

260 Commanded to Love

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Commanded to Love", originally shared on April 5, 2023. It was the 260th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bphKaL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Can love be commanded? Jesus thought so. Today, we're going to find out how.

The L. A. County Covid state of emergency ended last Saturday. That means certain mandates, not all, will no longer be in effect.

Many people have been concerned about mandates that require certain behaviors of them in order to take part in civil society.

Each year in the Christian calendar, we celebrate Maundy Thursday. It happens during Holy Week, the week before Easter.

Maundy Thursday marks the Last Supper, a meal Jesus had with his disciples on the night that he was betrayed to be crucified.

Jewish people will be celebrating a seder meal during their season of Passover, commemorating their liberation from slavery in Egypt. That seder supper was not celebrated in its current form until many years after Jesus' death and resurrection. But the Last Supper was held during Passover and had many references to that liberation, including the bread and wine presented as Jesus body and blood.

And, the obvious reference that was to the last plague, the blood of the spotless lamb that was painted over the doors of all the households of the people of God in slavery in Egypt. The angel of death visited every home and the first-born son died, except in those homes where the blood of the lamb was painted over the entryway. Those homes were passed over. Hence, Passover.

Only, Jesus is the lamb of the God, and we are freed from sin, death, and the forces of the devil by his blood freely given on the cross. Those references make the Last Supper the first celebration of Holy Communion, on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. It includes the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus as a witness to serve one another as we have been served by Jesus Christ, and the giving of a new commandment by Jesus.

That's where the word "maundy" comes from.

"Maundy" is an Old English word rooted in the Latin word "mandatum", which means "commandment". "Mandatum" is also the root word for "mandate".

The whole text is in **John 13:1-17, 31b-35**, but Jesus gives the new commandment at the end, in **verses 34-35**,

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus announces that he is about to leave them. Thomas responds that they don't know the way to where he is going. Jesus answers, in **John 14:6-7**,

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

This is how a Christian approaches mandates, from a relationship with God. We ask what is the best way to express our love for one another, not for ourselves. We start, not with an assertion of personal freedom, though we are free, but with an assertion of personal service.

Martin Luther, the 16th century Church reformer, taught that God rules the world through two kingdoms, the kingdom of this world, so that governments are to be measured by what God is calling them to do, and through the Kingdom of God at work in the Church, so that the Church is to be measured by what God is calling it to do. God rules in different ways, but God rules through both.

So, the first question a Christian asks when given a mandate by the government or the Church is, "Is my government, or the Church, acting in accord with God's will for the people"? That is, "How does this fulfill God's vision for a good society"?

In his work "On the Freedom of a Christian (aka "A Treatise on Christian Liberty"), Luther wrote, "A Christian man (*or woman*) is the most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man (*or woman*) is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."

Years ago, there was a restaurant/drive-through in San Dimas called "Bravo Burgers". There's still one in Pomona, but I still miss it here.

Most of their food packaging had "Phil 4:13" written on it. **Philippians 4:13** says, *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

The owner said that he put that verse on his packaging out of gratitude to God.

But, he said, "There isn't a day that goes by when someone doesn't come in and ask, 'Who's Phil?'"

Philippians 4:13 is often seen and quoted as meaning that, in anything I want to do or don't want to do, God strengthens me. But that's not what it says.

The context of that verse is this, **Philippians 4:11-13**,

¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul is writing to the Church at Philippi to answer their concern for him by saying that serving Jesus Christ is all that matters, our personal need or lack of need is irrelevant to our service in Jesus Christ.

How can that be?

It's because Christian behavior is not rooted in the requirements of the law, but in the new Creation we have been made to be in Jesus Christ. Our behavior is rooted in the love for one another that comes from our love for God.

The mandate of which we are reminded on Maundy Thursday is that we live in love to serve one another, as Jesus came to serve us. This new commandment, or mandate, is to love one another.

This is at the very core of what it means to be a Christian. Paul nailed this down in an earlier part of his letter to the **Philippians**, in **chapter 2, verses 2-8**, from a passage we read last Sunday,

⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,*

*⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

And being found in human form,

*⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Can love be commanded? Yes, but not in our behavior alone, but because we have been fundamentally transformed by the love of God in Jesus Christ demonstrated on the cross, the love that shapes us in the Holy Spirit, the streams of living water within us, and the love of the church for us and expressed through us.

Jesus removed his outer robe and washed the feet of his disciples, the job of the lowest servant in the household, the job that nobody could mess up. He modeled who he is and what his disciples are to be to one another. Judas went out to betray Jesus to the authorities.

The only way to go where Jesus is going is obedience to God, in response to and through Jesus Christ.

Every religion has its wisdom and its wisdom traditions. They are everything in some other religions. They are the least important thing in Christianity.

C.S. Lewis wrote, in his book "Mere Christianity", "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. It is lived as an outcome of a living relationship with the one true living God. It is the relationship for which we were created.

God made us for a living relationship but without making us to be simple robots. We needed to be able to say "no" to that relationship in order for our "yes" to mean something. And the first people disobeyed God, they said "no", and evil entered the world.

People only came back to God when they needed something. So, God set them free by coming to them, in the form of Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human being, to show His love by suffering and dying for us on the cross, so that we might know the abundant eternal life for which we were created in the beginning.

What does that life as the disciples of Christ look like? How do we love one another in obedience to the command of Jesus? How do we serve one another sacrificially as Jesus did on the cross?

Here are some lessons from building construction:

We built two buildings when I served at a congregation in San Dimas. I was there for the last almost 32 years of formal ministry before I retired.

Among the many things I learned in those projects, three stand out as instructive in living the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

First, you can have it done well, you can have it done fast, and you can have it done cheap. Pick any two.

If it's done fast and well, it won't be cheap. If it's done cheap and fast, it won't be done well, and so on.

The life of the disciple of Jesus is similar. The life of a disciple is entirely built on the work of Jesus on the cross. We are sinners and therefore separated by Sin from the holy God. Jesus is God in flesh and fully human at the same time. He paid the penalty for our Sin himself. The canyon between us and God is bridged by the cross. To be a disciple and live a Christian life isn't cheap or fast. It took the cross.

The early Christians spent 3-years in instruction before they were welcomed as full members of a local church. If our desire to serve involves no cross-bearing and does not bring meaningful life transformation, it is simply a superficial nod to Jesus. It will not be a life lived well, and so on.

Second, everything takes longer and costs more.

A building contractor, a member of our church advising our building committee during our worship-and-administration building construction, sent me a picture of a giant yacht with a small motorboat tied behind it. The name on the motorboat was, "Original Contract". The name on the yacht was, "Change Orders".

Change orders are the changes to the original contract that are made once work has begun. They can drive up the cost of the project astronomically. But, sometimes, the client doesn't know what they want until the project has begun, and sometimes they just get a new idea.

The life of a disciple of Jesus is similar. Sometimes, people who become disciples of Jesus don't know what they are getting into until God enters their true selves and their life transformation project begins. Maybe the word "sometimes" should be changed to

pretty much “always”. God always accepts us as we are. Repentant sinners. But God never leaves us as we are. God makes us, by God’s grace, a place that is fitting for the one true holy God to dwell in. That involves basic transformation. We are imperfect sinful human beings.

The thing about Christianity is not that God makes us better, but that we have a Savior. Our behavior improves not from fear but from faith, from our relationship with God. Our living relationship with God is what produces a desire to please God.

The Christian life doesn’t end in perfection until the world to come. We don’t need perfection to be accepted by God. We need a Savior, and we have one in Jesus Christ. The cost of our ticket to heaven has already been stamped “Paid in Full”, by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

We live not to get something from God, but in response to all that God has done for us at the cross.

Third, anyone can hand you a bill. That doesn’t mean that you have to pay it.

We frequently had bills handed to us during construction that we disputed. Things happened that were not our fault. Work was done that was not contracted.

In the same way, when a person **becomes** a Christian, or goes through a renewed faith and begins experiencing again a life transformed by God, people will take notice. We are made a new creation. We are born again. When that happens, people will begin doing things to irritate you just to get a rise out of you.

When some people find out you **are** a Christian, they’ll do the same things. They will try to get you to do things that are contrary to your new life. They will throw the “gotcha” questions at you, give you a demeaning nickname, distance themselves from you, accuse you of being “holier than thou”, or of thinking that you’re better than them. They will say they miss the old you and will try to draw you back to your old self.

People did similar things to Jesus and worse. All the powers that defy God defied Jesus.

The thing is that you don’t owe them anything, neither beliefs nor behaviors. Sometimes, in fact, it takes the hand of God for you to recognize who your friends and family truly are, who truly wants the best for you, and who wants to build you up and point you to a better future. Sometimes, it takes the hand of the Holy Spirit to guide us forward.

We don’t have to fall back. We don’t have to live under anybody’s expectations but God’s, Paul writes, in his letter to the **Galatians, the 5th chapter, the 1st verse**:

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Paul says a little further on, in **Galatians 5:6b**,

"the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

That's the message of Maundy Thursday.

Maundy Thursday reminds us of Jesus' mandate, Jesus' command, *"that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

The world thinks it's impossible to compel someone to love you or to compel someone to love someone else because we first and primarily think of love as something romantic, or maybe patriotic, or directed toward our family. But the love that Jesus commands is something else: it's selfless, it's a kind of love that can only come from God.

And it does, and it is who we are because it comes as the result of whose we are.

We are not the people we want to be. We are all under construction. But we have also been made into a new creation because we have a Savior.

On Maundy Thursday we see how we **can** be commanded to love.

Jesus is both preparing us for his death on the cross and showing us how to live in response to it, transformed by the living relationship with the one true living God, loving selflessly, as we have been loved.