

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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

(John 13:34–35)

Introduction

Several weeks ago, I began to question whether to continue our studies in the book of Proverbs. As I prepared to preach from Proverbs 6, I thought that perhaps a pause would be in order. I felt, increasingly, that what as a church were facing required a better understanding of the need for more relational and responsible congregationalism.

We had been doing some of this already in certain settings in the church, but as I was reading something about the New Testament one anothers, I began to explore this theme. It started to resonate with me. I became persuaded that studying these principles would help us as a congregation to be more relational, to be more responsible, and to be more reformed – that is, more Christlike.

I brought this conviction to my fellow elders and there was agreement that this would be good for the church. We will, therefore, take a pause from our Proverbs study to learn how to one another one another. Once we have sufficiently covered these matters, we will return to the book of Proverbs.

Explanation

There are 59 one another statements in the New Testament. They include exhortations to serve, encourage, forgive, greet, encourage, consider, esteem, and bear with one another. In addition to these, there are three negative one anothers. We are told to stop passing judgement on one another (Romans 14:13). We are warned that we will be destroyed if we keep biting and devouring one another (Galatians 5:15). We are exhorted to not become conceited so as to provoke and envy one another (Galatians 5:26). It is interesting that two of these negatives occur in a book that addresses fidelity to the gospel. Watch out when you lose the gospel.

Fifteen of these one anothers are exhortations to “love one another,” while an additional five verses directly mention the word “love.” We are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10), to serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13), to bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2), to make your love increase and overflow for each other (1 Thessalonians 3:12), and to greet one another with a kiss of love (1 Peter 5:14).

Obviously love drives us to one another. Love makes us concerned for each other. Love keeps us “one anothering” one another.

Jesus laid down “the law of love” when, on the night of his predicted betrayal, he said to his disciples, “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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:34–35).

This is, chronologically, among the earliest of the one another commandments. (Mark 9:50—be at peace with one another”—precedes it). Its early appearance is helpful in helping us to appreciate that this “one another” is foundational for all the other “one anothers.”

Captain and Tennille were an American husband-and-wife recording duo, who made famous the song “Love Will Keep Us Together.” Sadly, this proved not to be the case when, after 39 years of marriage the couple divorced in 2014. Love, in and of itself, will not keep us together; love of the Lord will keep us together.

Context

When Jesus spoke these words, he was soon going to go to the cross. He was soon going to leave his disciples, and he left them with the charge to love one another.

John 13 introduces the Last Supper, and this chapter serves as testimony to his enduring love. Jesus had stayed with these disciples through their thick and thin. He had faithfully loved them despite their sinful failures. He chose to declare his love to them and to disciple them further into how they should live. He washed their feet (vv. 1–20).

This act served as both an exhortation and an example of the value of one another. It served as an exhortation and example that not everyone is a one another (vv. 18–20). It served as an exhortation and an example that, if one belongs to Jesus Christ, then, by extension, how we treat that person corresponds to how we are treating Jesus. That is, those who are your “one another” represent Jesus Christ.

If we accept him, we will accept them. If we will serve him, we will serve them. If we will honour him, we will honour them. If we will submit to him, we will submit to them. If we will speak to him, we will speak to them. If we refuse to slander him, we will refuse to slander them. If we will confess our sins to him, we will confess our sins to them. If we will not lie to him, we will not lie to them. If we will be humble before him, we will be humble before them. If we will love him, we will love them.

This brings us to the first one another: “Love one another.” Consider the full context:

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus’ side, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, “Lord, who is it?” Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “What you are going to do, do quickly.” Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that,

One Anothering One Another

John 13:34–35

Doug Van Meter

because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. 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.’ 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.

(John 13:21–34)

It was night (v. 30)—in more ways than one. Things were about to get very tense. All hell was about to break loose. The shepherd would be smitten, and the sheep would be scattered. Were three-and-a-half years about to go down the drain?

Jesus, the good and great Shepherd, had come to help the harassed, but now they would be harassed again. So, what counsel would Jesus give them? “Don’t fail me”? “Strengthen your daily devotions”? “Man up and face the difficulties”?

No. Jesus commanded them to love one another. That sounds strange—until you think about it. This command would strengthen them as a community of faith. And they would need that strength.

There is nothing like being loved to strengthen your heart. I love my grandchildren, and they love me. Recently, I was sitting with my grandsons on my lap, telling them a story—made up on the spot. They sat, enraptured, until they heard the words from their grandmother, which triggered a greater love: “Who wants ice cream?” I lost their attention in a moment.

The sense that someone cares for you, that you matter, helps you to persevere. But when we lose that sense of being loved, our resolve can dwindle. This command provides the glue to keep them together as they face uncertain days (though, had they been listening, they would not be uncertain!). But it is a strange commandment in another way: Obedience to this command would identify them as disciples. It would bring them out of hiding. It would reveal them to a world that was hostile to them!

Peter, of course, denied Jesus (see vv. 36–38). But he, and the other disciples who scattered when Jesus was arrested, eventually came around. And they let their light shine before men. Jesus knew that they would. He knew that these eleven men would lay the foundation for the new covenant church. He knew that, to the degree that they loved one another, the glory of God would be displayed before the world (Ephesians 3:8–10).

There is much more to be said about “love one another.” But for our introductory purposes, we need to simply grasp that “love one another,” dominates all other one another because it drives every other one another. If you love, you will serve, you will

One Anothering One Another

John 13:34–35

Doug Van Meter

greet, you will consider, you will esteem, you will exhort, you will admonish, you will comfort, you will teach one another. You will one another one another.

So, ask the question of the song, “What’s love got to do with it?” Everything! And what are we going to learn from the one another texts?

Being a Christian is not merely about you. Being a Christian is about relationships. Being a church member involves responsibility. Being a Christian means being involved in the lives of others. Being a Christian means being one alongside others. Being a Christian means looking beyond your own needs. Being a Christian means hard work. Being a Christian means being a church member. And being a church member, means that we have been washed by gracious love of God in Christ.

Washing the feet pointed them to a greater washing, of which John wrote elsewhere:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(Revelation 1:4–6)

May the love of God, exposed and experienced in the gospel, move us to love one another, for our corporate good, to the glory of God.

AMEN