

A New Commandment

This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. Dear friends, if this is how God loved us, then we should love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us.

1 John 4 v10-12 (Good News)

When he had left, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is seen for who he is, and God seen for who he is in him. The moment God is seen in him, God's glory will be on display. In glorifying him, he himself is glorified—glory all around! "Children, I am with you for only a short time longer. You are going to look high and low for me. But just as I told the Jews, I'm telling you: 'Where I go, you are not able to come.' "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other." ³ Simon Peter asked, "Master, just where are you going?". Jesus answered, "You can't now follow me where I'm going. You will follow later." "Master," said Peter, "why can't I follow now? I'll lay down my life for you!"

John 13 v31-37 (Message)

So here I am in the place of worship, eyes open, drinking in your strength and glory. In your generous love I am really living at last! Psalm 63v2-4 (Message)

John speaks from Experience

John writes a letter.

It is about AD95, Over six decades since Jesus died. The apostle John is a very old man, and he is dictating his first letter from the mother church in Ephesus to the believers in the numerous 'daughter' churches spread across the region of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey.

There is this rumour than John is indestructible because numerous murder attempts had failed. All the others disciples are long since dead, Judas had hung himself almost immediately after betraying Jesus and all the others had been killed for their faith, martyred one by one as the authorities caught up with them. His letters was partly to persuade the readers that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, but John has the theme of God love securely lodged in his frontal lobes. He liked to call himself the beloved disciple, after all these years is still very much feeling the love!

He writes these wonderful words

This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. (1 John 4 v10)

Hot and Sandy (Head Knowledge or Experience)

Hands up if you think the Sahara desert is hot and sandy. It is not a trick question !

Now keep your hand raised, if like me, you have actually been to the Sahara desert. When I was 23 I went there. I slept in the desert, I did lemming leaps off the top of some huge dunes, and I rolled down the dunes getting covered in sand. From my time spent there, I can tell you two important things about the Sahara. First it's hot. Second it's sandy. That's about it really. OK, so you already knew that, as I did before I went. But the difference between you and I is that I got to experience and enjoy these truths. As I rolled down the dunes I got wrapped up in the hot sand. I can go back there in my mind and relive those experiences.

Growing up in a Baptist church, I often sang this chorus, (sing along if you know it) “Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so’. If the Bible tells me so, then it must be true, yes.

So we all know in a matter of fact way what John is saying in his letter. We know what love is. It is that God sent Jesus sent down to earth, he came, and he died on the cross so that we might be forgiven. That is a picture of what God’s love is. If we believe that, raise your hand. Keep your hand raised if you were actually there when he came, and when he died on the cross.

Of course, none of us were there, but the Apostle John was. He was the last living person to not only know those truths with his head, but to have experienced and enjoyed them. To have been so wrapped up in God’s love, that he felt confident to entitle himself ‘the beloved disciple’.

He was there with his brother James mending nets in their boat, when Jesus came to them flanked by his cousins Andrew and Peter who had themselves just down tools to follow this extra-ordinary man. These two sons of Zebedee, then spent the next 3 years experiencing the love, living out the love, and marvelling at the love of Jesus. There seemed no bounds or limits to the love of Jesus. He not just loved

the honourable Jewish men, but he showed love to women, children, foreigners, lepers, prostitutes, and even tax-collectors. John was there when Jesus came and when Jesus died. He stood at the foot of the cross, with Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome his own mother, watching the agonising convulsions of the blood swept body of Jesus; seeing first hand how much this love cost Jesus.

If it wasn’t for the love that Jesus demonstrated to them and encouraged in them, then Simon off-the-wall freedom fighting zealot would have probably killed Matthew the tax collector. They certainly would not have washed each others feet, which even many a slave thought too lowly a job.

John experienced the costly love of God as close as any human could have done.

Easy or difficult

John was there and experienced the love of Jesus first-hand. We were not there, but we know that we can still experience in our hearts the love of God, because of the Holy Spirit. Yet for many of us, understanding and experiencing God love is difficult.

It is easy to say it. “Jesus loves me”. Say it to some-one near you ! God loves me, desires me, is passionate about me. So why have I found this so difficult to move it from head knowledge, to fully experience it in my heart, enjoy it, and be wrapped up in like John was.

The Desert Island

Several years ago my wife asked me that desert island question? If you could be stranded on a desert island with any 3 celebrities, past or present, who would you choose. What about yourself. Who would you choose? I probably answered the question far too quickly and honestly ! First, Bear Grylls, the famous outdoors explorer. He would set up a protection and living space for us, go hunting for dinner. Then, TV chef Nigella Lawson as she could cook up a wonderful meal out of whatever Bear Grylls scavenged, and I hoped would be nice female distraction for him. Third, Baby Spice (Singer Emma Bunton), for those deep theological discussions ? No because she was an object of my desire, in a fun celebrity type way !! My choices didn’t go down very well, as you can imagine. My wife chose intellectuals for some higher thinking, but my choices were all on the horizontal. They were about me. My choices were all about looking after my basic needs; about feeding me, about keeping me safe, and entertaining me. Nothing deep at all about my choices, nothing intellectual, or spiritual. My choices were completely on the human horizontal scale.

What is desire?

I didn't really know anything about Baby Spice, other than I found her attractive, fun on stage, looked nice and cuddly, and that was reason enough to make her my desert island object of desire.

We live in an age, where looking desirable is more important than ever. There has been a culture shift over the last decade with young people, away from excessive drinking to working out in the gym. Then posting selfies and waiting for likes. 100 million selfies are taken every day, about 75% of all photos taken are selfies. But we are all interested self-image. Need proof? If we had a group photo of the church, the first face you would look for is your own. It wouldn't be mine, and wouldn't matter how many others were blinking or obscured, as long as you looked good. Am I right. We want to look our best. We want to look desirable. But what does that mean?

Forty years ago, as a teenager, I thought that girls that got to go out with me were quite lucky !! Now, it is as if the mirror is always lying. I do not expect anyone here to choose me to be on their desert island because they see me as an object of desire. Some of you good looking lads and lasses may feel quite desirable, but I think there will be many here, like me, that don't feel that way.

So if I do not feel desirable, then how can I really grasp and experience that God sees me as the object of his desire, that he loves me with a passion. However if I have this horizontal human mind-set of what is desirable, and don't see myself as a desirable person, then I could take that into the spiritual, and argue that I am not desirable to God. I can say God loves me, but it is just a matter of fact to me, if I am not experiencing it in my heart and enjoying it.

Not seeing myself as an object of desire, is one barrier to understanding Gods love for me, but the second is that I seem to have always has this Victorian work ethic. I must keep working. As a Christian I must keep doing things for him. Then in my mind, I have tried to argue that if I do lots for him, then I can more easily accept that he loves me, at least in part because of what I do for him. Its not just about me being desirable, it can be about what I achieve now as well. He now has another reason to love me, other than how attractive how I am.

However that argument is not only rubbish, but it denies the full extent of what Jesus did for me on the cross. When Jesus was hanging there about to die, what did he say? It is.... nearly finished ? If you can work a bit harder for me Kevin, then we can finish this thing together, and then I will be able to really love you ! NO. He said it is finished. Full stop. He has done everything that was necessary to bring me into the presence of God and be filled with his Spirit, and dwell in his love.

Jesus desires me, Kevin Elliott. He doesn't desire me because of my looks. He doesn't desire me for what I do. Interestingly at the baptism of Jesus, God said 'this is my beloved son, with whom, I am well pleased'. God said he loves Jesus, and he is really pleased with him. Why, because of what he looks like – No. Because of what he has done, no. Jesus had not yet done anything in his ministry and yet God is well pleased with him.

Could it really be, that Jesus actually loves me for who am I, warts and all, with all my faults and failures, with all my imperfections, regardless of if I have done anything or not. But he does not just love me, he really, really, really loves me, and that's been the hard part for me, and that might be the hard part for you too.

Why, because we are thinking horizontally with our basic human instincts. We are thinking about what is desirable about me, and what is not desirable about me, purely in human ways, in the same way as we see each other. You could not imagine that some-one could desire you and love you so much, they would be willing to give up everything for you.

Spirit love - Agape

It IS possible for us to be desired by God, to be loved by him with that intensity, because His love is not the Human love that we experience. It is not sexual or romantic love. It is far greater than that.

His love for us, and desire of us, is on the vertical axis, the spiritual axis. It is different to the love and desire on our horizontal axis. It looks different and feels different. It is what the scriptures call Agape love, an unconditional all out love of sacrificial giving.

There are some glimpses of this in the natural world. If you're a parent and your child is diagnosed with cancer, you would give anything for the cancer to be simply transferred to your body instead. If you are an expectant mother and told that if you continue with the pregnancy then it could kill you, but you opt to carry on anyway, because you will pay any price to

Jesus did the same. In the first chapter of John's gospel he tells us that all of creation came through Jesus, he breathed life into us all, even though he knew he would lose us to sin, and then he would have to come die for us, to set us free for him. He still did it.

John tells the churches. This is what Love is. It is not about us deciding to love God, and do things for him, and then you get noticed and he then decides to love you in return. No, God first loved you, and sent his son to die for you regardless of what you look like, how healthy you are, what dodgy history you have, what emotional baggage you have, or what we do or don't do for God or for anybody else.

This is Agape love. It is unconditional, it is sacrificial, it is forgiving, it is patient, it is merciful, it corrects you and builds you up. It is a love which is unfathomable; it is infinite, it has no boundaries, no end; it's incomparable, indescribable, and it's inexhaustible. You can never exhaust the love of God. There is always more love.

You do not have to feel desirable, you don't have to feel worthy of it. He loves, He loves you, He loves you. It is His choice. It is His gift. You just have to accept that He desires you and He has chosen to give you this level of incredible love as a free gift. Receive it, and let it soak into your heart.

The Last Supper (Jn 13) & New Commandment

As John wrote his first letter, He may well have been thinking back to that most memorable of all days when he was at the Passover meal with Jesus and the other disciples.

The disciples were reclining around the low table, and when they weren't eating they could lean back and rest their head on the chest of the person to their left. John was sat so that it was his head that nestled into the chest of Jesus. Judas was the other side of Jesus and John may have heard Jesus whisper for Judas to go and do what he had planned. As Judas leaves, there must have been a change in the atmosphere, as Satan who had entered Judas had now left the room. As Judas shuts the door, Jesus suddenly declares, **now** my glory will be seen, Gods glory will be seen, glory, glory everywhere !! The wheels of his great victory, had been set in motion, he knew there was no stopping it now, in the next few hours, he would be betrayed, arrested, trialled and crucified. He is about to demonstrate the great sacrificial agape love of God. His death on the cross, was his ultimate mission, the main reason for coming. As much as the manner of his death was going to be awful for Him, he knew that this act of Love would enable those he loved to be able to enter into the presence of God. His beloved children united with his beloved Father.

John picks up the story in his Gospel..

"Children, I am with you for only a short time longer. You are going to look high and low for me. But just as I told the Jews, I'm telling you: 'Where I go, you are not able to come.' "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other." (John 13 v32-35)

Jesus looks at his apostles and he tells them again that he is going away, for a short time, to somewhere where they will not be able to follow. He calls them his children, using the same word that Mary does when Jesus is 12. These are his loved ones, his boys. They were his. Then he gives them a new commandment. What was it? Love one another?

It is not a new commandment to love one another. The Old Testament guys were commanded to love God with all their heart, mind and soul, and to love their neighbour. They were commanded to treat the stranger no differently than their Jewish friends, and to love them as they loved themselves. In today's selfie culture that is quite a challenge.

The new Commandment is love one another **as I have loved you**.

This is no sexual, romantic or emotional love. Instead it is a spirit-led love, a love of **choice**. It is the agape love, which means you go out of your way to love those that you would not normally love, and it costs you to do so. You may not even like them, but you still show Gods love to them. They may have bad-mouthed you, or pinched your boy-friend, or caused you financial loss, or ridiculed your faith etc etc, and yet you still find in it you to love that person.

At that moment, could they love like Jesus loved. No. But they would be able to after Pentecost, when they were full of Spirit, and least they would start to develop the ability to love in that way, to add the vertical to the horizontal.

Horizontal disciples

At the last Supper, the disciples though were thinking just in human terms. They were not really aware at that time of the spiritual dimension of what Jesus was doing. Even though they saw Jesus use spiritual power from his Father to do miracles, they saw it all working out on a human level. They were not aware at that time of what he was achieving in the spiritual realm. It was all horizontal thinking.

They still thought Jesus was going to depose the Romans, and King Herod, and take up the throne. They were going to rule with Him and John had been in the arguing with the other disciples before the meal about who was going to get the key roles in the new parliament.

Jesus, tells them he is going away for a while and he has this new commandment for them. Something to engage with going forwards. I don't think Peter even hears the new commandment, he got stuck on the first part, and starts kicking off. "Where are you going? Why can't I follow you? Its not fair. I'll do anything for you. I will die for you. Why can't I go? Why can't I do that !!"

He is focussed on what he can't do instead of what he can do. Jesus has just said go and love like I have loved. This is a great commission, which he will make possible for them. Peter has got to start thinking on the vertical. This is not about what we give up in obeying Jesus, its about the opportunities he gives us.

A couple weeks ago, a young lady asked me a question. If she put Jesus first in her life, would she still be able to smoke and drink her friends. Where is her focus? It is on what you might be missing

out on; what she will lose. The truth is, that when you start filling a spirit-filled life of loving others, the things that you don't do any more, or do a lot less of are, aren't of consequence. You never think, I have just been in God's presence, received a prophecy and seen him heal my friend, then think. Oh no, I have missed an episode of Emmerdale, or I could have been out getting plastered tonight !! When you add in the vertical gains, then the horizontal losses can often seem of little consequence.

If John had written a letter back then, he may have said. This is what love is, Jesus investing his time, and teaching and affection on us disciples, so we can help him bring in the new Kingdom. It was all earthly stuff. So when Jesus died on the cross. They would have seen this as a big defeat in human terms. Unseen to them, was the huge victory in spiritual terms.

But Jesus starts to tell them that things are going to change. You may be my children on this earth, but when I am gone you are going to have to grow up spiritually. As you grow up spiritually with me living in you, then you can start loving others in the way that I Jesus love them.

Work in Progress

In his letter John says ***"God lives in union with us, and his love is made perfect in us."*** (1 Jn 4v12). In his gospel, he quotes Jesus as saying ***"This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."***(Jn 13v35)

We are work in progress. There are two aspects to his love. One is receiving it, and the other is giving it out. It is like your spiritual love scales.

Allowing the love of God to infiltrate your life, will empower you to love others. Worship him, pray to him, press in to His presence, persist, seek it, chase it, find it, then soak in his love, marinate in it. Go to this world, with the Gospel love, and share it. Then give it out to your fellow Christians, to strangers, and to those that give you a hard time.

Some of us are always receiving and not getting out there. Some are always doing work for Jesus, but not spending time in his presence and being filled up. Where are you right now. Which way are your spiritual love scales tipped.

As we keep taking in **and** giving out, we do not stay still, but we then grow in the spirit, and we are more able to love like Jesus loved. He will help us and encourage us to grow. He loves us too much to leave us the way we are.

Jesus says if we do this then others will know that you are my disciples.

The greatest proof in your life that you are born again, is your love for others. More than your church attendance, more than your bible knowledge, more than your worship experience, it is the love you show for others that will speak loudest of your faith.

It is the last commandment that Jesus gave, and it is the first proof of his work in you.

In his book Choose Life, Simon Guillebaud recounts this true story

After the end of apartheid in South Africa, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up. In the presence of the victim's mother, a policeman named van de Broek recounted how he had shot an 18 year old boy and burned the body on a fire to remove all evidence. 8 years later he returned to the same house and seized the boy's father. The wife had watched as her husband was tied up, had petrol poured over him and was set alight. The courtroom became completely silent as the judge offered the widow the opportunity to respond. 'What do you want from Mr van de Broek' he asked.

She asked him to go and collect the dust from the place where he had burned her sons body, so she could honour him with a proper funeral. He was so ashamed that he could not look in her in the eye, but nodded in agreement. Then she added "Mr van de Broek took all my family away from me and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend the day with me so I can be a mother to him. I would like Mr van de Broek to know that he his forgiven by God, and that I forgive him too. I would like to embrace him so that he can know my forgiveness is real.

As the elderly woman pronounced these astounding grace-filled words and walked towards him, some people began spontaneously to sing 'Amazing Grace', but van de Broek didn't hear any of it, because he was so totally overwhelmed that he had fainted.

Could the lady have shown love like that that in her own strength. No, not at all. She had the spirit-led love of Jesus in her.

Can I love that? Can you love like that? Yes you can, if you allow the Spirit to take what you know in your head, down into your heart. Yes you can, but in your human weakness, not in your strength, and led by the Spirit of Jesus shining within you. It is him that does it through you.

I have been going out to Macedonia, and helping lead mission trips there for 3 years now. We have gone out, as unknowns, with little experience, and little resources, not really knowing what we were doing other than making ourselves available to God, following the promptings of the Spirit, and stepping out in faith with no idea of what would happen next.

In those short trips, we have had the privilege of seeing hundreds of people make decisions for Jesus, daily miracles with hundreds healed, and many more encouraged and blessed. It is not what we expected and it is not what we set out to do.

But really behind it all has been a simple motivation, to go out and love on the Macedonian people in any way we can.

When we go, we may have some outline plans, but we don't really know what the team is going to do until we get there, sometime our agenda is not known til the previous day. So when people join our teams and often say this " I know I am suppose to go on this trip, but I don't know if I have anything to offer, and I don't know what I'll be doing. Can you tell me' . I have to be honest and just say 'I don't know what you will be doing, except you will get chances every day to love on people, some very poor people, some lost in life, some needing encouragement in their faith, some need a blessing, some need healing, but everyone needs Jesus. Just go out and love on them, every opportunity you get. You go out and show Gods love to people, and you will be surprised how he will use you when you do that'.

We held our third New Hope conference on Easter Monday and two of our group, who had both expressed these doubts of God using their love, had been put together for the 2 hours at the end of the day where hundreds of people come forward for prayer. We had our feedback session and they confidently reported "We saw 3 different people healed of eye problems, lots of pains like in heads, backs and knees gone or reduced, one demon-possessed lady we prayed for was released from it, and we prayed for 3 or 4 people to accept Jesus in their lives for the first time". They had previously had very little experience of praying for people in this way, but they both saw an incredible release of Gods love and power through them, even though they

We may no have to go far, because each day normally give us opportunities to show Gods love to people. But we can pray for more opportunities, and we can make ourselves available to be led by the spirit to step side our comfort zones

Conclusions - More Love More Power

Tradition tells us that the Apostle John ended his days in Ephesus, and as he became more frail, the church leaders would ask him each service if he had anything to share with the church. He would say 'Yes, one love another'. One day an elder asked him why he always answered their question by saying 'Love one another'. He replied, because you must love one another. He had spent all that time with Jesus, and had refined the message simply down to 'love one another'.

The new commandment 'Love one another, as I have loved you'. But first we need to know that love. The Apostle John knew this love and was full of this love, calling himself the 'beloved' disciple.

Jesus had no more love for John than he does for you. Do you feel like a 'beloved' disciple, one that God desires with a great passion.

Or do you feel undesirable ? It may be because of what you see in the mirror and don't like, or because of past things you have done to others. You may think that your poor health makes you undesirable, or that emotional baggage you carry round, or that habits and addictions that you try and hide. Perhaps it all makes you feel that you are undesirable.

But that is the horizontal view point, though human eyes. God's desire for you looks past and through all of that horizontal stuff, and sees the person he created, the person he loved into being, both what you are now, and what he can create in and through you as he continues to mould you in his image. You are a new creation, and he is filling that new creation with his agape love and power.

Allow yourself to be filled up with his Spirit love, his Agape love, so that out of this love (he first loved us) you want to step out and share that love with others.

Lets echo the words in Psalm 63 (v2-4) - **So here I am in the place of worship, eyes open, drinking in your strength and glory. In your generous love I am really living at last!**
Psalm 63v2-4 (Message)

The same Love that rescued the earth lives in you; the same power that conquered the grave lives in you.

So allow yourself today to be the object of the vast delight of Jesus Christ.

With the realisation of that love and power living in you, then step out bravely and love one another.

Amen.