

“New Love for a New Era”

John 13:34

As we enter a new era in the life of our church today, I thought this would be a wonderful opportunity to look at the new commandment that Jesus gave to His original disciples and to us: John 13:34.

At the outset, there are two questions I'd like to answer about this verse. First, why love? Why is love so important in Jesus' thinking, so important that He would command it the way He does? Immediately the answer is that God is love, and Jesus came to reveal, to show us God. But that's not all. Jesus knew that a reality of human life is the lack of love, that is, loneliness, hurt, and alienation. It's a timeless reality, true not just 2000 years ago, but today as well. Life in our world is increasingly described by words such as fear, anger, and brokenness. Mean-spirited is an additional phrase I've heard recently. In that world men, women, boys, and girls are desperately looking for love and the acceptance, affirmation, and security that it brings. Here, Jesus provides and promotes the remedy to this very basic human need. Second, what makes these words a new commandment? “Love one another” in and of itself was not new. In the Old Testament Leviticus 19:18 says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” What makes this commandment new is that Jesus adds to “love one another” the words, “as I have loved you.” What's new here is the standard of love. Christ now sets it; it's loving as He loves. When we set the standard of love, we can come up with a pretty low standard. The boys and girls were asked in Sunday school, “What is the commandment for dads and moms?” The answer, “Honor your father and mother.” “What's the commandment for brothers and sisters?” After a pause, one little boy yelled out, “Thou shalt not kill.” Not quite the same standard as Jesus. The standard that is loving as Jesus loves is practically and beautifully described in I Corinthians 13:4-8: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” I step back from these verses and ask, who wouldn't want to be that type of person? Who wouldn't want that type of loving person in their life? Who of us wouldn't prosper and flourish if that love characterized our relationships? Certainly this is a love to seek, a love to experience, a love to share! My three points today look at what it means to love as Jesus loves.

First, if I love as Jesus loves, my love is distinctive. There are some specific qualities that characterize this love. For example, Jesus' love is a thoughtful and decisive act of the will. As such, it's a statement of commitment and permanence. It's not the “here today, gone tomorrow” sentimentality that our fallen world popularizes and even celebrates. This is not to say that Jesus' love is cold and unfeeling. Jesus' love is emotional and even passionate, the feeling side certainly fuels it, but it's a love that is inspired and controlled by the power of decision. Second, to love the way Jesus loves is to focus attention on the person being loved. It's you-centered, not me-centered. Jesus' love says, “You are of first concern to me; my interests, my desires are secondary to yours, because I love you.” If I love like Jesus, I don't ask, “What can I get out of this relationship?” or “Is it in my best interest to enter into and stay in this relationship?” This type of thinking is alien to Jesus' love. Third, loving like Jesus is loving unconditionally. It doesn't say, “If you do this, I will love you.” Or, “If you do that, I will withhold my love from you.” Unconditional love declares, “Regardless of what you do, I will love you.” Let me offer an important qualifier at this point. A number of times I've heard a person who is pursuing destructive behavior say, “You're not loving me unconditionally when you bring up my sin.” What that person is saying is that unconditional love is love that approves of the person and their sin. That's not loving as Jesus loves. Jesus loved His disciples when they failed Him, betrayed Him, deserted Him, but He didn't approve of their sin. Our I Corinthians 13 passage reminds us that love “does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth.” Loving unconditionally does not mean loving or approving of sin. Fourth, Jesus' love is love that gives. His whole life and ministry was about giving. Giving love asks, what can I do to benefit you, to help you, to support you, to comfort you? If I love like Jesus, my love is a decision, it's you-centered, it's unconditional, and it gives.

That brings us to our second point, which is the reality check. I might want to love like Jesus loves, but the problem is I can't. I can do it for a while, but not continually, constantly. The reason being that left to myself, to my own resources and ability, my love is ultimately driven by my feelings, it's me-centered, it's conditional,

and it focuses on what I can get for myself. Unfortunately, this is the love that is natural to who we are as human beings. That's why there's so much frustration, broken relationships, and alienation in our world today. People say they love each other but the type of love they're practicing is this natural love, love that is sentimental, self-centered, and ultimately divisive. The reality is that Jesus' love is not natural. This is one of the reasons that a distinctive different Greek word, *agape*, is used to describe this love. It is not in your nature to love as Jesus loves. It's not in mine. Jesus' love is different; it is supernatural, beyond your nature. So here we have what would appear to be an impasse: Jesus commands me to love others the way He loves me, yet I'm not capable of loving the way He commands. All my efforts to do so will end in failure. Is He being unjust, unfair, and arbitrary? No, but that brings us to the good news of our third point.

I can love as Jesus loves, in this distinctive, supernatural way if I receive the gift of His love. First John 4:9 says, "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him." What did God do? He decided to be you-centered, to put your best interests first, He gave His own precious Son unconditionally for you. The cross tells you how much Jesus loves you. He died there, for you. Do you deserve His love? No, in your selfishness and sin you deserve the opposite of His love. Can you gain this love, work for it, achieve it in some way? No, it's above, it's beyond your nature. It's SUPERnatural. The only way to access this love is to receive it, accept it. When you receive that supernatural love of God in your life He stamps this statement on your heart and mind and soul: "You are loved! You are special and precious to Me. I embrace you in my strong arms of forgiveness, acceptance, affirmation, and love." That, my friends, is love that changes your life! When you receive this gift, then you're able to share it, to love others as Christ loved you. The greatest, the richest experience you can enjoy in this life is to receive this gift, to love as Jesus loves! It's in response to receiving this gift that Paul writes in II Corinthians 9:15, "Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" But that's not all, because this is a gift that keeps on giving. I can love as Jesus loves because there is no lack of His love in my life. When you receive this gift Romans 5:5 tells us, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." The Greek word translated "poured" means this: you hold a glass under a faucet and turn the water on. The glass fills up and usually you turn the water off. But not in this case, because the water just keeps coming. The glass can't contain all the water being poured into it. The water is poured out to overflowing, and still it keeps coming. That's what we're talking about when we receive into our lives God's love in Jesus Christ. Our lives are like that glass, and God pours His love, a love that has no limits, into your life. You can't contain it or manage it; it consumes you, changes you, and cascades out of your life and into the lives of those around you. This is the love that is yours if you receive the gift: you're truly enabled to love as Jesus loves!

As we close today, let me ask you, have you received into your life God's gift of love in Jesus Christ? It's the only way to love as Jesus loves. It's a love that will change your life as you reject the self-centered love that wreaks nothing but havoc in your life, in your relationships. If you're tired of frustration, loneliness, and alienation, won't you consider Jesus Christ, the offer of His love for you, love He's already demonstrated by dying on the cross? If you'd like to do that, please speak to me or one of the pastors after our service today. If you have received Christ and His love in your life, let me ask you: does His love—distinctive, supernatural love—does that love really describe your life and relationships? Do you love as Jesus loves, are you patient and kind, not envious, boasting, or proud? Is your love rude or self-seeking? Is it not easily angered, does it keep no record of wrongs? Is yours a love that does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth? As we begin this day a new era in the life of this church, I believe that an important part of Jesus' vision for us is to love one another as He loves us. Then people in our community will say, "Look! Look at how those Christians love each other!" It's a love that overcomes the frustration, brokenness, alienation, and loneliness that are rampant in our world today. It's a love that so many in that world are desperately searching for. Will they find that love here? Having received that love from Jesus, having that love pouring out of our lives and relationships by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, I know that the answer to the question "Will they find that love here?" is yes. Yes, they will. And in that, God will be pleased and glorified!