

Becoming a member of MRBC 4: Responsibilities of membership: Loving one another

OUTLINE

How we are to love one another

How we are to see one another

INTRODUCTION

Picture with me Jesus last evening with His disciples before His arrest: If you could have tasted the air there would have been a strong variety of flavours in the upper room. Different emotions written on the faces of the various disciples. Some would have been slightly euphoric still high from the shouting of the crowds, heralding Christ as He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Judas would have been under the cloud of his guilt and shame, anxious for what he was about to do. Others like Peter, who would have been a type of self-appointed body guard, would be very conscious of the danger that Jesus was in because of the various confrontations with the leaders with their loaded questions, you can just imagine him fingering his sword. The disciples would have looked across the table at each other, and when James and John were caught sight of, the Sons of Thunder, there would be a remembrance of their mother asking that they be seated at Jesus right and left hand, and a previous argument about who was the greatest. And then there is Christ, this is His last night before He dies that He gets to spend with His disciples. Full of emotion, probably not understood by those there, during the evening meal—the Lord’s Supper, He gets up; adorns Himself as a slave and out of love proceeds to wash His disciple’s feet (John 13:1). His emotions reach a peak, and He speaks out about the one who will betray Him, “After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” (John 13:21) And after Judas had left Jesus gives them just one commandment to follow, what would you have expected to come? Jesus says in John 13:34-35, “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.”

We are continuing in our series on church membership and we are presently considering those responsibilities that every Christian should be doing in the context of a local church. We have dealt with every Christians responsibility to meet together, today we want to look at our responsibility to love one another. We want to look at Christ’s New Commandment given to the disciples and how it defines how we are to love. We will then apply the gospel to our seeing one another and how the gospel should feed this love.

How we are to love one another

In what way is the new commandment new? The newness in the new command is found primarily in Christ’s qualifying statement, ‘just as I have loved you’. The world has never seen a perfect life of human love lived out from beginning to end. It has never seen a

perfect human rendition of God's love incarnate. So the first aspect of newness that we need to draw attention to is the new example of love where Christ sets the bench mark far above any other lowered standard known to man. Let's elaborate a little on this love.

Jesus would have loved every single person He met. When He loved a child, He would not have been condescending, dismissive, bullying, insensitive or abusive. Children would have felt drawn to His warm acceptance and genuine interest in them. When He loved a woman, He would have been free from lust and flirtation, He would not dominate, insult, demean, or look down on women. They would have felt safe, protected, respected, and valued in His presence. Men would not sense the competitiveness for the Alpha male position in His presence, no bragging, intimidation, violence, or machoism. The untouchable knew His touch, the despised His acceptance, the sick and hurting His healing and compassion, the lost had His tears, He washed His disciples feet, and prayed for the forgiveness of His enemies sins. He was God in the flesh, and if God who is love becomes a man, then we have love incarnate in Jesus Christ. He is everything human love should look like, and our example to follow.

However, Christ's love is not only new in that this sinful world has never known such pure love, but Christ's love is also new in the extent to which it went for us. We have all heard love songs that speak about crossing seas, and mountains, and pulling stars down out of heaven, and jumping over the moon, in love for someone. These empty words convey something of the depth of ones feelings, but are wild exaggerations—not so with Christ! When we come to trying to measure the love of Christ for His church we find that words restrict us, and make all our attempts seem banal, bland and colourless. To borrow a phrase from Jonathan Edwards, 'infinite upon infinite' seems the only fitting description to tell of how much He gave up, how much He endured, and how much He earned for His beloved. Philippians 2:5-11 gives us the three steps of Christ's humiliation. Firstly, we have the great mystery of the Son who is equal with God, who is God in every way, infinite in every way, becoming a frail human being, subject to the weaknesses of our human existence, even able to die—what a mystery! He lives a life of servanthood, not in a palace, not in fame but relative obscurity amongst an oppressed people. He is the most innocent man who has ever lived and He is wrongly tried in 6 mistrials, tortured to death, and killed not just like any man but a despised criminal. His physical pains were immense but His spiritual pains immeasurable. And then He was raised from the dead, and has through His resurrection obtained an never dying life for us, that is ours even now by His Spirit, He is presently building mansions for us, and will return for His bride to take her into immeasurable riches and eternal pleasures. If we try to measure His love by the step of God becoming man, we are left without anything to compare it with; if we try and measure His love by His suffering, once again we have no 'like' to compare it to; and if we try and measure His love by what He has gained for us, all of eternity has yet to reveal it. This is His measure of love, He has held nothing back. Now as we inspect that measure, we are brought to worship, on your knees now let me remind you, this is the measure that we are to love others with. His measure not ours, His royal measure not our beggars measure. If our only debt towards one another is love, we will never pay off the bond, we are life-long slaves to fulfilling this debt towards each other. We can never do enough for each other if

this is the measure. How different this is than the attitude that seems to be our default setting. Church is on the periphery, going to church something that can inconvenience you, those at church are not seen as your family, nor those you owe a life-long love debt, but a pool from which you choose out one or two for close friendship and interaction. All the while you let no one into the inner circle of your life, and hope not to be let into anyone else's. We must imitate this new measure!

But what about that question about the difference between this command and the command to love your neighbour as yourself? This too highlights another aspect of the newness. On the one hand the love is no different from our other loves. The object of our love defines the appropriate form for our love to take. We do not love our gardens like we love our wives; nor our animals like our children; nor God like we love ice cream. So when we love our neighbour, who they are and their highest needs determine what form our love will take, in the case of those who are not Christians this love will include preaching the gospel. Loving other Christians has a different shape based on whatever their needs may be. However, there is a unique difference that sets the new commandment apart. In the case of neighbour love, you can think of it as a one way street. You love them, and there is no context for their love to be returned. However, imagine a situation where everyone loved everyone else in that way, where it was a case of Christians loving others who were loving as they were loved. There love would not end in a single act of love, but would turn into a conversation of give and take, which would turn into a community that pulsed and thrived on the selfless service of the love that every individual kept giving in an ongoing fashion. In part this love community would reflect not God's love for a sinful world, as much as God's Trinitarian love. This love was always the intention of creation, and will be the love of heaven, and the new creation. In the church this love finds a partial restoration. Or at least it should.

Christ gave us this example, and we see that Paul also followed it. He counted it an honour and a privilege to serve the same church that Christ served, to suffer for who He had suffered, to serve her who He gladly served. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church," Listen to how Paul sees Christ loving the church through the picture of husbands loving their wives. Eph 5:25-30, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body." Jesus lived, suffered and died to save His body, that is us the church. Husbands are to love their wives according this rule, as husbands and wives are one through marriage. But let me remind you that you are one body in Christ by the Spirit, this is what the one loaf that we eat reminds us of. Jesus loves the church, husbands love their wives, and Christians are to love Christians, all for the same reason, we are united to each other. Those that are sitting around you are those to

whom you are united, and for whom Christ was willing to serve and die, can we do any less than He?

John, known as the apostle of love tells us in his first epistle that loving the church is a necessary, and not optional fruit born in every true believer's life. It is proof of new life, if there is no love, there is no life. "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes." (1 Jn 2:10-11). "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." (1 Jn 3:14-15) It is the nature of the new life that God has made to dwell within us, and the nature of the One who has come to dwell within us. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." (1 Jn 4:12).

The big question that should be filling our minds as we look at this perfection of love is: How do we do it? And once again let me repeat the phrase, 'What the Law demands, the Gospel provides.' God changes us by His Spirit, as well as inhabits us by His Spirit, all to the end of conforming us to Christ and His love. We are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit when we are born again, in order that His life and holiness might become ours. Christian love is a flower that only grows in the native soil of its homeland, if the heart is not a part of the new creation, the love cannot grow. The new humanity that results from Christ's resurrection is mediated to us by the Spirit so that we are grafted into His resurrection and influenced directly by it. This is how the love grows. God grows it by His power through Christ by the Spirit.

Christ goes on to tell us not only that we should love one another as Christians, but that this love will have an effect upon the world. By our love, when it bears the marks of His love, will show the world the reality of His love, and they will see Him in us. That is also the teaching of 1 Jn 4:12 that we quoted earlier, no one can see God, but if we love one another with the love of the Lord, the world will see love incarnate in our lives. James Montgomery Boice in his commentary on John highlights the context of John 13:34-5. Look down at verse 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.'" Jesus is going away, what is the connection between this and the new command? Well, although the world will not see Jesus, it will learn of Him through our loving each other. That is very convicting! When an unbeliever walks into our services and they cannot see God, they should be able to sense something of His care, compassion, grace, forgiveness, service, and love all from the actions of His children.

God reveals Himself to the world in various ways, but this is also one of them. We see this principle at play in Acts 2 and 4 in the early Church. We see a Church filled with the Spirit, sitting under the apostle's teaching, breaking bread together, and visiting each other in their homes. And what is the result, the church grows, sinners are added to the church daily, and part of the reason is the authentic loving community that results in Jerusalem.

How we are to see one another

Christ's love is seen very strongly in the sacrificial way in which He loved us, but there is another way in which Christ continues to love us that is beneficial to our own loving of one another. Think for a moment about how God sees you right now. Let me use an illustration of Luther's to highlight it. Luther called the Christian a pile of dung under a white blanket of snow. We are presently sinners and not yet perfect, and God accepts us on the basis of the fact that we are covered and dressed in the righteousness of Christ, a dung pile under snow. When God looks at you He does not consider the dung but the snow, when He hears your prayers He does not look at the dung but the snow, when you bring your worship to Him he sees the snow not the dung and when we bring our gifts and good works to Him He receives our good deeds in Christ not apart from Him.

The present relationship that we have with God as Father depends upon this righteousness given to us in Christ. The ongoing way in which all of God's dealings with us are according to grace and not law are because of Christ's righteousness seen as ours. God looks down upon us from a Father's face and not a judge's because of Christ. Although our sins might induce a Fatherly frown He will never judge and condemn us to hell because Christ has perfected forever those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:14). That is how God sees us, a pile of dung under perfect white snow and He deals with us according to the snow not the dung.

Now how do you look at your brothers and sisters in Christ? What do you see first the snow or the dung? Do you treat with your brothers and sisters in Christ as God does? Do you treat them, speak of them, criticise them, think of them, and serve them on the basis of grace as God does because of Christ's righteousness, or law as the devil does? Proverbs 10:12 says, 'Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.' When we look at each other through the gospel we give each other a clean record every day, we cast the memory of past hurts into the ocean of forgetfulness, we begin with a familial not legal attitude. But when we look at each other through the lens of the law, it is the purpose of the law to expose sins, and we will see all the splinters in everyone's eyes and never consider them forgiven by God, paid for by Christ and being worked on by the Holy Spirit. We will be offended and prosecute like the devil and divide not unite the church.

So then let me urge every single one of us to love like Christ. To go to the same lengths that He has gone in sacrificial service, and to see each other as He continues to do.