

Love and Action
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Acts 10:44-48
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” John 15:17

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “commandment”? Most of us probably think of something like “rule” – after all, the 10 Commandments still stand as the most familiar set of rules for how we should act, both with our actions and with our thoughts.

We have two initial options when we first hear Jesus talking about “commandments” and it sounds like “rules”. We can get our Protestant ears up and say “That sounds like ‘works’ and we’re into ‘grace’ so even though Jesus said ‘commandment’ – it’s not a requirement, it was just a suggestion.” We could do that. Or we could go the other way, and say “Yes, Jesus gave us this command, and if you look closely you’ll find that he also said all these things that we are supposed to do. Let’s make up a list of them and follow that list... religiously. We could go either route [and you can find churches that do either one of them]. Fortunately, we’re [Presbyterians, so we’re] not going to choose either one of those options. We’re not going to oversimplify what Jesus said until it has no impact on our lives, and we’re not going to get into legalisms about coming up with a long set of rules.

When we take a closer look at the commandment that Jesus was talking about, we realize that this isn’t the first place he says this. Elsewhere in the Bible Jesus says this same thing as part of the greatest commandment. The first part is (of course) – love God with all your heart, mind, strength, soul, and the second part is “love your neighbor as yourself.” (In that verse, “love one another” seems to be secondary, but Jesus always said the two of them together, which is a clue that he saw them as being interconnected). But Jesus says it in a different way this time (emphasizing love for one another as being how we show our love for God).

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide (aka “remain”) in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”

That *almost* sounds like an ultimatum: “***IF*** you keep my commandments, ***THEN*** I will love you.” It sounds even even worse when Jesus goes on to say “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” What happened to unconditional love? [Nothing. Jesus still loves us even when we don’t do what he commands, he just wants us to live this way so our lives will be better. Jesus never says that this is the way that we get to earn his love, or this is how we get to earn our way into heaven. He said plainly why he was telling us this, if we just listened to what he said.]

But there is another way to understand what Jesus said. The words could be a description of cause and effect. “***IF*** you keep my commandments ***THEN*** you will continue in my love.” Or perhaps it could even be said like this, “My command to you is for you to love one another, and the more you do that, the more the you will grow in the type of love that I have shown you. If you do this, then people will know that you are my friends, because you love one another, which is what I commanded you.”

[The evidence that we follow Christ is not in our theology, and not in that we go to church. The evidence that we follow Christ is seen in how we treat one another. Scary, eh?]

I had not seen Bob Battles' article for the Bugle this week, and he had not seen my sermon, it was just one of those wonderful "coincidences" of life to see that he had used this same phrase when he was talking about another verse from the Gospel of John. Jesus "command" was telling us to do what he knew we needed: we need to love one another because we need one another.

You can get good and dizzy trying to figure out which comes first: that we need one another or that we must love one another. When we love one another we realize how much we need one another, and when we realize how much we need one another, when we find out how much love and support we receive from one another, then we love each other even more. Which comes first, the love or the action? The answer is that it is probably different for each of us. The important thing is that we follow the command to love each other because we need each other, not simply say that we love each other and they fail to show it in our actions.

[People say, "Well I love him/her, I just don't like him/her." Jesus wouldn't have accepted that as a possibility. His understanding of friendship and love were too interconnected.]

Jesus had every right to command his followers. He had every right to order them to do what he wanted. After all, he was [and still is] God. But Jesus did not use his power and authority to dictate to those who followed him. He considered them friends, and one doesn't treat friends that way. [You tell friends what you think is best for them, and hope they'll follow it... but you still love them even if they fail, right? If yes, then you know what friendship is all about. If no, then you really aren't a friend to them, you're an advisor.]

He considered them friends and was giving them this commandment because he knew they needed it. He said that he did not consider them servants or "slaves" [it's the same word in the Greek]. He commanded them not as servants or slaves, whose actions are dictated by requirements that are placed on them. He commanded them as friends, who he hoped would choose to follow the path that he showed them, not because it was a requirement, but because they freely chose to do so.

Jesus taught many things, but the one thing that he taught more than anything else was about love. Not romantic love, not the love of rose-colored glasses, but the friendship love, what used to be called brotherly love, that love that binds people together in a very deep and true sense. That love is not theoretical love, that love drives people to act, to action, to show the love that they feel. That is the love that thinks of the other before the self. That is the love that is willing to lay down one's life for a friend. Acquaintances are nice, but Jesus is talking about something more, deeper, richer.

It should be impressed upon us how much of an emphasis Jesus put on friendship. He was describing radical friendship, not just social acquaintances, he was talking about a lifestyle of love for one another because we need one another. I had a friend in seminary who really disliked the hymn "What a Friend We have in Jesus" because he thought it was too hokey, not "elevated" enough. Now I would agree that Jesus is more than just our buddy, but the imagery of friendship is something that Jesus himself used to describe his relationship with us. He said to

his followers, “I don’t consider you servants, I consider you friends.” That’s an amazing thing when you consider that the God of the universe wants to have you and me for friends.

And Jesus didn’t just talk about friendship, and having this sort of love for one another. He did it. You heard him say, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Those who first heard Jesus say these words didn’t know it yet, but Jesus was getting ready to do for them what he wanted them to do.

But when Jesus said “friend” he was talking about a deeper level of commitment than we sometimes mean when we use the word. The same is true when Jesus used the word “love” – when Jesus said “love” he didn’t mean a warm fuzzy feeling, he meant a level of friendship and commitment that would lead us to do for others more than for ourselves. And when Jesus said “love” he meant an unconditional love. I know we hear that phrase a lot, but look at the example Jesus gave us through his own actions

Jesus continued to love and show love even to those who abandoned him at the cross. He went back to Peter who denied him, back to Thomas who doubted him, and to you and me when we have failed to live up. When he talked to Peter he asked him the same question, “Do you love me” and when Peter said “yes” how did Jesus respond? Feed my sheep, tend my lambs. In effect he said to Peter, “OK, if you love me, then take care of others as I would. Care for them. Look after them. Watch out for them, make sure they don’t get hurt.” Jesus took Peter’s word that he did love Jesus, and then gave Peter a way that he could show his love.

Love and action are interconnected, bound up together. When you love like Jesus then you will want to follow the commands of God. When you love like Jesus you will want to fix the parts of your life that need fixing, even when that will be difficult. When you love like Jesus, you will want to show it, not because you have to, but because you want to. It will make you happy to do so, and Jesus knew that too. Jesus knew that loving each other would make us happier. Hear again the words from the Gospel reading with a little amplification.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; continue to live in my love. By keeping my commandments, you will continue in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus gave us this commandment to make our lives better. Not necessarily easier, because it is often hard to love at first. We’re not always in the practice of loving. We get to be very good at criticism, at cynicism, at being able to see the cloud inside every silver lining. And it makes us terribly unhappy. Jesus gives us one step to counteract that unhappiness in our lives: love one another. You’ve heard the old saying that love is blind, but love isn’t blind, at least real love isn’t. Real love isn’t ignorant of the facts, real love is love that continues despite the facts. Real love finds a way to go on after failure and disappointment. Real love isn’t ignoring the pain and heartache, but makes a decision that the pain of life will not be what we base our lives on, but instead decides to base live on love.

Sound too simple? Well it may be simple, but it is not always easy, because we have been called to love one another. Loving God is easy, God loved us first and God is perfect. Loving one

another is hard, we are disappointed, let down by our friends. Others make decisions we don't agree with, fail to live up to our expectations, and this simple thing gets much more difficult. It's remarkably easy to love your neighbor from the safety of your own home. It's simple to turn the other cheek when you never let anyone get close enough to do any harm.

What is difficult is to live together, to bear with one another, to get along as a family, as a community of faith called a church. We are called to love one another. We are called to be a family gathered together. When we do that, when we love one another, then our joy increases, then our joy will be complete. When the love of God takes over and starts doing spring cleaning on our hearts and wipes out the anger that has been swept under the carpet, and the frustration that has been kept locked in the cabinet, all the different things in our lives which keep us down are transformed.

Sounds too simple, I know. And I don't mean to suggest that every scar that we have will be wiped away instantly. For people who have emotional illnesses like depression, being told to just let it go is as cruel as telling someone with a broken leg to just get up and walk. But we cannot let those honest exceptions keep us from looking into our hearts and seeing where we might need a renewal of love and action.

This is a long term commitment, but it has to begin somewhere. There has to be a first step, or maybe a new first step.

Sound impossible? Entirely unlikely? Well, it may sound that way, but Jesus knew who he was talking to... he knew that it would be difficult for us. Perhaps that is one of the reasons he said it so often, because when we first hear "love one another" it sounds so simple, but it isn't always easy. But is it impossible? Is it impossible? Jesus took a group of fisherman and political radicals and brought them together, and in the end they did nothing short of changing the world. And Jesus did it with the unlikely ones. Jesus didn't choose the strong and the powerful and the most educated. He called to those who the rest of society had little use for or took little notice of, and he made them the foundation for his church. Sound impossible? Entirely unlikely? I doubt anyone ever expected Peter to turn into a preacher, reaching out to the Gentiles with the baptism of Jesus Christ.

What was it that transformed Peter from who he was to what he became? It wasn't education or social status or well-reasoned arguments. It was the love that Jesus showed him, the forgiveness that Jesus offered him, and Peter's willingness to try to be like Jesus.

It was that simple. All it took was Jesus dying on the cross, rising again, and forgiving Peter for what he had done. Sound a little extreme? Well that's the sort of love Jesus was talking about.

It worked for Peter.
Will it work for you?