

2016-04-24 Keith Foot

“A new command” (Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35)

Introduction

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)

“A new command ...”? You may well ask, ‘what’s “new” about it?’ Surely we are familiar with the summary of Law - often quoted in Gospels - e.g:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ ; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Luke 10:27)

But the fact remains - Jesus speaks of a “new” command. The Greek He uses for “new” is special - *kainós*. It carries the meaning of something **totally** new - of a new kind, unprecedented, novel. Not simply like a new car or new shoes.

So again - ‘What’s new?’ The answer is both simple **and** profound. It the **standard** of this love.

In the Old Testament the standard was: (a) *your neighbour*: this was something always up for debate, as Good Samaritan parable addressed (*cf* Luke 10:25-37); and (b) *yourself* - me, you, us - **we** were standard of love.

But in this “**new**” command the standard is **Jesus**. His love. We are to love **as He loved**. This really does set a whole new standard!

The new standard: no longer ‘neighbour’?

Let us explore this change of standard a bit further. “Love you neighbour as yourself” raises many questions. I have already alluded to the ‘Good Samaritan’ parable. Jesus told this when an expert in law “wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’” (Luke 10:29)

We see that this implies we can choose whom we love. The current refugee crisis, the EU in/out debate, and many more issues in life, raise such questions. But in Jesus making the standard “as I have loved you” - we have **no** choice. We are to love everyone - even our enemies! (Incidentally, we are not to confuse ‘loving a person’ with ‘liking what they do’!)

This is at the heart of the events recorded in Acts 10 and re-told in our Acts 11 reading. The issue of centuries of prejudice towards non-Jews needed a dramatic intervention by God (in this case, Peter’s vision) to bring home to the early church the totality of Jesus’ “new command”.

Thus, the first thing this “new command” does is to make us look beyond ‘our neighbours’, ‘our folk’ - wherever the boundary may be drawn in our minds, and to love **all** - even those who to our mind are ‘unlovable’!

The new standard: no longer ourselves?

There is another aspect of this “new command”. In the Old Testament the standard was “as yourself”. Why is this so limiting? Simply this: vast numbers of people **don’t** love themselves! Low self-esteem, even **self-hatred**, is an increasing problem. Self-harming, abusive relationships & behaviour are all too often rooted in **not** loving yourself.

Therefore not for nothing Jesus changed the standard!

The reality is: when we **really** grasp and experience the love of God for yourself, it transforms how you love others. When you come to know ‘in your knower’ that you are loved by God, warts and all, it is profoundly life-changing.

How to attain this new standard?

But this raises another question: ‘How can I possibly obey this “new command”? I have enough problem loving an annoying neighbour - let alone ‘foreigners’!’

Let me refer you to John 15 which is all part of same teaching at Last Supper. It records the famous vine/branches image. Here, Jesus repeats this new command: “Love each other as I have loved you.” (15:12), but He only does so **after** speaking of “remaining (*abiding*) in Him.” Indeed, **every** aspect of the Christian life hinges on this: our connection to Jesus.

This is **the** clue to obeying the “new command”. It is only possible as we are connected to Him. We can only love as He loves when we receive for ourselves His love through His Spirit.

Very briefly, let me explore one aspect of ‘connectedness’.

A central verse of my faith is: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27)

I used to think this simply meant heaven when I died! However, more recently I have come to see it’s relevance **now** - before I die. Let me draw three things from this verse:

1. *Christ in me*. He lives in me by His Spirit which is the powerhouse enabling me to do all He calls me to do - including loving as He loves.
2. *Hope* - This is not something vague, like ‘I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow’, but firm expectation of what is available to us as Christians. Indeed, **all** that is from God’s glory.
3. *Glory* - God’s glory is not just the awesome smoking mountain stuff! It is His whole character and nature, especially His love (*cf* Exodus 33:18,19), is imparted to us through “Christ in you”. Thus, His whole purpose is that people encounter God’s love through us!

Conclusion

Loving as Jesus loves us is only possible when He lives in us. When He lives in us - ‘He want’s out!’ That is, He wants to be manifested to others. Hence the consequence of obeying the “new command” is spelled out in the next verse:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34,35)

This is your calling a Christians, as the community of HT Crockham Hill.

(All Scripture quotes are from NIV 1984)