

Live In the Light

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[0 : 00] So, we're going to take as our key verse this evening, number 34, 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.

Now, before we get there, we're going to sort of do a little bit of background, because I think that's pretty important. This is one of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

John was probably the last or the latest Gospel in terms of dating, and there's a lot of theological reflection going on here. John was one of the disciples, so he was present.

He was there in the upper room. He was a witness to all these events. What he's doing some years later is writing about them, recording them for our benefit, and putting them in a structure of framework that we can understand.

He's a brilliant, brilliant writer. There's two or three, well, there's a number of interesting things he does, but for our purposes tonight, there are a couple that we want to focus on. First of all, a consistent theme that runs throughout the Gospel of John is rejection.

[1 : 16] The 13th chapter here is a sort of pivotal moment in the Gospel. The first 12 chapters, Jesus has come to the people of Israel, and he's publicly announced that he is the Messiah, very publicly.

Everyone knows he's there. He's traveled around the countryside, proclaiming the good news that Christ has come, that he is the Christ, and announcing his advent, his coming with miracles, with challenging of the authorities, with a message of good news, which is what the people of Israel were supposed to be waiting for.

Their whole history as a people was of hundreds of years of waiting for the Messiah to come, of waiting for the Messiah who would bring them freedom, bring them life, and make them whole again as if God's people.

So you'd expect that message to be welcome, and you'd expect Jesus to be well received. Instead, this is something John emphasises, time and time and time again is that Jesus is rejected.

So chapter 1, he came unto his own, and his own people did not receive him. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.

[2 : 33] Chapter 3, this is the verdict, light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Chapter 5, you refuse to come to me that you might have life.

Chapter 6, after this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So there's a consistent theme of rejection of Jesus and his message, and really chapter 12 is the kind of, you know, the peak of this rejection after which Jesus retires.

Bear in mind that the public authorities have basically said, we want to take this guy out. He's a menace to public order, he's a threat to the status quo.

If he keeps on saying what he's saying, the Romans are going to crush us, he has to go. So a lot of his followers have left him and he is now in this small upper room with his 12 disciples, and this is all that's left from the great crowds that followed him earlier on, 12 disciples.

And one of these, of course, is also going to reject him. One of these is going to betray him, and he knows this. But what he's doing here in these last few hours, because he also knows he's going to cross, what he's doing is instructing his disciples and what he's looking for from them, how they should live, how they should respond to the events that are coming around the corner.

[3 : 55] So this rejection, he's stepped right back from public ministries now with a small tight core group, but there's still further rejection and death to come.

Another thing that John does a lot of, which is really interesting, is if you look throughout John, there's tons of misunderstandings. So what happens is that the Pharisees misunderstand Jesus, he

says, I'm going to destroy this temple and rebuild it in three days, and they go, what are you talking about?

Nicodemus, you must be born again, and Nicodemus, what are you talking about? This happens time and time again, both with folks who don't know him, but also within his core tight group of disciples, he says things to them and they don't understand what he's talking about.

You see, you see even here in chapter 13 where Peter just totally misunderstands what Jesus is talking about when he says that he's going to go and you can't follow me.

He misunderstands when Jesus says, going to wash your feet. So this is happening time and time again that Jesus is being misunderstood.

[5 : 02] So the benefit of hindsight, he's making it very clear who he is. There's almost a fog of misunderstanding over the people at that time. They don't know what he's talking about.

So he's coming to them and bringing them life, bringing them light, and they completely misunderstand what he's saying. And I think one of the reasons is that they are interpreting everything that he's doing in a very sort of temporal human sort of mind frame.

They expect Jesus to come and sort them out in this world, to bring them freedom in this world, to give them relief from the Romans, to recreate the Jewish state.

And Jesus is saying, I'm not that sort of Messiah and they just misunderstand it. So the rejection of Jesus in some ways is quite understandable because if Jesus comes to you and your only way of responding to him is this material world, this human framework, that what you see is all that there is, and that's all that's worth living for or dying for, then Jesus comes into that and he's talking about something completely different, completely.

He's talking about a spiritual world that seems to make no sense to the folks who reject him. Now, how does John capture this? Well, John uses a really interesting, excuse me, just a bit of a frog in the throat.

[6 : 27] John uses light and darkness as a way to capture this underlying spiritual reality, that although there's all this stuff going on and Jesus saying things and going around the world, going around the country and the Jews and the authorities and the Romans and all the rest of it, behind all that there's a deeper spiritual reality.

He uses light and darkness. And there's a very rich Old Testament sort of heritage that John is referring back to all the times. And all the New Testament writers do this.

They kind of ground what they're saying about Christ in the Old Testament. So for example, there's over 120 examples in the Old Testament of using light as a sort of metaphor for God.

And it goes right back to creation, doesn't it, to Genesis. The first chapter in the Bible, there was darkness over the face of the waters and God said, let there be light.

Now we see it in Isaiah 9. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. And those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned. And there's also a very personal expression of this in Micah, where Micah the prophet, oppressed, he's challenging the people.

[7 : 44] They're not liking what they're hearing. It was a tough job being a prophet in the Old Testament world. Micah says, though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.

So this prophetic word, hundreds of years before Christ comes, that the light is coming. And then John picks up on that. And so when he talks about Jesus, he's always talking about Jesus being the light.

And Jesus himself confirms that. Here's two or three examples. When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Later on he says, believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light.

John 12, I've come into the world as a light so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. So although on a human level, rejecting Jesus might seem quite rational because you're, he's a challenge to the status quo.

[8 : 54] He's asking things that people don't want to hear. He's upsetting the apple cart. A deeper spiritual dimension, rejecting Jesus is deeply, deeply irrational.

And that is everything that scripture tells us. That the rejection point, if you reject Jesus, however rational it may appear in a kind of human secular modern day framework, an underlying level is deeply, deeply irrational.

You are saying I would prefer to stay in the darkness rather than to walk in the light. And this is the sort of predicament of the human race that we prefer to stay in the darkness.

We don't want to walk in the light. We say we do. We think we might want to. But in actual fact, we don't. We naturally choose the darkness. It's irrational because darkness is where you stumble. Darkness is where you don't know what's going on. Darkness is where you can't see God. You're estranged from each other. And at the end of the day, you are estranged from yourself. You have no framework.

[10:01] You have no light to understand who you are, what you were made for, what life is all about. And Jesus calls you into the light where you find out who you are, where you find out who he is, where you find out how you fit into this broader, deeper spiritual reality.

The other key thing that John says is that this isn't a kind of battle of equals, a sort of Asian yin and yang sort of thing where light and darkness are always fighting and it's an eternal struggle.

No, it's not. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness is not overcoming. The darkness is passing away. Jesus is victor. Jesus has already conquered the darkness.

It's done. It's a done deal. That's what the Bible teaches that in the cross, the death, the resurrection, darkness is finally once and forever been defeated.

And the only thing that remains is for Christ to return. So again, to reject the light is irrational, you're choosing something that has no future.

[11:06] This is what makes Judas' story so poignant and so tragic. And John reflects it very, very cleverly when Judas takes a bit of bread from Jesus.

After receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out and it was night. Now John isn't giving us a police report here. It's not a kind of time of day.

He's saying something very, very powerful and profound that Judas, in the light, the only source of light in the whole world is sitting in that small upper room and Judas chooses instead to walk out into the darkness, into the night and he never returns.

It's a tragic, tragic story, tragic to be in the presence of the light instead to choose the darkness.

So where does that leave us? Let's get to the core of what we want to talk about tonight, which is this new commandment. Because just after Judas leaves, he's chosen the darkness, Jesus then kind of gathers his troops around about it and they're confused.

[12:18] They don't know what's going on really. They know that their leader's been rejected. They know he said a lot of unusual stuff. They don't know that he's about to go to the cross. Jesus knows, but they don't.

And so these are his last words. He's trying to kind of rally the troops and give them a framework, giving an understanding of how to cope with the future. And he says this, a new commandment I give to you, love one another.

As I have loved you, love one another. Now, this is good news, isn't it?

Loving one another has got to be a good thing. We all need love, don't we? We all need more love. It'd be great.

But there's a catch because it's that standard of love that Jesus is talking about here. As I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

[13:18] Now, the disciples already have an example of how Jesus loves because he's done this foot washing thing where he's got down on the floor in a society, a culture where it was only the lowest of the low got down and washed people's feet.

Jesus, Lord of all creation, second person of the Trinity, knowing where he was coming from and knowing where he was going, washes his disciples' feet.

And we know that that's just the start of it because he then goes to the cross. He doesn't just wash the disciples' feet, he lays down his life for them. So you've got this really kind of high, high standard of love.

And it's tempting to say, well, okay, that's what Jesus does, isn't it? Jesus lays down his life for his followers. We're happy to follow, but you don't really expect us to do that, do you?

But John doesn't let us off the hook, unfortunately, because in the first letter that John writes, he says this, by this we know love, that he laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

[14:33] I think we're going to go to sisters in there, for our brothers and sisters. Which I really don't know, dear. That's quite a high standard, isn't it?

See we're not used to that sort of love. The Greeks were very good at having different words for different sorts of love. And I'm sure you've heard this before, but it's worth reflecting on.

The sort of love we see a lot of in this world is Eros love, from which we get the word erotic. And that is a love which is demanding, always wanting more.

Has an object of desire, but the object of desire is really to feed its own appetite. Never satisfied, never full, always wanting more.

And that's across, you know, whether it's a relationship, whether it's any other sort of context. It's hungry, demanding and ultimately about the self. And we're all familiar with that.

[15 : 35] We all probably practice it in one way or the other. That is what the world understands love to be. What we see here in this lay down your life for your brothers, a different sort of love, it's agape love.

And agape love is from above. It's the sort of love that God provides and shows for his children. Agape love is a love that gives, that I'm ever looking for anything in return. Agape love gives freely. Agape love gives joyfully. And agape love is the recipient which receives and grows and has benefits and is blessed.

That's the sort of love we see here. So there's two very, very different sorts of love, kind of Eros love and agape love. So we appear to have a problem because God appears to be demanding something of us that, frankly speaking, we can't deliver.

[16 : 36] Does that make sense? Naturally we don't do this sort of thing. We just don't naturally give ourselves to others freely. But this is a standard that is required from us.

I think it's more fundamental than that. It's not just an aspiration. But this sort of agape love is an identifying mark of the Christian church.

Now why do I say that? Again John gives us very, very firm evidence that walking in the light and love are related.

If you walk in the light, if you follow Jesus, you will practice agape love. If you do not practice agape love, whatever you say, you are still walking in the darkness.

So this is again, first letter of John. If we claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and we do not live out the truth.

[17 : 52] Whoever does not love, does not know God because God is love. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness.

Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light and there's nothing in them to make them stumble. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness, they do not know where they are going because the darkness has blinded them.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. I think it's quite difficult to be honest.

We're told that this kind of standard of selfless love should be a hallmark of our lives as individuals and as a community.

That's something that we should expect to see. And some ways it feels a bit like you're being set up to fail, doesn't it? That God's asking you something you simply cannot do.

[19 : 02] This was a few years ago, I had surgery and it was quite serious. I remember lying in the hospital and after your surgery, the hospital are quite keen that your lungs start to work again and you are as well.

You think this is a good thing. So what are they doing? Some of you who are involved in medical field will know what I'm talking about. You have to blow into this peculiar little tube thing that looks like a gravy separator and the idea is that you blow and you get the little ball and you have to get it to the top and you do that and it gets your lungs going and everything is great and it's an exercise. I find that absolutely impossible for at least 48 hours. It was desperately, desperately painful, humiliating because I was relatively young and dispiriting because I knew what I needed to do. What was worse was I had this chap who the hospital hired and he was in South Florida and South Florida is full of crazy people and the hospital had found a crazy person to take this role of it. It's supposed to be encouraging you to blow harder and he did a terrible job of it. It was terrible because he kept on telling me I was doing an awful job. He kept on telling me that I was hopeless. He kept on telling me that I should do better.

[20 : 23] I remember Pamela knew he had to hit him at one point which I was appreciative of. It was dreadful, dreadful, dreadful.

As we talk about this, I bring it out there because it's very easy to read these words and get depressed about things. It's very easy to hear the voice of an accuser going, yeah, you are rubbish at loving, aren't you?

You always have been rubbish. I remember you tried in 2010 and that was hopeless and I'm not surprised you don't bother anymore. The accuser is always going to tell you that you're not any good at this.

When you hear that voice, sort of telling you that you're rubbish and you can't do it, I'd say very strongly, I don't believe that's a voice from the Lord. It isn't.

God does not accuse. God sends a spirit. So let's talk about how God sort of solves the problem for us because he is never going to be setting us up to fail.

[21 : 19] That's a ridiculous notion. All we know about God is that he loves us and all we know about God is that he is on our side and all we know about God is that he's a God of grace who has already done everything for us.

So the idea that he's given us a standard that we are doomed to fail in and we can never ever meet does not make sense. It cannot make sense. So what was going on here?

We have to put this verse 34 in the context of the broader chapter. And I think in particular you've got to read the verse, love one another in the context of the next chapter, which is chapter 14.

Now chapter 14 is amazing because having told people to love each other, what does Jesus then go to do? He gives us a picture of reality.

So he tells his disciples about their destination. I go to prepare a place for you. So straight away, you sing this, look, okay.

[22 : 20] This is a temporal situation here. I'm calling you to love one another. How do you learn to love one another? One of the great ways to do it is to remember where you're going, what your destiny, your destination is.

We believe in a resurrected Christ. We believe in the resurrection. We have a hope and an expectation that what we see here today is not all there is and that one day life will be completely different and it will be real life, real physical life, but it will be a completely different life resurrected, living in perfect love with a perfect God.

So that's what I've hoped and expectation. And to some extent, living in community and in love here today is to live an anticipation of that. We're not going to be perfect. Of course we're not.

But we are living in anticipation of who we're becoming and who we will be. So again, you're not living life backwards. You're living life forwards. So at the end of the day, Eros' love is irrational because it doesn't work.

It never ever fills or satisfies and it's wholly based on the view that this life is all you have and it's all you're ever going to have so you're going to grab what you can get and hold on to.

[23 : 37] Whereas agape love is something different and it's something that is out of the root, so the root of it all is the nature of who God is.

Again, we believe on the basis of scripture that the core of all existence, of everything that lives and moves and breathes is a Trinitarian God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, living in perfect love and harmony, constantly practicing this agape love.

So the Trinity is quite a mysterious kind of doctrine but it's core to who we are. That God is already in this perfect, ever-loving, ever-giving existence and out of that perfect love has chosen to give to us, to create and give to us and we are invited into that relationship with this loving God.

So that's why agape love is actually very rational because what you are doing when you practice agape love, when you give without expecting anything back, when you give without looking for approval from the other person, when you give just to see the other person benefit, you are doing something that is in tune with the underlying reality of the universe.

There's a quote from Bonhoeffer, I wonder if we can get that up on the screen. I find this quite helpful. In Jesus Christ, the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world.

[25 : 09] All concepts of reality that ignore Jesus Christ are abstractions. And Bonhoeffer was a martyr, he lived his life in full consistency with that.

That what appears to be real is not real. If what appears to be real ignores who Christ is. You cannot understand your life, this world, God, without reckoning with Jesus Christ.

So we have this wonderful, wonderful example, the core of all existence, of all reality, of a Christ, a savior, a God who dies and a cross.

So again, agape love is not irrational, it's totally irrational. And again the other thing I think that we probably have to really home in on here is that God is not sort of, excuse me, God's not sort of sitting somewhere far away, whatever that is, kind of setting us up for failure and watching us fail. God is present with us. So again we look forward into chapter 14 and what do we find? Jesus says, I love one another. By the way, remember where you're going and also, I'm not going to leave you to do it by yourselves because I'm not going to ask you to practice this spiritual love from above, spiritual love from heaven without giving you some help.

[26 : 33] So I'm sending you a helper, second person to trinity, the Holy Spirit. Again this is an amazing, amazing part of the Christian faith that a mysterious level that we don't understand, as you follow Jesus, Jesus says, we will come and make our dwelling within you.

He's not leaving you alone, but he's connecting you to who he is. And the word helper in some ways is not quite right. It's more of a strengthener.

The Spirit strengthens you and gives you the courage and the perspective and the desire to keep on giving in a way that the natural world can never give you.

So this is what our God, our Lord is looking for us. He's not asking us to create our own light. That's not possible.

We're not Thomas Edison. We're not asked to create our own light. We're asked to reflect the light of God, to reflect the light of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 37] So again, that is what our destiny, that is what our ultimate end will be. What's the estimates for confession? Oh, dear me.

Thank you. Joy God and glorify him forever. That's who we're called to be. That's what we were made for. I always find it difficult to say what is man's chief end, but what is man's chief purpose? What were we made for? We were made to enjoy God, glorify him, be with him forever. So that's where we're heading. The extent to which we practice agape love today in this world, we anticipate that resurrected life.

So the command to love one another is not a burdensome command. It's very easy. I've certainly done it many times in the past. It's very easy to kind of be weighed down by this.

Oh, gosh, I'm hopeless at loving people. I'm a busy, it's just very, very difficult. It's not a burdensome command though. It's a liberating command.

[28 : 42] Because if you're set free from any idea that this world is what it's all about, if you're set from the need to grab and possess and control, if you know and understand that you have everything in Christ and you need nothing else, and Martin Luther, he who is Christ in the whole world has nothing more than he who is Christ.

Christ is all you need. It sets you free to give, to serve, to love. It's also really interesting.

I mean, when Jesus talks about washing other people's feet, it makes it very clear that in doing so, in serving, you are blessed. So something is going on here. As you serve and as you love, something in you changes, you are blessed, you become more like Jesus, you become more conformed to his image, and in doing so, you become more and more like who you truly were made to be.

So there's deep, deep blessing and richness and a life of freedom and joy that is simply not available to you and you will never experience if you don't have the courage to practice this sort of love.

So what does that look like as we pull it all together? What does that look like? Because it's easy to talk about it.

[30 : 18] I say look around. People keep this straight ahead. I don't think I'm going to look around. No, I'd rather not. Okay, look around.

These are the people you were called to love. This is your church, if you're part of this church, you're part of another church, then those are the people you're called to love. This is your community. This is the place where you have the opportunity to show love and to receive love. Now, it varies if you're very cynical about that and say, well, I've tried that a number of times and it wasn't particularly good. It can be difficult to love.

Let's call it spade of spade. We are all different. We bring our own challenges. We bring our own hang-ups. It's difficult to love in community.

Takes time. It takes effort. It takes getting to know people. It's difficult, but that's what we're called to be. Identifying mark of a true community of God's people is that they love each other.

[31 : 26] Again, I say there's a great freedom in that and to extend that you step back from that, to extend that you recoil from it and say, no, I don't want to do that.

I'm not saying this. Scripture is saying this. You're not stepping forward into the light. You're stepping back into the darkness. There are lots of ways to step into the darkness due to the physical, but an active decision to not to love, an active decision to hold on tight is a decision to step into the darkness.

It's not a good thing to do because it's not the way the world is going. We know that the victory is with Christ. We know that he has come. He's conquered darkness. He's conquered death. He's conquered sin. The only thing that remains is for our resurrected Savior to come again and he will. So we're given the opportunity as we anticipate that to wait for him and as we wait for him, we practice love.

We're going to finish there. I'm going to just read a couple of verses from Romans 13, which I think, again, it's quite interesting.

[32 : 39] If you start looking for light in the Bible, it's all over the place. So who are Paul is saying just what John is saying. Romans chapter 13 verses 8 and verses 11 to 12 and full credit to the IT team.

I only gave them this about 445, I think. So I'm very impressed that it's up there. Thank you. Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuous debt to love one another for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law and do this understanding the present time.

The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Amen.