

A New Commandment: love one another



*Christ's Final Address to the Apostles | Bona Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1380 |
from the Maesta Altar | Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*

³¹ When [Judas] had left, 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 he will glorify him at once. ³³ My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, and as I told the Jews, ‘Where I go you cannot come,’ so now I say it to you. ³⁴ I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. ³⁵ This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:31-35)

Setting the Scene

Perhaps we should place this short gospel passage in context. The public ministry of Jesus has drawn to a close with John 12. Here in Chapter 13 begins the “private ministry” of Jesus preparing his disciples for his impending death. John 13:1-17:26 is characterized by Jesus’ being alone with his disciples before his betrayal and arrest. While there may have been others present, such as those who were serving the meal, the focus is on the Twelve (so also Mt 26:20; Mk 14:17; Lk 22:14). The section begins with an account of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet and the prediction of Judas’ betrayal (13:1-30). Then there is a lengthy section known as the farewell discourse, which consists of teachings (13:31--16:33) and a concluding prayer by Jesus (17:1-26).

These five chapters (13-17) veer sharply from the previous presentation of Jesus’ teaching and performing signs to an insistence on the Christian’s actual, realized life in Jesus. In the course of offering assurance and comfort in the face of his impending departure, Jesus develops various themes that have been introduced earlier in his ministry, including glory, mutual indwelling and love. His main point is the realized experience of life in God the disciples have and will continue to have.

“*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*” (John 12:23) – and thus is explicitly stated the theme of the second major part of John’s gospel: The Book of Glory. While John has already provided us with his Book of Signs, this second part of the gospel contains the great sign – the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Yet this discourse is not John’s commentary on these signs. It is John’s way of telling us that the heavenly realities signified in the miracles/signs are now present and available to humanity. The category of sign has blossomed into the realm of Glory.

The emphasis is not on the future but on the present. We hear the voice of Jesus speaking to “his own” (13:1) for whom he is willing to lay down his life because of his love for them (15:13). The Jesus who speaks here transcends time and space, as though already risen and glorified, speaking to his disciples of present life, of indwelling, of love, of affected judgment, of the Spirit Paraclete who is at once both advocate and revealer. Jesus leaves to go to the Father and, in a little while, to return. Fr. Raymond Brown notes “Although [Jesus] speaks at the Last Supper, he is really speaking from heaven; although those who hear him are his disciples, his words are directed to Christians of all times.”

The central stress is on union: the union of Father and Son; the gift and indwelling presence of their Spirit; the union of Son and disciples; the union of disciples with one another. The dynamism of all this is love, a word that now begins to take over John’s good news. If we really want to know who and what Jesus is, so that we might know who and what God is, Love is the answer. In these chapters, therefore, is the most profound teaching on God and discipleship in the Bible – the life of believers described in relation to the persons of the Godhead.

Commentary

Our short text can be divided into three parts:

- vv. 31-32 – the glorification of God and Jesus
- v. 33 – Jesus’ departure
- vv. 34-35 – the commandment to love.

Glory

Before we delve into the text itself, we should perhaps consider the word “glory.” If asked, what would you give as a definition? Merriam Webster reflects on the definition in all the ways the word is used in the common parlance: [glory](#) - renown, magnificence, exaltation, achievement, and more. When speaking of God, at best, these seem to linger on the edge of meaning, but not approach the heart of the matter.

If we turn to the Hebrew scriptures to discover what is meant by God’s glory, we quickly find it is not a single, well-defined concept. In fact, it is probably best to treat the word as something of a cipher, a term used to point to the ineffable qualities of God. In the OT *kabod* is perhaps the most important of many related words and refers in its root meaning to what is weighty, important or impressive. That would certainly apply to the people’s experience of God’s interactions in the world; not a direct experience but an experience nonetheless.

In the text and psalms we find *kobad*/glory associated with the name of God as it refers to the power, holiness, majesty and splendor of the Lord. This is in response to ways God reveals God’s self/glory in the history of Israel, e.g. in the Exodus story appearing as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud during the day. For Elijah it was in the still small voice among the thunder, lightning and earthquake. Be the revelation grand or small, the occurrence is meant to signal the presence of the transcendent Lord who acts in power for Israel’s salvation.

The manifestation on Mount Sinai, which may be viewed as the climax of the Exodus, is foundational. Here God’s glory is seen in God’s absolute lordship. God’s power overcomes all other gods and nations in

order to liberate Israel and enter into covenant with them. This begins a pattern in the OT where the glory of God is associated with places: Sinai, the Tent of Meeting, Solomon's Temple. Especially in the Psalms we find the further reflection that the glory revealed by the Lord in Israel's liberation is the very glory and power of the creator of all. And so, in speaking of God's glory, the Psalms refer to the creative, sustaining and ordering power of God evident in the awesome beauty and majesty of the cosmos. Finally, in the Prophets and Psalms, the glory of God refers in a special way to the kingdom of covenant peace and justice which God will establish in its fullness at the end of time. All of the different perspectives find a central unity in the recognition that God's glory is what humans are graciously given to experience of God and God's saving action in the world.

In the OT we also find that glory is something which men and women are expected to give God. Given the above, one can assume that "giving glory to God" - something He already possesses in full - can only mean acknowledging God's glory and responding in faith.

In the New Testament God's glory (*doxa*) refers to the power, majesty, honor and radiance which belongs to God alone. What is new is the confession that the glory of the Lord which has appeared in so many ways has in these last days appeared in Jesus Christ. The glory which had always been associated with the saving, self-revelation of God refers now in a unique way to the person of Christ. This is the reason why the traditional association with observable phenomena, although still present, no longer plays a significant role. Jesus reflects the glory of God; in him we see just what the godliness of God is.

In a variety of text and account the NT asserts that central to the experience of God's glory is the paschal mystery: the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Both Paul and John, from different perspectives, saw the cross of Jesus as the place where the true glory of God is revealed. The cross of Jesus as the end and fullness of a life lived completely from God for others is the revelation of God's majesty and power as self-emptying love.

It offers us a paradox: in what seems Jesus' powerlessness - his death on the cross - it is then that the absolute power of God becomes visible in the light of the resurrection. Seen in their essential unity, however, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the revelation of the glory and majesty of a love stronger than all powers of sin and death, a love greater than which it is impossible to conceive. It is precisely God's glory that God, while remaining God and Lord of all, is powerful enough to enter into the sin and death which has disfigured God's creation and from within, in loving solidarity, to save God's beloved world.

Thus God's glory is revealed as the mystery of trinitarian love which empties itself in order to become one with the world, and so to establish the salvation which was always God's eternal design as a sharing in God's own life and freedom.

Like the OT, the NT thinks of God's glory primarily as God's own initiative and action. God's glory reveals and establishes itself as the salvation of the world. This can be experienced, even now, in a concrete, sensible way in the church as the community of believers who, in the obedience of faith, allow the glory of God's kingdom to appear in their lives.

Thus giving God glory is the response of faith to the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ. Since God's glory is seen for the first time to be real self-communication, and not only self-manifestation, the acceptance of this gracious gift is itself an integral part of the establishment of God's glory. Thus history as a whole, seen as the transforming entrance of the world into the reality of God's own divine life, is the glorification of God by believers in the power of the Spirit. The glorification of God is the salvation of the world.

The Glorification of God and Jesus

³¹ When [Judas] had left, 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 he will glorify him at once.

The immediate reference to Judas' departure, like the coming of the Greeks (12:20-23), signals to Jesus that a new stage of the glorification has been reached. The betrayal has begun, and so "*Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.*" These verses are difficult to translate and understand. The verb "to glorify" (*doxazo*) occurs five times in these two verses. And of those five occurrences the verb appears three times in a form (aorist) that is used for a one-time event in the past - except one one aorist occurrence is connected with "now" (v.31). The next two occurrences are future. There are also the active and passive voices mixed in there along with "him" five times.

During his earthly ministry (or at least part of it), Jesus was not glorified: "*He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified*" (7:39). But when was Jesus glorified?

It is clear from other verses that it is the "Father" or the "Spirit of truth" who glorifies Jesus. Note the changing verb tenses.

- "*If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me...*" (8:54 – present tense)
- "*He [the Spirit of truth] will glorify me, ...*" (16:14 – future tense)
- "*Father, the hour has come, glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.*" (17:1 – aorist tense)
- "*So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.*" (17:5 – aorist tense)

The aorist tenses in the last two verses suggest that there is a specific point in time when God glorifies the Son. For John, that point seems to be Christ's death/resurrection/ascension as these next verses suggest.

- "*His disciples did not understand these things [the 'Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem] at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him*" (12:16).
- In 12:23: "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" This "hour" is preceded by Greeks wishing to see Jesus – thus fulfilling the words of 12:19: "*The world has gone after him.*" Immediately following this verse, Jesus talks about the necessity of a seed falling into the earth and dying, so that it will bear much fruit (12:24).
- However, 11:4 suggests that the death and raising of Lazarus occurs "*so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*" Although after this miracle the Jewish leaders "*planned to put him [Jesus] to death*" (11:53).

The cross is itself the revelation of divine glory and the way for Jesus to share the divine life with his followers. It is also the way for God to glorify the Son in himself (v. 32), which he will do at once as Jesus returns to his presence (17:5). Just as Jesus' keynote address focused on the relation between the Father and the Son (5:19-27), so also his farewell discourse begins from that same fundamental point. This relationship is central to this Gospel.

What is clear is that in the Fourth Gospel the glorifying of the Son of Man involves suffering and death as well as sovereign power—Jesus enters his glory via the cross. That is why Judas' departure to betray Jesus elicited the statement '*Now is the Son of Man glorified*'. However, the death of Jesus was not just his passage to glory. In death itself Jesus was glorified. In giving his life for sinful humans the glory of his gracious character was most clearly seen. And it did not stop there, for Jesus said that when the Son of Man was glorified, God also would be glorified in him. In Jesus' self-sacrificing love for human beings the glory of God was revealed, for the Father loves the world, and this led him to give his one and only Son so that those who believe might have eternal life (3:16). In the giving of his Son, the glory of God's own self-giving love was revealed.

Jesus' Departure

Referring again to his imminent departure, Jesus said to his disciples, “*My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, and as I told the Jews, ‘Where I go you cannot come,’ so now I say it to you*” (v.33).

“My children (*teknia*)...” This term of endearment expresses Jesus’ love for his disciples and is a poignant introduction to his announcement that his departure is imminent. The term a little longer (*eti mikron*) is imprecise (cf. 7:33), so they could not be sure how soon this separation would take place, but given the announcement of the betrayal they might suspect that it would be very soon. Jesus seems to refer not just to the time of separation between his death and resurrection, but also to the time thereafter. For he says they will look for him, which they did not do after his death, but which they did do after the resurrection. Just as the first disciples sought him out (1:38), so will they continue to seek for him after his departure. Part of the purpose of the farewell discourse is to tell them of the new ways in which they will find him in the future.

The departure had been a theme in the controversy with the Jewish opponents (7:34; 8:21), as Jesus reminded the disciples. Even earlier Jesus had talked about going to where he was before (6:62), referring to the ascension.

While it is impossible for either group to follow Jesus where he is going, there is a big difference between the groups’ relationships to Jesus. For the opponents are alienated from God and can never follow Jesus into the Father’s presence as long as they remain in that condition. The disciples, on the other hand, have been cleansed (v. 10). They are little children who will indeed follow Jesus as later outlined:

- “*Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.*” (12:26).
- “*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where (I) am going you know the way.*” (14:3-4)
- “*Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world*” (17:24).

As the following chapters will make clear, they first need to receive the Spirit, the Paraclete, to share in the Father’s life and love and to accomplish his works, as Jesus himself has done.

The question of Jesus’ origins – “where he is from” (*pouthen*) – becomes a significant faith-issue in John (7:27-28; 8:14; 9:29-30; 19:9). His human origins in Galilee are clear, but by faith, we also know of his divine origins and the place where he will return to.

The Commandment to Love

³⁴ *I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.* ³⁵ *This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” This is the first of two instances (13:34; 15:12) in which Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, but only on this occasion did he refer to it as a ‘new’ command. What is new about this commandment? It can refer to something that didn’t exist before. But the command to love one another is not recent. It is found in the Torah (Lev 19:18; Dt 6:4). It can refer to something that existed previously, but was not fully known or understood; e.g., a “new” understanding. I think that it is in this sense that this commandment is “new”.

Gail O’Day (“John”, *New Interpreters Bible*, 732-3) writes:

...what is new is that the commandment to love derives from the incarnation (see 3:16). The “new” turn in the commandment of 13:34 is that Jesus’ “own” are asked to enter into the love that marks the relationship of God and Jesus. Their participation in this relationship will be

evidenced the same way that Jesus' is: by acts of love that join the believer to God (cf. 14:15, 21, 23; 15:12). Keeping this commandment is the identifying mark of disciples (v. 35), because it is the tangible sign of the disciples' abiding in Jesus (15:10).

In the OT the Israelites were commanded to love their neighbor as they loved themselves (Lev. 19:18), but Jesus said to his disciples, As I have loved you, so you must love one another. This raised the ante considerably. The measure of love for their neighbor was no longer their love for themselves, but Jesus' love for them. The Fourth Gospel speaks of Jesus' love for the disciples, a love that led him to lay down his life for them. Now he said they should love one another in the same way (cf. 1 John 3:16). Jesus' love command was 'new' because it demanded a new kind of love, a love like his own.

O'Day's reflection continues (734):

To interpret Jesus' death as the ultimate act of love enables the believers to see that the love to which Jesus summons the community is not the giving up of one's life, but the giving away of one's life. The distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. Jesus' death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately lead to death. ...

To love one another as Jesus loves us does not automatically translate into one believer's death for another, nor does it mean to deny oneself for others. Jesus did not deny himself; he lived his identity and vocation fully. Rather, to love one another as Jesus loves us is to live a life thoroughly shaped by a love that knows no limits, by a love whose expression brings the believer closer into relationship with God, with Jesus, and with one another. It is to live a love that carries with it a whole new concept of the possibilities of community.

This love command seems to focus on relations within the new community rather than toward outsiders, a focus that has led many to view John as a narrow sectarian with no concern for outsiders. Such a view, however, misses the larger picture. John is quite clear that this divine love, in which the disciples are to share, is for the whole world (3:16; 4:42; 17:9). Indeed, their love for one another is part of God's missionary strategy, for such love is an essential part of the unity they are to share with one another and with God; it is by this oneness of the disciples in the Father and the Son that the world will believe that the Father sent the Son (17:21). Jesus' attention here in the farewell discourse, as well as John's attention in his epistles, is on the crucial stage of promoting the love between disciples. The community is to continue to manifest God as Jesus has done, thereby shining as a light that continues to bring salvation and condemnation (cf. chaps. 15-16). Without this love their message of what God has done in Christ would be hollow.

John was known in the ancient church for his concern for love. Jerome tells of John in his extreme old age saying, whenever he was carried into the assembly, "Little children, love one another." When his disciples got tired of this, they asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" "It is the Lord's command. If this alone be done, it is enough" (Jerome Commentary on Galatians at Gal 6:10).

In the earliest centuries of the church divine love was indeed the hallmark of the community of Jesus (e.g., *Ignatius of Antioch Letter to the Ephesians 4.1*; *Justin Martyr 1 Apology 1.16*; *Minucius Felix Octavius 9*). Tertullian reports that the pagans said of the Christians, "See, they say, how they love one another . . . how they are ready even to die for one another" (Apology 39).

The love that Jesus is speaking of is not simply a feeling. One cannot really command a feeling. It is willing and doing the best for the other person (1 Jn 3:11-18). Since God's will alone is that which is truly good in any situation, love acts in obedience to God's will, under the guidance of the Spirit. Jesus has revealed such a life – only doing what he sees the Father doing and only speaking what he hears from the

Father. The same pattern is to be true of the disciple, because “*whoever claims to abide in him ought to live (just) as he lived*” (1 Jn 2:6). Feelings of compassion and concern will be present as the disciple more and more perfectly shares in God’s own love for those around him or her, but such feelings are not the source nor the evidence for this love that Jesus demands of his followers (cf. 15:1-17).

Notes:

13:31 *God is glorified in him*: Brown (p. 606) list four possible ways to understand this clause: (a) through Jesus God is held in honor by men, (b) God is honored by Jesus, (c) God has won honor for Himself in Jesus, or (d) God has revealed his glory in Jesus. Brown analyzes the suitability of each understanding in light of the Johannine context. Given the stress that glory involves a visible manifestation of God’s majesty in acts of power. Both these qualities are verified in Jesus’ death and resurrection, which is an action of his own power (10:17-18). Since Jesus’ power is at the same time God’s power, the full meaning here is found in a combination of understandings (b) and (d). For a more detailed analysis of the use of “glory” in this passage see the section, “Some Additional Notes.”

13:32 [*If God...*]: This clause is missing in some ancient manuscripts – but is also present in some equally ancient manuscripts. Brown holds that it is easier to explain why it may have been lost than why it would have been added.

in Himself: In contrast to v.31 where God is glorified in Jesus, this verse means that Jesus is glorified in God. There are however many ancient commentators who held that this referred being glorified in himself.

13:33 *My children*: Jesus addresses the immediate impact of the cross on the disciples. By calling them children (using the diminutive form *teknia*, “little children,” which the translation tries to capture by adding my) he is putting them in a relation to himself that is analogous to his relation to the Father (cf. 14:20; 17:21, 23). This term would be in keeping with the Passover meal setting since “small groups that banded together to eat the paschal meal had to pattern themselves on family life, and one of the group had to act as a father explaining to his children the significance of what was being done” (Brown, 611).

13:34 *I give you a new commandment*: This puts Jesus on a par with Yahweh. The commandment itself is not new - see Lev 19:18: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” cited by our Lord as the second of the two most important commandments of God (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). Although in the context of Lev 18 the word “neighbor” is restricted to “fellow countrymen,” in Luke 10:29–37 Christ extends its meaning to embrace all men, even enemies.

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