

The Joyful Command

John 15:9-17

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98:1-9; 1 John 5:1-5

Love or Law

We love Jesus and coffee because each gives us such a warm, cozy feeling. We are not so crazy about Moses and milk because while they might be good for us, they can be tough to swallow (especially skim milk). Moses is the Lawgiver. No one likes a lawyer and no one trusts a politician. Jesus, on the other hand, was a preacher of love – which is always welcome. We want a god who “so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son” – a God who loves the world, not one who is making up rules for us to obey. And so when we hear, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love,” we sigh with contentment that we are Christians and not Israelites. And surely, this is wonderful. It is wonderful that Jesus loves us and encourages us to abide in His love. What idiot would say this is a bad idea? But as Jesus explains that love, we get a dramatically different picture than the love this world presents.

There is a lot of content in these short scriptures, and today we are going to discuss only three points. 1) Christ’s love *for* us, 2) Christ’s love *in* us, and 3) Loving joyfully.

Christ’s Love For Us

Jesus invites us to abide in His love, and goes on to explain what that means. **First** Jesus declares that **He loves us the same way the Father has loved Him**. The Father’s love for the Son is abundantly displayed in the gospel accounts. The Father spoke from heaven twice to affirm His love for Jesus, and even Jesus’ enemies recognized that God’s power was at work in Him. If there are any perfect relationships anywhere, certainly they are the love among the Father, Son, and Spirit of the Godhead. The love between the Father and Son was pure, powerful, passionate, and perfect.

We have a sliding scale of loves. We love chocolate and donuts, but not as much as steak and wine. And our love for our families is of a different nature, but although we love our children dearly, we love our spouses more. And speaking of that sliding scale, our children may slide up and down depending upon their behavior. We love some friends more than others, and although Mr. George loves disc golf mightily, he loves his friends more than disc golf. So it seems natural, almost necessary, that no matter how passionately Jesus might love us, it would be less, or of a different nature, than the love of the Father. But no. This short sentence packs an explosive fact. How can it be? How is it possible that Jesus could love a created being, a *sinful* created being, the same way the Father loves the Son? I do not know. It is absolutely mind-boggling. This is a statement that demands not understanding, but worship. However it works, Jesus’ love for us is too wonderful to grasp. Jesus does not call us to understand His love. He calls us to abide in it. Relish it. Enjoy it. Be comforted and encouraged by Jesus’ love.

Lest we think we are such blundering sinners that we got into this by mistake – like thinking you are in the dining room for coworkers, but discovering yourself seated with the board of directors – Jesus reminds us that **He called us**. This being loved by Jesus was not our idea. We did not sign up for it. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Yep, you, with all your silliness and sin and failure. Jesus had a choice. He looked around the world, considered all the people out there, and finally said, “I’ll take that one.” Jesus does not love us out of obligation. It is not that He is stuck with us and, being God and all, is determined to do right by us. Jesus does not love us out of grim determination. Jesus loves us because He *wants* to love us. Jesus *chose* to love us.

But it gets better. Perhaps the image forming in your mind is of the dog pound. Some of us want a healthy, pedigreed, frolicsome pet – but others of us find our heartstrings tugged, yea yanked even, by the runt, the orphan puppy with no mother or brothers, alone in a cold, heartless pen. We feel an over flow of

love for this adorable creature and take it home to a warm supper, a cozy bed, and a happy family. But no matter how strong your love is, he is still a dog. He might be man's best friend in a metaphorical sense, but he will never share your thoughts and dreams, your joys and sorrows – he will never hold a conversation with you. But Jesus does. Jesus not only calls us, **He calls us friends**. Real friends. Not metaphorical friends. Friends He can talk to. Friends with whom He can share His hopes and dreams, His joys and sorrows. And secrets. Do you have a friend to whom you have told all your secrets? Jesus said lots of things when He was here on earth. I'm sure some were trivial, like "Please pass the salt," but much was profound. You do not tell your friends all your secrets, probably because you think they would not understand. Well do you think we could understand everything the Heavenly Father says to the Son? Of course not! Yet that did not stop Jesus from telling His disciples everything. No secrets. No wonder the disciples were in a state of constant confusion! Jesus did not treat the disciples as students, or employees or subjects or creatures. Jesus' love treats us as friends!

How can you measure love? Is it by the quality of the chocolates? The number of roses? The size of the diamond? Or is this talk of measuring love just trashy? Perhaps love is one of those things which is so precious that attempting to measure tarnishes it. "You're all wrong!" says Jesus. Love can definitely be measured, but not by chocolates or roses. Not even by diamonds and rubies. Love can be measured by death. The greatest love is dying love. I think we can safely say that no one here this morning has loved his friends to the death, but Jesus has. Jesus loves us with the unsearchable love of the Trinity. Jesus loves us not as creatures or subjects, but as friends. And Jesus loves us with the maximum love – the love that brings death. When Jesus says, "Abide in my love," this is the love He means. Jesus is not inviting us into a casual dating relationship. Jesus is all in with you. His love moved Him to choose you, to call you, to die for you – and His love will never waver.

Christ's Love in Us

So wonderful! This love of Jesus is so amazing it makes us weep or laugh, or both. Then Jesus goes and messes it all up. He gives us a commandment.

You can tell who has never read their Bible much. I don't think most people even know Jesus said these things. But there it is. A commandment. Here we go again, dumped with more rules from a far-off deity. But Jesus is very crafty. He does not just dump this commandment on us and walk away. Jesus intricately weaves this commandment into His declaration of love. Feels like asking your girlfriend to make dinner for you after you give her a ring.

Jesus is not satisfied with a pretty good attempt at love. A good-faith effort now and then is not enough. Jesus is blunt and explicit. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." That's right, Jesus expects us to love others with the same love that He loves us: the choosing, intimate, friendship, divine, deadly love. If this does not seem outrageous to you, you have not been paying attention. It is hard enough consistently to love those dearest to us, but even then we waver. And how in the world are mere mortals to love like God? And if we all died for love, we would all be dead! Hold on, you say. I am blowing this out of proportion. Jesus is simply calling us to love sacrificially. Well that is for sure. But let's read verse twelve again. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Let's not patronize Jesus. If Jesus had wanted to say "love sacrificially," He was certainly capable of doing that. Jesus knew the Aramaic language. But Jesus did not advise us to make a strong effort to love sacrificially. He did not advise anything at all. He issued a command. These are orders, not discussion points. The only acceptable response to a command is "Yes Sir!" And the command was to love with a deadly divine love. How is this even partly possible?

The correct answer is that it is impossible. But it gets worse. This command is impossible for mortals with their family and friends, but that is not what Jesus says. Jesus commands us to love “one another.” That includes everyone. In the context of Jesus teaching, the others are those in His Kingdom, other Christians. This command has implications for how we treat non-Christians, but that is secondary. Now this is positively frightening. One another. Everyone. That is going to include the rude, mean, ignorant, and irritable among us; the kids who do not sit still in the service, the old people who sing off-key, the cheap-skate who brings hot dogs to the potluck lunch, the compulsive rule-followers and the scandalous rule-breakers, the shamefully timid and the rudely brash, the lazy and the greedy. Last year in the adult Sunday School class we established that God is at work sanctifying everyone. God will not allow sinful habits to remain in any of His children. But God takes His good old time about it – decades, even. So here we are, stuck for the present with all manner of awful people, and Jesus – the shock of it! – demands that we love these people with a deadly divine love. And what is divine love? Pure, powerful, passionate, and perfect. Yep, that’s the orders. And to the death. Jesus orders you to die for other Christians. It is not a request. It is an order.

Finally, Jesus equates love for Him with obedience to His commands. In other words, if we do not love each other this way, we cannot legitimately claim to love Jesus. At this point Jesus seems not to be proclaiming the gospel as consigning us to eternal slavery. Is this good news?

Loving Joyfully

Jesus told the disciples before He died that He had a lot more to say. Later the Apostle John wrote more of Jesus’ message to us in his letters, where He continued teaching about love. Jesus does not make it any easier in John’s letters. John’s letter repeats and reinforces what Jesus said in the gospel account. Then Jesus adds insult to injury. After posting this impossible command and dressing it up as love, Jesus says His “commandments are not burdensome.” What? You have got to be kidding. All commandments are burdensome. That is why we bristle at them and work hard to cut corners and avoid them. And as we have seen, this command is especially onerous – if we take it seriously. And then to say, “By the way, this is not hard,” comes across as grossly insensitive.

This brings us into a collision with the facts. A few verses earlier the Apostle John wrote, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.” Is Jesus the Christ, the promised Messiah who would come to set His people free, save the gentiles, and redeem the world? Is Jesus the Son of God? More to the point, can Jesus be trusted? Most people would glibly say, “Yes.” But if Jesus is trustworthy, that means He always tells the truth, which means that loving God and each other are intertwined. We are under the impossible command, and it is (if Jesus is telling the truth) not burdensome. Is it possible that we are able to love each other as Jesus loves us, in a non-burdensome way? Instead of being grossly insensitive, might this verse be offering us hope?

But there is more. Back in the gospel reading Jesus said that His purpose in saying these things was to bring joy to us, and not just a sample of happiness – full joy. Jesus says – and you have to decide if you believe Him – that it is a joyful pleasure to love each other with a divine, sacrificial love. Is that what you want? Do you wish for joy? Are you longing for full, deep, satisfying, joy, but instead going through life beaten down and miserable most of the time? Jesus says – and you have to decide if you believe Him – that joy can be yours, and the way to get joy is to love each other as He loves us.

That is a lot to swallow, even when it is Jesus saying it. This message contradicts everything we have experienced about life. No one else is saying this. It makes no sense. Let’s be honest this morning. Well, at least I will be. This message sounds to me like nonsense that only fools would accept. Maybe you are holier than I. You probably are. But I bet most of you are thinking the same thing. That is why the next

verse in John's letter says, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world." Folks, you have been lied to, and not by Jesus. All your life, every day, every hour of the day the world has been telling you that joy is found in pursuing your dreams and accomplishing your goals. You are being told constantly that you will be a miserable failure if you do not assert yourself. You need to get the best education, land the best job, marry a beautiful, handsome, sexy, prosperous spouse. Your body must be fit, your technology must be up-to-date, you must follow the latest Netflix series. This is the path to joy. Other paths lead to miserable failure. Every day, all day, everyone you meet, everything you see reinforces these convictions so that we are not even aware of them. Then when Jesus says that joy comes through loving each other with a deadly, divine love, it is Jesus who sounds nuts. But the children of God overcome the world. We who are born of the Spirit come to recognize that we have been the victims of terrible, vicious lies – and we reject those lies in favor of the truth. But it is not easy. When Jesus says we overcome the world, that implies that there is a struggle – and you feel it now, don't you? It might be non-burdensome to obey Jesus commands, but it is hard to believe them.

So John continues, "And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith." You began this new life believing that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died to save you from your sin, and you continue the Christian life believing that Jesus tells the truth. All day, every day, all your life you choose to believe Jesus instead of the world. The world says, "You must look like Tom and Gisele Brady," but Jesus says, "You must talk to the lonely widow next door." The world says, "You must get a high-paying summer job at a law firm to enhance your application to law school," but Jesus says, "You must work at the camp for inner-city kids." The world says, "Only losers are missing out on the latest Netflix series," but Jesus says, "You will enjoy spending a morning cleaning up the church." All day, every day you are confronted with two opposing demands – from the world and from Jesus. The demands of the world make sense. They look promising. But you cannot obey both. So who will you believe? Jesus or the world? It is only by faith that we overcome the world. We say, "I know the world's way looks better and more sensible, but Jesus always tells the truth, so I am going to follow His orders." And if your friends say, "You're crazy! Your choices make no sense!" (And they *will* say that.) it will be impossible to prove that you are making the right choices, because they really do *not* make sense in this world. Is only by faith that you overcome the world. And as you choose over and over to believe Jesus rather than the world, the lies become more obvious and the truth of Christ becomes more sure.

Abiding in Christ

Did you notice that we have in effect added another command? Now we are called to love each other *and* to overcome the world. It is no wonder that the Christian life is so difficult and Christians look so exhausted. All these commands in addition to the subtle expectations of our friends. Jesus says this is the path to joy, but honestly, that is not how many Christians experience these things. And that is because they are trying to live the Christian life by the world's means. It is hard enough to fight a determined enemy, but when you are on his ground trying to use his weapons against him, it is overwhelming. To put it another way, many Christians attempt to obey Christ in their own power. And no one is strong enough, no one has enough faith to overcome the world in his own strength. On our own, we are helpless against the overpowering forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil. If you have been following this message and *do* believe the words of Jesus and leave here resolving to obey His command, you will fail. You will be beaten down, exhausted, run over, chewed up and spit out by the relentless demands of obedience. You will be discouraged, depressed, angry, and frustrated at Jesus. Your commitment and good intentions will get you nowhere. You need help. You need supernatural help. You need Jesus. Not just the commands of Jesus. You need Jesus in person.

Jesus did not give this new commandment in a vacuum. This commandment is part of His message which began in John 15:1, and includes a fact and a command. The command which encompasses the new commandment to love one another is “Abide in me.” (v. 4) Jesus discusses this nature of this abiding in the first eight verses of chapter 15, then He shows how this works in our human relationships. Jesus introduces the *new commandment* by saying, “Abide in my love.” (v. 9) The new commandment is possible, and only possible, as we abide in Jesus and in His love. Outside of Jesus, this commandment is a burden – a terrible burden.

The reality is that those born of the Father are in Jesus just as a branch is in a vine. The vine supports and nourishes the branch. If the branch becomes separated from the vine, it withers and dies and is useless. So Christians are supported and nourished by Jesus. If we were to be separated from Him, we would wither and die and be useless. God is always pruning His church, and eventually He will cut out those Christians who do not believe in Jesus. But God will never cut out those of us who *do* believe in Jesus. God prunes us, cutting away the dead and useless twigs so that we might flourish and be healthy and fruitful, but He never will cut us off.

The fact is that Christians abide in Jesus. We can no more change this than a branch can change its position. A branch cannot decide to join the vine, and you could not decide to join Jesus. Jesus called you. Now in the mystery of God’s providence we do make choices and they do make a difference, but our choices do not change the fact that God chose us and placed us in Jesus. The word “abide” means permanent residence. The Franchetti children abide in the Franchetti home. They are there all day, every day. They eat there and sleep there and do their schoolwork there. My children do not abide in our house. Benjamin has his own apartment in Pittsburgh. Some time you may find him at our house, but he is a visitor, not a resident. So when Jesus says that we abide in Him, that it a permanent condition. We are connected to Jesus all the time, and nothing can yank us away. We are constantly being supported, nourished, and comforted by Jesus. This is a fact, an aspect of salvation. Circumstances do not change this. We may go through rough times, and those may be caused by our sin or God’s pruning. There may be times when we feel God is distant, or Jesus does not care about us. But the fact is that believers are secure in Jesus. The fact is that we always abide in Jesus.

The command is to abide in Jesus. In other words, to bring our thoughts and feelings and actions into line with the fact. Often we do not think and feel and act as though we are in Jesus. We think sinful thoughts, our emotions run crazy, our behavior is not Christ-like. We are out of sync with reality, and it messes with us. It messes us real bad. Think about this. Imagine Phillip showing up at Denise’s house for dinner one night. Ken walks in and says, “Hi Phillip! What brings you here.” and Phillip says, “I’m having dinner with my wife,” pointing to Denise. Stop. Now is it a good thing for Phillip to have dinner with his wife? Sure. What is the problem here? Phillip’s concept of reality is badly messed up. Denise is not his wife. Pat is. This is what it is like to go all day and never interact with Jesus. You are connected to Jesus. All the time. But you act as though Jesus is off somewhere. He’s not. He is right with you. You are living in a twilight zone of foolishness. When Jesus commands us to abide in Him, He is telling us to live in the real world, not some fictional world of our imagination.

How does this look in practice? We encounter Jesus through the means of grace. Abiding in Jesus happens as we read and hear the Bible, as we pray, and as we partake of the Lord’s Supper. The most potent meeting with Jesus is in worship on the Lord’s Day, but if Sunday is the only time you read the Bible and pray, that looks more like visiting Jesus than abiding in Him. You do not have to be a monk or Bible scholar to talk to Jesus and read some scripture every day. You decide. What would it mean for you to live as though you were permanently connected to Jesus?

Abiding in Christ's Love

Jesus opened this chapter by telling us to abide in Him. Then He intensified it by telling us to abide in His love. This is the love that longed for you, went searching for you, that wooed you, showers you daily with gifts. This is the love that thinks you are the most wonderful thing in the world, that is thrilled with you. This is the love that is always pestering the Father with the joyful news of what you are doing now, or sending angels to rescue you from your foolishness. The world tells you, you are not good enough. Jesus tells you He is delighted with you. The world tells you, you could make more money and have more success if you would get your act together. Jesus tells you He accepts you the way you are. You are abiding in Jesus. Now stop listening to the world. Listen to Jesus. Abide in Him. Abide in His love.

And when you abide in Jesus' love, the new commandment is not burdensome. When you abide in Jesus' love, you find unbelievable joy in loving others. When you abide in Jesus' love, you find yourself doing the impossible – loving the worst people and actually enjoying it. When you abide in Jesus' love, you unleash a supernatural love within you which spills all over everyone you touch.

If you are here this morning and do not believe in Jesus, none of this is possible for you. You are trapped in the loveless lies of the world and will never escape. But Jesus welcomes everyone who comes to Him. This pure, powerful, passionate, perfect love can be yours, too – when you begin to trust Jesus. You can begin right now, or you can talk with one of us elders after the service.

The mystery of salvation is that we who believe in Jesus are in Him, and He is in us. Jesus has been entering us through the words I have spoken, and He will enter us through the bread and wine which I will serve presently. Just as sure as you have heard me speak, and just as sure as you eat and drink the bread and wine, Jesus enters you again, loving you, rejoicing in you, and giving you the power to love others.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we long for love. We are starved for love, and would go to great lengths to get love. It sounds too good to be true that you chose us – poor, sinful us – and love us. You called us, you gave us new life, you continually give us gifts, you died for us! We admit, Father, that we do not understand your love. We scarcely believe it. But what choice do we have? The world will eat us up.

Thank you for choosing us. Thank you for giving us eternal life and the faith to believe in you. Now, Lord, help us to love one another. We have too often believed the lies of the world. We have not loved each other. We repent of these sins and ask you to work new obedience in us by abiding in Christ. We do not want to act as visitors to Jesus. Help us to cling to Him, all day, every day. Help us to abide in His love.

We ask these things in the name of Him who loves us, Jesus Christ, your Beloved Son. Amen.

C. David Green
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