

Old Testament lesson – Leviticus 19:9-18

New Testament lesson – John 13:31-35

A NEW Commandment? What's Wrong with the Old One?

Lately, when I boot up my computer, it will sometimes give me a notice that I need to upgrade to Windows 11, because there will be no support for Windows 10 sometime this fall. I hate when that happens. It took me a long time to get used to Windows 10 after I finally gave in and upgraded to that version.

I am used to it now. I don't want a new version. But I also don't want to make my system vulnerable by not having security updates available any more. I suppose I will have to give in at some point, but I really dread having to figure out all the new "improvements" that have been devised to torture people who don't spend 17 hours a day exploring all the new abilities of the new system. If it has 1,000 improvements compared to the current system, I probably won't use more than 10, and it will take me a couple years to even find out about them.

Phones may be even worse. If I keep allowing updates and upgrades to my computer it will continue working. But every time my phone updates, it uses up a little more storage space. Eventually there will not be enough space and the RAM and the processors will be overtaxed, and the phone will quit working. That's why I have the phone I have. My old one just quit working in 2021, shortly before we went to Scotland. Every time I started the phone, it would restart, over and over and over again. It could not be repaired or made usable because it was too old.

I really, really resent that sort of "improvement" that traps users. But I fear that I am an addict. I would have terrible withdrawal symptoms if I gave up either my computer or my phone. Now that I have cats, I have actually started to enjoy those silly cat videos that are so ubiquitous. I used to hate them; now I watch almost every one that pops up on my phone.

And if I had to give up both my phone and computer, you could probably just start planning

my funeral. The shock would simply be too much.

But, man, oh man, I hate upgrades and system changes.

In the days of Jesus and his disciples, change moved at a much slower pace. But at the last supper, just after Judas left to fetch the authorities to arrest Jesus, he informed the other eleven about a system upgrade. He announced a new commandment: "That you love one another, even as I have loved you."

At first, this seems to be basically a re-phrasing of the commandment God gave in Leviticus 19:18, which was part of our OT lesson: "Love your neighbor as yourself." The eleven disciples were neighbors under the OT law. At another point in his ministry, Jesus had identified this as one of the two greatest commandments. Last week our OT lesson included the other one: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might."

Jesus said that the entire Law depends on these two commandments. That seems quite reasonable. If you love God that completely, you will want to fulfill all the laws that are directed towards God – things like keeping the Sabbath, having no other gods, making no graven images, worshiping God properly on feast days, making the proper sacrifices, and similar commandments.

On the other hand, all the commandments that prescribed how the people should live together, conduct business, structure their families and communities and their relationships with one another, would all be followed if the people loved each other as they loved themselves. This, of course, depended, as I said last week, on an understanding of love that defines it more as behavior than as feeling. You might not like your neighbors, but you should still behave towards them according to the law of Moses.

Consider the particular statutes listed in our lesson this morning. The first couple of laws command the people to take into account the needs of the poor. I once heard a radio show host who is a Mormon claim that the OT does not say anything about caring for the poor. Well, maybe Joseph Smith said nothing about caring for the poor, but Moses and the prophets did in fact say quite a bit about the subject. These verses are a good example.

In those days, the poor would pass through a field or a vineyard after harvest and pick up grain or grapes which were dropped or missed. Sometimes these gleanings were left on purpose by generous owners. This statute is repeated in Leviticus 23. And in Deuteronomy 24, olives are added to the list.

Imagine leaving one pass of a combine at the edge of your fields for someone else to come and pick for their own use, or even just a couple of rows. Fields were certainly smaller in those days, but this law required a substantial amount of crop to be left for the poor.

That was a very concrete expression of love for one's neighbor. And it had nothing to do with feeling; it was a behavior commanded by the LORD.

This passage includes other definite behaviors that would show love in tangible ways: no stealing, no false dealings, no lying, no false swearing by God's name. All of these would have influenced the daily life and business dealings between neighbors. They were designed to keep such dealings fair, with no one taking advantage of a neighbor.

That is biblical love. It has nothing to do with how one feels; it is all about how one behaves.

There are some more rules given here. There was to be no oppression in wages, and workers had to be paid promptly. It was important not to curse the deaf. Why was that? A curse was considered to be powerful in its effect against someone. It would be unfair in the extreme to curse someone who could not hear it, just as it

would be cruel and dangerous to put an obstacle in the path of someone who could not see it.

God prohibited his people to use courts to do injustices based on status. Nope – treat the poor and the wealthy alike. That is some sound advice which we follow in theory in our country, but I don't think we always fulfill that standard.

We could also benefit a great deal from the laws in verses 16 and 17. Don't go about slandering others, keeping in mind that even if there is a kernel of truth in slanderous comments, they are still harmful. And America has a clear need to apply verse 17: don't hate your brother in your heart, but reason with your neighbor. Even if someone doesn't want to post the Ten Commandments in government buildings, they ought to be willing to post these verses all over government buildings.

It might be a good idea to put them up around the offices and studios of media companies as well.

Finally, God commanded his people not to take vengeance or bear grudges. Instead, love your neighbor as yourself.

There are more laws along these same lines, as well as other topics of importance. Some of them regulate home and family life, and of course, some of them regulate the religious life of Israel. But the bottom line commandment, the one that sums up these laws that define the community life of Israel, is to love your neighbor as yourself. That is supposed to characterize all the relationships between all the people of Israel. Non-Israelites who live among the Israelites are also subject to the same laws.

Again, of course, we have to realize that this is not a commandment to feel a certain way about your neighbor. It describes how they should treat one another. In effect, it gives each person a goal: want the best life possible for your neighbor, just as you want the best life possible for yourself.

I think that is a good summary of love: wanting the best for someone. That does not

mean you want them to have their way or to have whatever they want or demand. We often want things that are not even good for us, let alone the best.

You might see a child demanding another toy at the store, but it isn't really what they need, and letting them have every toy they want would not be the best for them. Spoiled children are spoiled not because they are given what is best for them. Parents indulge them because it makes the *parent* feel better. There are a lot of ways that spoiling a child makes a parent feel better, but none of them give the child what is best for the child.

In a similar way, God wants what is best for us. But in the case of God, he is looking at an eternal time scale. He does not consider only what is best for this life. What is going to work out for the best life possible beyond this earthly life? That is often what God is doing in our lives, but we don't see it, because we are focused on what we think is best for us here and now, or maybe in the next few days or weeks or years. But eternity is seldom on our minds.

And it is rarely on our minds when we think about loving our neighbors. We think about the here and now for our neighbors, or maybe the next few days or weeks.

As an example, consider a neighbor who finds out they have cancer, and they have six months to a year to live. What do we think of? Can I help them with something around the house? Do they need a ride to the doctor? Can I help their spouse or kids?

Now, if we know for a fact that they are a Christian believer and they are right with God and they are going to heaven when they die, those ideas might be useful. But we might want to ask them whether this discovery is affecting their relationship with God. And if they are not a Christian, and if we really want to show love for them, we had better make sure someone talks to them about Jesus, because that is what is best for them in an eternal sense. And if it is a neighbor that we care about and love in the ordinary sense, that task probably falls to us.

In the OT, the people of God were chosen to fulfill the promise to Abraham and bring into the world the blessing for the world in the person of Jesus. Loving neighbors sustained the community and kept it going in order to bring that about. After Jesus came into the world, was crucified and raised from the dead, we now have a slightly adjusted goal. We are still supposed to love our neighbor in the ways described in the law. We don't do that because we are bound by the OT law, but because we are still commanded to love others as we love ourselves. Jesus repeated and reinforced that commandment.

But now there is an eternal dimension to the commandment. And that dimension increases the importance of keeping the commandment to love our neighbor.

Our NT lesson occurs during the Last Supper. Judas had just left to carry out his betrayal of Jesus. Right before that, Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples and told them that they, too, ought to wash one another's feet. They were to be servants to one another. By extension, all Christians are to consider themselves as servants, especially to their fellow Christians.

Now in our lesson, Jesus says he is giving them a new commandment. If all he had said was, "Love one another," it would not have been new. The commandment in Leviticus 19:18 had already commanded that. What made this new was the part when he said, "*as I have loved you.*" How had he loved them?

He had loved them in a way that wanted what was best for them. But he had added that eternal dimension to it. He had left heaven, taken on human form, lived and taught and worked miracles among the human race. He had chosen twelve men to be his closest disciples, and he had apparently knowingly chosen one who would betray him. He had done this so that he could voluntarily give up his life to restore the relationship between God and every human being who would ever walk the face of the earth.

He gave up his heavenly position. He humbled himself to be a servant. He died the

painful, humiliating death of a criminal. In this passage, he is calling on his disciples to have that same sort of love for one another. If they will do that, other people will know that they are disciples of Jesus.

How has this worked out for the church? At times, it has worked out well, if we maintain an eternal perspective. Tertullian, a Christian theologian who lived in Carthage – the one in north Africa, not the one north of here – around 160 A.D. to 220 A.D., famously said “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In his mind he imagined pagans of his time looking at the way Christians lived, and saying, “Look... how they love one another (for the pagans themselves hate one another); and how they are ready to die for each other (for the pagans themselves are readier to kill each other).”

He wrote this near the end of the second century, in a letter to Roman authorities to defend Christians against the many false charges made against them. Tertullian pointed out how the Christians behaved towards one another, and how that was in such sharp contrast to the way most people lived and behaved.

He was also aware of the way Christians died when persecution hounded them to death. Many of them had that eternal perspective I mentioned, and they faced death not with a cringing fear of the unknown or the utter end of existence. They faced death with the same sort of calm as Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Like Stephen, they looked forward to heaven, their reward for trusting Jesus with their lives.

It’s easy to hear the announcement of a new commandment and wonder why we need another one. Then we hear it from the mouth of Jesus: love one another as I have loved you. It sounds a lot like the old one he mentioned before: Love your neighbor as yourself.

But it is different because his love was different. It was sacrificial, and it had an eternal purpose. That is the model for this new commandment.

We all realize it is hard enough just to love our neighbor as ourselves. We all realize it is hard enough to do what we can so that others have the best life possible here and now. We all realize that we often fail to love that well. We probably don’t fully realize just how often we fail at it, but we have some idea.

And now, I hope, we have a better idea of the eternal aspect of the love Jesus commands us to show. Human need is far more than food, clothing, and shelter. Those are important, and we should not neglect them.

But we have an eternal nature, an eternal soul or spirit. And so do our neighbors. Furthermore, the eternal needs of our neighbors may be hiding behind a mask of relative prosperity. A person with more than adequate shelter, clothing, and food may be living in eternal poverty.

Within the Church of Jesus Christ, we love each other and often speak of our eternal nature. So love your neighbor outside the Church as yourself, and take their eternal nature into consideration as well. Love others as Jesus loved his disciples, as he loves us. Amen.