How might these examples make the Christian understanding of love seem unreasonable?
2. In Mark 12:28-34 and in similar accounts in Matthew and Luke, Jesus explicitly ranks the importance of the command to love above all others. Why does he do this? Why is Jesus' command to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves sensible? Why is it one commandment we can't afford to break?
3. Can we love God without loving one another? Can we love one another without loving ourselves? How are each of these connected?
4. What is your reaction to Paul's statement in Romans 13:8, that love is a "continuing debt" that we owe to one another?
5. How can human love be said to live in partnership with God's love? What does it mean to carry God's love forward?
6. What would you consider the characteristics of love? What does it look like when we love one another? As you think about this, consider the examples listed on the previous page and the ways you've seen them enacted in your life.