## **Week 3 - Commanded to love? (28 Feb- 5 March)**

##  **The Emphasis of the Old and New Testaments**

**Old Testament Emphasis**

There is a very significant and consistent Old Testament theme, which explicitly refers to our human response to God’s love by obeying God’s commandments.

1. What do you learn about God’s command to love him from the verses below? If you are in a small group context, share the verses out and feed back to each other.

**Deuteronomy 6:5-9** - *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.****6****Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.****7****Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.****8****Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,****9****and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

**Deuteronomy 10:12-13** - *So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,****13****and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God[ and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.*

**Deuteronomy 11:13** - *If you will only heed his every commandment[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%2011&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-5222b)*] that I am commanding you today—loving the Lord your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul—****14****then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil;*

**Joshua 23:11** – *“… it is the Lord your God who fights for you, as he promised you.****11****Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God.”*

**Psalm 5:11** - *But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.*

**Psalm 31:23** - *Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.*

**Psalm 91:14-16** - *Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name****15****When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them.****16****With long life I will satisfy them and show them my salvation.*

**Proverbs 8:17** - *I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.*

**New Testament Perspective**

The passages in John’s gospel from John 13 to John 17, which you may have had the chance to read after last week, are significant for understanding the importance of loving one another as Christians. Indeed, Jesus’ *commandment* to his disciples to love one another and, in particular, his recorded prayer in chapter 17 that his future followers would do the same, are precisely why ‘*growing in love for one another*’ forms part of this 3rd diocesan Strategy. John carefully reiterates this commandment in these 4 chapters:

* *‘If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father’s commandments and abide in his love.’ John 15:10*
* *‘I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’* John 13:*34*
* *‘This is my commandment that you love on another as I have loved you.’* John 15:12

A “commandment” is defined as a divine rule, or a ‘rule to be observed as strictly as one of the Ten Commandments.’ Loving one another is not therefore an optional or discretionary extra for us as Christians. We are *commanded* by Jesus Christ to do this as followers of Jesus.

At first sight, being *commanded* to *love one another* appears incongruous. How can we be ordered to do something such as *loving,* which we may instinctively associate with voluntariness? It is worth, therefore, seeing how the Bible addresses this potential concern.

1. What reasons are given in the following verses for obeying the command to love God and love one another?
2. What continuity do you see with the Old Testament? What’s new or different?
* John 14:15 - *If you love me, you will keepmy commandments.*
* John 15:9 - *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*
* John 15:11 *- I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*
* John 15:12-17 - ‘*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.****13****No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.****14****You are my friends if you do what I command you.****15****I do not call you servants[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+15%3A12-17&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-26704a)*] any longer, because the servant[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+15%3A12-17&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-26704b)*] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.****16****You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.****17****I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

A scholar called Jordan Wessling commented of John’s gospel, ***“it seems that Jesus is describing a particular quality of love, a love that obeys commands.”*** This is a different type of obedience, not one being demanded by someone who has power over another, but something being offered voluntarily and willingly to God and to other people, out of love. John’s epistle comments: *‘For the love of God is this, that we obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.’* (1 John 5:3)

Author Selwyn Hughes pondered the conundrum that it is not always easy for us to fulfill the command to love God. He reflected: ‘***The command to love does not mean we have to reach deep down within ourselves to create feelings of love for God, but rather we should focus on how much God loves us and let God’s love love us into loving.’***

Selwyn quotes another author, John Powell, from a book *Why am I afraid to love?* Powell says:***‘Before anyone can really give their heart, soul and mind to the task of loving God, he or she must first know how much God has loved them, how God has thought about them from all eternity and desired to share God’s life, joy and love with them.’***

1. How far do you agree with the statements made above by Jordan Wessling, Selwyn Hughes and John Powell?
2. Have you experienced something of how much God loves *you*?

**Pray**

We finish this week with a prayer of E.B Pusey (19th C, with slightly updated language):

‘O God, fountain of love, pour your love into our hearts, that we may love those whom you love with the love you have given us, and think and speak of them tenderly, meekly, lovingly; and so loving our brothers and sisters for your sake, may grow in your love, and dwelling in your love, may dwell in you, for Jesus Christ’s sake.’

**For Further Reflection**

When we think of commandments we often think of the 10 Commandments, which form the basis of Judaeo-Christian law to this day. Mark 12:30-31 is the story of a lawyer who asked Jesus, out of all the commandments, which is the most important? According to Josephus, a Jewish historian, there were no less than 3600 commandments in Israel at that time. Jesus reply was to name not one but two profound commandments: ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your whole heart and with all your whole soul and with all your whole mind, and with your whole strength … You must love your neighbour as yourself.’

Sometimes we can associate commandments with orders and law and legalism and not with grace, or love, or voluntary freewill. St Paul, in particular, thought about these issues very deeply because of his own background as a Pharisee and then encountering the free grace of God. This helped him when he came to address the potential clash between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Galatia and in Rome. This was his considered response to the Roman Christians:

‘owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.’ (Romans 13:8)

You might like to look up 1 John 2:1-11 which explicitly links God’s commandments with our knowledge and love of God and our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Contrast this with Proverbs 10:12 and also try 1 John 3:23-24.

If, as human beings, we were intended to image the Triune God then it also follows that anything which breaks this quality of relationship, or prevents it from developing, is likely to be damaging to us as individuals and as communities. It is why when we find ourselves in these situations they can be so stressful, including within our families and our churches. It is also why in the *Book of Common Prayer* people were reminded on a previous Sunday to make their peace with one another before taking Holy Communion on the next occasion. Here is the wording:

‘And if ye shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God, but also against your neighbours; then ye shall reconcile yourselves to them; being ready to make restitution and satisfaction, to the uttermost of your powers, for all injuries and wrongs done by you to any other; and being likewise ready to forgive others that have offended you, as you would have forgiveness of your offences at God’s hand.’ (*Book of Common Prayer* p 147)

Christopher Marshall is a New Zealand theologian who has been working on restorative justice in the New Zealand criminal system. In his book *Compassionate Justice*, he examined the parable of the Prodigal Son. Marshall refers to the Prodigal son’s offending as ‘relational rupture’. The prodigal son does not just break the law at some technical level, says Marshall, he does something far worse: he wrecks bedrock relationships. His offending manifests a profound disrespect for the rights and needs of others. Marshall argues this constitutes the harmful essence of all crime. God’s command for us to love God and one another is thus designed to create, develop, and where necessary, heal relationships.