

“A New Commandment,” John 13:31-38 (March 26, 2017)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” ³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” ³⁸ Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

PRAY

We are studying the gospel of John in the weeks leading up to Easter, and we are in chapter thirteen. This chapter and the ones following narrate the events of the last night of Jesus’ life, the Thursday before Good Friday. It’s also called the upper room discourse, where Jesus and his disciples have the Last Supper and Jesus gives them some final instructions before he goes to the cross.

A bit of J.D. Shaw trivia: my first Sunday at Grace over six years ago, I preached this text for my trial sermon before the church agreed to call me as their pastor. I went back last week and looked at that sermon for the first time since then, and it wasn’t great but it wasn’t horrible. Obviously, it was good enough for the church to want to call me after hearing it.

Jesus returns to the theme of love in this passage. He teaches on it at the beginning of John 13 and he closes John 13 with it as well. The question he will try to answer is: what does love look like for those who follow Jesus? First, the standard of love. Second, the command of love. Third, the goal of love.

First, the standard of love. In other words, what’s the bar we are trying to reach when Jesus says “love.” “When he had gone out [that’s talking about Judas], Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.” John 13:31-32.

To glorify something means to magnify it or show it off or display it in some positive way. The Bible says all kinds of things display God in a positive way.

Creation does it. God created the heavens and the earth, and in Psalm 19 the Psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his

hands.” The beauty of creation glorifies, shows off in a positive way, the God who made it.

When it comes to creation, this is my favorite week of the year, because the azaleas and dogwoods are blooming. I love dogwoods, and I love driving down a Mississippi highway at the beginning of spring and looking into the woods beyond the shoulder. The rest of the trees don’t yet have any leaves, so you can see all the white dogwood blossoms sprinkled through the trees, even a hundred yards deep into a forest you can see them because they stand out so. To me, anyway, it’s wonderful, and it displays the glory of God.

The law of God, the Bible, glorifies God. “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.” Psalm 119:97-98. The longer I live, the more I see how that is true – the law, the Scriptures, are so full of wisdom and goodness and truth, they are a light unto my feet and lamp unto my path, and only a magnificent, glorious God could have inspired them.

But in John 13, Jesus says that what glorifies God more than anything else is the cross. His death, his execution. He says in verse 32: “If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him *at once*.” The cross is now imminent – it’s twelve hours away. And it’s through his crucifixion, Jesus says, God’s glory will be on its fullest possible display.

Yet it is impossible for that statement to have the emotional impact on us that it should. The irony of this statement is totally lost on us, because the cross is so familiar to us. We wear it as jewelry, decorate their homes with crosses, we put them as stickers on the back glass of our cars, we tattoo them on our bodies. The cross is something pretty to us. It’s inspirational.

Never back then – the cross in Jesus’ day meant only *humiliation and shame*. Cicero, the great Roman statesman, philosopher, rhetorician who lived about a century before Jesus, wrote this about the cross: “Shameful is the loss of one’s good name in the public courts, shameful, too, a monetary fine exacted from one’s property, and shameful is exile. But, still, in each calamity there is retained some trace of liberty. Even if death is set before us, we may die in freedom. But ... the very word ‘cross,’ let [it] ... be far removed not only from the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears.”

Paul, in Romans 1:16, feels compelled to write this: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel ...” Now, why would he be ashamed of the gospel? Because the gospel, the good news, is that God became a man and died on a cross! He was claiming that in Jesus the God of the universe went through the most ignominious, shameful, humiliating experience possible. That’s why Paul had to start Romans with that disclaimer: “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” In 1 Corinthians Paul feels compelled to point out what would have been obvious to first-century readers: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing ...” 1 Corinthians 1:18. And the word translated as “folly” is actually the Greek word that literally means “madness.” The word of the cross is “madness,” because

who in the world could think that God becoming a man and dying on a cross was anything other than madness. No one was inspired by the cross back then.

In the first century, the furthest you could get from “glorify” was “crucify.” Yet Jesus says the cross will be his greatest hour of glory. But, again, it’s lost on us. I can’t make you feel nor can I make myself feel how shameful and humiliating the cross actually was, because our culture is so different. We’ve been too conditioned to love the cross. And there is no perfect analogy to illustrate for us today what that was like. But I’m going to try anyway.

When I was in college the horrifying phenomenon of school shootings began to get national attention. There had been school shootings before, but they didn’t get the kind of national attention they do now until Pearl, Mississippi, in 1997. If you were alive then, you remember that one. Nothing has been the same since.

But the bloodiest high school shooting took place a couple of years later in 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, at Columbine High School, where fifteen people died and twenty-one were injured. Last week I saw where the mother of one of the Columbine shooters has come out to tell her story. She wrote a book published last year, in February she released a TED talk that you can find on YouTube. And in one of the interviews she gave recently she said that on the day of the attack, when she first heard of that her son was one of the shooters, she began to pray. But not the kind of prayer any mother would want to pray. When she heard her son was one of the attackers, she prayed that he would take his own life. “And so while every other mother in Littleton was praying that her child was safe, I had to pray that mine would die before he hurt anyone else.”

Now, try and imagine the amount of shame and humiliation that woman has been carrying around these last almost eighteen years. Have you done it?

Now perhaps you’re in the ballpark when it comes to the shame of the cross. Yet Jesus says that shame, that humiliation, is what glorifies God the most. How?

Here’s how: sin, breaking God’s law, doing things contrary to the design God had for you when he made you, always leads to shame and humiliation. Some of you have this morning thought some angry thoughts, lustful thoughts, jealous thoughts, and you’ve been ashamed of yourself.

Or, you shame others. Just think about when you were a kid and you did something ugly in front of your grandparents that really embarrassed your parents. Just made them look like they were absolute idiots as parents. Did you ever do that, or were you perfect? No, you did it. What happened? Your sin shamed your parents. You may have been too young to feel the shame yourself, but they did. All sin leads to shame.

Yet all sin also is ultimately against God. He is our Creator, he made us in his own image, so all sin brings shame to him.

Now, what did your parents do to you when you shamed them? If they were really good parents, they disciplined you calmly and in an appropriate way, but they still got mad because they felt so humiliated. If they were bad to average parents (and I would say I fall into that category) they probably let their anger get the best of them and just wore you out. They probably raised their voice, spanked you too hard.

But what does God do when we sin against him? *He takes the shame and the humiliation of our sin on himself.* Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus is the one “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Don't you see? The cross is God absorbing all the anger, all the punishment, all shame for all the sins of the world, himself. The cross is God himself becoming utterly humiliated, *so we wouldn't have to be.* The cross shows us how seriously God takes sin (because he judges it there), but it also shows us how powerfully God loves us (because he doesn't judge us).

I'm sure that at some point over the years the mother of the Columbine shooter had to feel like she was so humiliated by her son's sin that she was under a curse. But do you what the Bible says about Jesus? Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” *She felt like she was cursed; Jesus became the curse.*

Jesus did that for us. There is nothing more important than that you believe that. If you believe that, nothing else matters. You are reconciled to God. You have God as a Father by sheer grace, and he will care for you, he will be your provider and protector. If you don't believe that, nothing can matter.

The standard of love, the bar we are to reach, **is loving someone to the point of shame, to the point of being humiliated because love them so much.**

Second, the command of love. John 13:34: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.” We call the Thursday before Easter “Maundy Thursday,” and if you've ever wondered why it's from this verse. The new commandment was given on the Thursday before Easter, and the phrase “new commandment” in Latin is “mandatum novum.” Since the Bible was only written in Latin for a thousand years, gradually the word “mandatum” became associated with the Thursday of Easter week, and became “Maundy Thursday.”

At first glance, though, there's a problem: is loving one another really a new commandment? In Leviticus 19:18 the people of Israel were told to love their neighbors as themselves. The Old Testament is full of commands to love. So how is the commandment new?

In this sense: when Jesus Christ glorified God on the cross, he put a magnifying glass to the law. Essentially, the cross is Jesus saying: “You thought the command to love meant

one thing. But you have no idea. Love goes way beyond that. If you're going to love one another as I have loved you, you will love people to the point of shame – just as I did for you.”

You know, you can love people without having to go to the point of shame and humiliation. You really can. I enjoy when young couples in our church get engaged, and get their engagement pictures done. They look great, holding hands while they're walking down a gravel road, or kissing next to a barn, or sitting on a blanket in the Grove just looking at each other and smiling. That's love, no doubt. And it's great. I'm not making fun of it. But it's not loving to the point of shame, and if you're one of those young couples then I tell you to ride that kind of love as long as you can. It's great.

But no one looks at that young couple right out of college and admires their love. We think it's great, and we're happy for them, but we don't admire it. However, if another couple for their fiftieth wedding anniversary has a photo shoot, and they are walking down the gravel road holding hands, and they look very much in love, well we do admire that. Why? Because those of us who have been married if not everyone else knows full well that over the fifty years of that marriage there has been sin, and so they have both at one time or the other felt shame and humiliation. It happens even in the best of marriages.

In the closest relationships – between spouses, parents and children, close friends – there will be sin, so there will be shame. *We will hurt each other. We will wound one another. We will disappoint one another. We will let one another down. And it can feel so humiliating and shameful to pick yourself up in year 7 or 27 or 67 of a relationship and try to love again.* You'll say to yourself, “Again? Again I have to do this? How many times have I forgiven this sin from this person? A thousand times? How many times have I been ignored by this person? But I have to go and love *again*?” Mind you, I am not talking about an abusive relationship. That's another sermon. I'm talking about how hard it is to love a normal sinner in the best of times over the long haul.

But when the love is still present in a relationship after years and years, when of course they've hurt each other because they are sinners yet still they are obviously fond of each other, when after years and years they are still saying to each other, “My life for your life,” that love is admired, even by people who don't believe in God, because they look at that and even if they don't know the words they know the spirit behind Philippians 2 has taken hold in that relationship: “³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Philippians 2:3-4.

In those relationships, they've loved – they've said for years, “My life for your life.” And Jesus (ha!) takes that kind of love, the love we usually see only in marriages, only in families, only between those very rare best friends, and applies it *to the church* and says, “Only if you have this kind of love for each other will the world know you follow me.”

That's terrifying! Jesus says, "The world will not know you are my disciples by how regularly you attend church, or study your Bible, or by your charitable giving. The world will not know you are my disciples by how much you practice evangelism or even by a willingness to go and live in hard places on the mission field. The world will not know you are my disciples by the good deeds you do for strangers. Only if you're loving one another in the church to the point of shame will the world know you are my disciples." Only this kind of love will cause the world to admire Jesus.

Now, before we get to what that love would look like among members of a church, we have to ask this question: are we even putting ourselves in a position where this kind of love can even happen? In other words, are we opening our lives, our homes, our time up to other Christians to whom we are not related by blood or marriage? This kind of love, whatever else it involves, certainly takes time. You can't cook this up over a weekend at some retreat.

If we're not devoting the time and energy just to make the relationships possible, then there's no way we are obeying Jesus' command to love. This is why we harp on small groups so much at Grace Bible. Not because you have to be in one of our official small groups, but if we aren't encouraging you to carve out some space in your life for something like this, then we aren't doing our job to teach you to obey the commands of Jesus.

Third, the goal of love (get you closer to Jesus, not glory for yourself). Here we will look at Peter. And I personally love Peter, because whenever I start to get down on myself for how I don't love and what an idiot I can be, I just think about Peter and what an idiot he could be, and I feel better.

John 13:36-38: "Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward."³⁷ Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

Peter is so sure that he will be able to follow Jesus wherever he goes, even to death. And he probably should feel that way. When the Jesus' arrest does come in a few hours, Peter draws his sword and cuts someone's ear off trying to defend Jesus. Yet, seconds later, Peter runs for his life.

Why? What happened? Jesus says at the Last Supper, "Now is the son of man glorified," and Peter said to himself, "Yes! Finally! I'm ready." And he was ready. Peter was ready to die for glory, just not the kind of glory Jesus displayed on the cross. So long as Peter thought Jesus was a political figure, or a military figure, so long as Jesus was someone who was going to work to restore Israel to the glories it had under King David, then Peter was ready to die for him. Even if Jesus failed, Peter was ready to die, because if you die trying to drive the bad guys out of your land, you have songs sung about you after you die. People build memorials to you. Women weep when they think

about you. Your grave becomes a shrine; your birthday becomes a holiday. That's the kind of glory Peter thought Jesus was going to get, and Peter was ready to share in it.

But when the glory Jesus was talking about turned out to be something else, when it meant he would love people to the point of shame – then Peter bailed. Peter was ready to follow Jesus wherever Jesus led, so long as some glory was in it for Peter. Likewise, we are ready to obey Jesus and love, but only if there is some glory in it for us.

Here's what I mean: we tend to think that when we love others, there ought to be some visible, tangible results. And we will get some glory for it. We are ok with loving so long as there is some glory in it for us. Someone will see us loving and serving and say, "Oh, you're so selfless – thank you for doing this." Or, we'll love by serving our community, and because we've loved some problem will be eradicated, and we'll get recognized for that. Or, we'll love and someone will change – we'll really love and serve someone for a few weeks or months and they will on the other side be absolutely transformed, and this person will be forever grateful that God brought me into their life. We are ready to love... so long as we get to share in the glory.

Now, sometimes that will happen – occasionally we will love, and we'll see people actually helped. And when that happens it is wonderful. But **far more often** we will love and no one will notice, no one will brag on us, no problems will be solved, and no one will change. And that's especially true when we love those closest to us in our families and the church.

I can't tell you how many times early in our marriage I would do something nice for my wife and expect, I don't know, her to see me washing the dishes after supper and come to me with tears streaming down her face saying, "Thank you – I am so incredibly grateful God gave you to me." Or maybe clap, or do something along those lines. And of course, because she's human and sane, she didn't do that. And I walked around angry. Why? I was "loving" for the glory of it, not for the sake of loving itself.

But when you love and no one seems to change, no one seems to notice, no big problems are immediately solved, then you are in a good place. You will be right where Jesus wants you to be. Because when you love and no one notices, you are humbled. You think, "Man, I'm doing all I can and the needle has not moved here at all. What am I even doing here?" You're humbled. And you know what another word for "humbled" is? Humiliated. Both come from the same root Latin word.

When you love and nothing seems to change and no one notices you are humiliated, but you're actually in a very good place because then you will see how much you need Jesus.

Friends, why does Jesus command us to love? It is not primarily because he needs our help fixing the world or caring for the people around us, though he does use our love that way. Primarily, the reason Jesus commands us to love is to draw us closer to him.

Andrew and Rachel Wilson live in London, and they have two young children with

severe disabilities. It's hard enough to raise children, but almost certainly its even more difficult when the children have extra challenges to be faced. The Wilsons write about their experiences in a book they wrote on suffering called *The Life We Never Expected*. I commend it to you. But in one chapter Rachel talks about the difference between what she calls "fake battles" and "the true battle." The "fake battles" involve getting stuff done, seeing results, from all her serving and loving. The true battle is something else. And she writes this: "I can have days in which I win several fake battles, but in doing so I lose the true one. The fake battles are a whirlwind of phone calls, government services, websites, more phone calls, forms, applications, more phone calls. And each of these can distract me from the true battle, which ... is not fought that way. Frequently, the weapons of the true battle include silence, prayer, ... clinging onto a recently read Scripture passage with my fingernails, singing through gritted teeth, reading a prewritten prayer out loud, reaching for Jesus through the mist of confusion or unanswered prayer, stilling myself in his presence, and remembering that he is good and faithful and kind." Andrew and Rachel Wilson, *The Life We Never Expected* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 42-43.

You see, if she thought the goal of love to get glory for herself or changing people, she'd give up. She'd feel like a failure. There are certain things about her life that she cannot change. But that's not the goal of love. The goal of love is to keep going back no matter how humiliated you are by your ineffectiveness or how weak you feel. *And for that you need Jesus.*

In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul talks about some affliction he has, he calls it his "thorn in the flesh." We don't know what it was, whether it was spiritual, psychological, or physical, but he begs Jesus to get rid of it. But Jesus says to him: "Paul, removing your thorn is not the point. Because my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Then Paul says, "I have learned, though, that when I am weak, I am strong.

Feeling weak when you try to love one another is good. As long as we feel self-sufficient, as long as we feel like we can do life on our own, we won't go to Jesus. But when we try to love the way Jesus did, and we don't see things changing, we will feel weak, humbled.

And then can we really begin to know Jesus, and *that's the point*. Christians say all the time that we want to know Jesus better, we want to get closer to him. There's only one way. Paul says in Philippians 3:10-11: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." We have to share in the fellowship in his sufferings. Not by going to the cross (Jesus has already done that), but when we love people to the point of shame we will share in the humiliation that he bore on the cross.

"A new command I give you: love one another." Friends, let's pray that we can be obedient to that command, and know Jesus better for having done so. AMEN