

[MacLaren's Expositions](#)

John

'AS I HAVE LOVED'

[John 13:34](#) - [John 13:35](#).

Wishes from dying lips are sacred. They sink deep into memories and mould faithful lives. The sense of impending separation had added an unwonted tenderness to our Lord's address, and He had designated His disciples by the fond name of 'little children.' The same sense here gives authority to His words, and moulds them into the shape of a command. The disciples had held together because He was in their midst. Will the arch stand when the keystone is struck out? Will not the spokes fall asunder when the nave of the wheel is taken away? He would guard them from the disintegrating tendencies that were sure to set in when He was gone; and He would point them to a solace for His absence, and to a kind of substitute for His presence. For to love the brethren whom they see would be, in some sense, a continuing to love the Christ whom they had ceased to see. And so, immediately after He said: 'Whither I go ye cannot come,' He goes on to say: 'Love one another as I have loved you.'

He called this a 'new commandment,' though to love one's neighbour as one's self was a familiar commonplace amongst the Jews, and had a recognised position in Rabbinical teaching. But His commandment proposed a new object of love, it set forth a new measure of love, so greatly different from all that had preceded it as to become almost a new kind of love, and it suggested and supplied a new motive power for love. This commandment 'could give life' and fulfil itself. Therefore it comes to us as a 'new commandment'-even to us-and, unlike the words which preceded it, which we were considering in former sermons, it is wholly and freshly applicable to-day as in the ages that are passed. I ask you, first, to consider-

I. The new scope of the new commandment.

'Love one another.' The newness of the precept is realised, if we think for a moment of the new phenomenon which obedience to it produced. When the words were spoken, the then-known civilised Western world was cleft by great, deep gulfs of separation, like the crevasses in a glacier, by the side of which our racial animosities and class differences are merely superficial cracks on the surface. Language, religion, national animosities, differences of condition, and saddest of all, difference of sex, split the world up into alien fragments. A 'stranger' and an 'enemy' were expressed in one language, by the same word. The learned and the unlearned, the slave and his master, the barbarian and the Greek, the man and the woman, stood on opposite sides of the gulfs, flinging hostility across. A Jewish peasant wandered up and down for three years in His own little country, which was the very focus of narrowness and separation and hostility, as the Roman historian felt when he called the Jews the 'haters of the human race'; He gathered a few disciples, and He was crucified by a contemptuous Roman governor, who thought that the life of one fanatical Jew was a small price to pay for popularity with his troublesome subjects, and in a generation after, the clefts were being bridged and all over the Empire a strange new sense of unity was being breathed, and 'Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free,' male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves 'all one in Christ Jesus.' They were ready to break all other bonds, and to yield to the uniting forces that streamed out from His Cross. There never had been anything like it. No wonder that the world began to babble about sorcery, and

conspiracies, and complicity in unnameable vices. It was only that the disciples were obeying the 'new commandment,' and a new thing had come into the world—a community held together by love and not by geographical accidents or linguistic affinities, or the iron fetters of the conqueror. You sow the seed in furrows separated by ridges, and the ground is seamed, but when the seed springs the ridges are hidden, no division appears, and as far as the eye can reach, the cornfield stretches, rippling in unbroken waves of gold. The new commandment made a new thing, and the world wondered.

Now then, brethren, do not let us forget that, although to obey this commandment is in some respects a great deal harder to-day than it was then, the diverse circumstances in which Christian individuals and Christian communities are this day placed may modify the form of our obedience, but do not in the smallest degree weaken the obligation, for the individual Christian and for societies of Christians, to follow this commandment. The multiplication of numbers, the cessation of the armed hostility of the world, the great varieties in intellectual position in regard to the truths of Christianity, divergencies of culture, and many other things, are separating forces. But our Christianity is worth very little, if it cannot master these separating tendencies, even as in the early days of freshness, the Christianity that sprang in these new converts' minds mastered the far more powerful separating tendencies with which they had to contend.

Every Christian man is under the obligation to recognise his kindred with every other Christian man—his kindred in the deep foundations of his spiritual being, which are far deeper, and ought to be far more operative in drawing together, than the superficial differences of culture or opinion or the like, which may part us. The bond that holds Christian men together is their common relation to the one Lord, and that ought to influence their attitude to one another. You say I am talking commonplaces. Yes; and the condition of Christianity this day is the sad and tragical sign that the commonplaces need to be talked about, till they are rubbed into the conscience of the Church as they never have been before.

Do not let us suppose that Christian love is mere sentiment. I shall have to speak a word or two about that presently, but I would fain lift the whole subject, if I can, out of the region of mere unctuous words and gush of half-feigned emotion, which mean nothing, and would make you feel that it is a very practical commandment, gripping us hard, when our Lord says to us, 'Love one another.'

I have spoken about the accidental conditions which make obedience to this commandment difficult. The real reason which makes the obedience to it difficult is the slackness of our own hold on the Centre. In the measure in which we are filled with Jesus Christ, in that measure will that expression of His spirit and His life become natural to us. Every Christian has affinities with every other Christian, in the depths of his being, so as that he is a great deal more like his brother, who is possessor of 'like precious faith,' however unlike the two may be in outlook, in idiosyncrasy, and culture and in creed, than he is to another man with whom he may have a far closer sympathy in all these matters than he has with the brother in question, but from whom he is parted by this, that the one trusts and loves and obeys Jesus Christ, and the other does not. So, for individuals and for churches, the commandment takes this shape—Go down to the depths and you will find that you are closer to the Christian man or community which seems furthest from you, than you are to the non-Christian who seems nearest to you. Therefore, let your love follow your kinship, and your heart recognise the oneness that knits you together. That is a revolutionary commandment; what would become of our present organisations of Christianity if it were obeyed? That is a revolutionary commandment; what would become of our individual relations to the whole family who, in every place, and in many tongues, and with many creeds, call on Jesus as on their Lord, their Lord

and ours, if it were obeyed? I leave you to answer the question. Only I say the commandment has for its first scope all who, in every place, love the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is more than that involved in it. The very same principle which makes this love to one another imperative upon all disciples, makes it equally imperative upon every follower of Jesus Christ to embrace in a real affection all whom Jesus so loved as to die for them. If I am to love a Christian man because he and I love Christ, I am to love everybody, because Christ loves me and everybody, and because He died on the Cross for me and for all men. And so one of the other Apostles, or, at least, the letter which goes by his name, laid hold on the true connection when, instead of concentrating Christian affection on the Church, and letting the world go to the devil as an alien thing, he said: 'Add to your faith,' this, that, and the other, and 'brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, charity.' The particular does not exclude the general, it leads to the general. The fire kindled upon the hearth gives warmth to all the chamber. The circles are concentric, and the widest sweep is struck from the same middle point as the narrow. So the new commandment does not cut humanity into two halves, but gathers all diversity into one, and spreads the great reconciling of Christian love over all the antagonisms and oppositions of earth. Let me ask you to notice-

II. The example of the new commandment, 'As I have loved you.'

That solemn 'as' lifts itself up before us, shines far ahead of us, ought to draw us to itself in hope, and not to repel us from itself in despair. 'As I have loved'-what a tremendous thing for a man to stand up before his fellows, and say, 'Take Me as the perfect example of perfect love; and let My example-un-dimmed by the mists of gathering centuries, and un-weakened by the change of condition, and circumstance, fresh as ever after ages have passed, and closely-fitting as ever all varieties of human character and condition-stand before you; the ideal that I have realised, and you will be blessed in the proportion in which you seek, though you fail, to realise it!' There is, I venture to believe, only one aspect of Jesus Christ in which such a setting forth of Himself as the perfect Incarnation of perfect love is warrantable; and that is found in the old belief that His very birth was the result of His love, and that His death was the climax of that love. And if so, we have to turn to Bethlehem, and the whole life, and the Cross at its end, as being the Christ-given example and model for our love to our brethren.

What do we see there? I have said that there is too much of mere sickly sentimentality about the ordinary treatment of this great commandment, and that I desired to lift it out of that region into a far nobler, more strenuous, and difficult one. This is what we see in that life and in that death:-First of all-the activity of love-'Let us not love in words, but in deed and in truth'; then we see the self-forgetfulness of love-'Even Christ pleased not Himself'; then we see the self-sacrifice of love-'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' And in these three points, on which I would fain enlarge if I might, active love, self-oblivious love, self-sacrificing love, you have the pattern set for us all. Christian love is no mere sickly maiden, full of sentimental emotions and honeyed words. She is a strenuous virgin, girt for service, a heroine ready for dangers, and prepared to be a martyr if it be needful. Love's language is sacrifice. 'I give thee myself,' is its motto. And that is the pattern that is set before us all-'as I have loved you.'

I have tried to show you how the commandment was new in many particulars, and it is for ever new in this particular, that it is for ever before us, unattained, and drawing faithful hearts to itself, and ever opening out into new heroisms and, therefore, blessedness, of self-sacrifice, and ever leading us to confess the differences, deep,

tragic, sinful, between us and Him who-we sometimes think too presumptuously-we venture to say is our Lord and Master.

Did you ever see in some great picture gallery a copyist sitting in front of a Raffaele, and comparing his poor feeble daub, all out of drawing, and with little of the divine beauty that the master had breathed over his canvas, even if it preserved the mere mechanical outline? That is what you and I should do with our lives: take them and put them down side by side with the original. We shall have to do it some day. Had we better not do it now, and try to bring the copy a little nearer to the masterpiece; and let that 'as I have loved you' shine before us and draw us on to unattainable heights?

And now, lastly, we have here-

III. The motive power for obedience to the commandment.

That is as new as all the rest. That 'as' expresses the manner of the love, but it also expresses the motive and the power. It might be translated into the equivalent 'in the fashion in which,' or it might be translated into the equivalent 'since-' 'I have loved you.' The original might bear the rendering, 'that ye also may love one another.' That is to say, what keeps men from obeying this commandment is the instinctive self-regard which is natural to us all. There are muscles in the body which are so constructed that they close tightly; and the heart is something like one of these sphincter muscles-it shuts by nature, especially if there has been anything put inside it over which it can shut and keep it all to itself. But there is one thing that dethrones Self, and enthrones the angel Love in a heart, and that is, that into that heart there shall come surging the sense of the great love 'wherewith I have loved you.' That melts the iceberg; nothing else will.

That love of Christ to us, received into our hearts, and there producing an answering love to Him, will make us, in the measure in which we live in it and let it rule us, love everything and every person that He loves. That love of Jesus Christ, stealing into our hearts and there sweetening the ever-springing 'issues of life,' will make them flow out in glad obedience to any commandment of His. That love of Jesus Christ, received into our hearts, and responded to by our answering love, will work, as love always does, a magical transformation. A great monastic teacher wrote his precious book about The Imitation of Christ. 'Imitation' is a great word, 'Transformation' is a greater. 'We all,' receiving on the mirror of our loving hearts the love of Jesus Christ, 'are changed into the same likeness.' Thus, then, the love, which is our pattern, is also our motive and our power for obedience, and the more we bring ourselves under its influences, the more we shall love all those who are beloved by, and lovers of, Jesus.

That is the one foundation for a world knit together in the bonds of amity and concord. There have been attempts at brotherhood, and the guillotine has ended what was begun in the name of 'fraternity.' Men build towers, but there is no cement between the bricks, unless the love of Christ holds them together, and therefore Babel after Babel comes down about the ears of its builders. But notwithstanding all that is dark to-day, and though the war-clouds are lowering, and the hearts of men are inflamed with fierce passions, Christ's commandment is Christ's promise; and though the vision tarry, it will surely come. So even to-day Christian men ought to stand for Christ's peace, and for Christ's love. The old commandment which we have had from the beginning, is the new commandment that fits to-day as it fits all the ages. It is a dream, say some. Yes, a dream; but a morning dream which comes true. Let us do the little we can to make it true, and to bring about the day

when the flock of men will gather round the one Shepherd, who loved them to the death, and who has bid them and helped them to 'love one another as'-and since-'He has loved them.'