

FRIENDS OF JESUS

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Jesus said, “*You are my friends if you do what I command.*”

What has Jesus commanded? *What is the most important commandment in the Bible?*

Most of you agree that it is: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength.*” And, “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Can I tell you that I also thought that and taught that? But, as a result of more careful reading, my thinking has changed. Let me be clear: I did *not* say that God has changed, but I have changed my thinking because of what I found in the Bible.

The Word of God should be able to do that—change our thinking. Sometimes we have just a child’s understanding and we need to exchange it for a more adult understanding. Let me show you what I found and see what you think...

The line most of us thought of is found in Matthew 22:

Matthew 22:34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees with his reply, they met together to question him again. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”

³⁷ Jesus replied, “ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ (Deut 6:5) ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Lev 19:18) ⁴⁰ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

Jesus draws his answer from the Sh’ma, which was recited twice each day by the Jews. This is the heart of the Law of Moses. So much so, that Jesus said, “*The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.*” Everything God required in the Old Covenant hung on these two hooks.

Mark also recalls this encounter:

Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

³² The teacher of religious law replied, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”

³⁴ Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

But notice: Jesus told the Jewish teacher, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” Not far, but not in. The fundamental meaning of the word, sin, is to miss the bullseye. Close doesn’t win the prize.

Paul concurs:

Romans 13:8 Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. ⁹ For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.” These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.

Problem: Nobody has ever loved God with all his being. Nobody has ever loved her neighbor as herself. So nobody can possibly merit eternal life.

Luke actually records the most moving account:

Luke 10:25 One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question:

“Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

²⁷ The man answered, “ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

²⁸ “Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

What we cannot miss in each record of this encounter is that Jesus was speaking with a Jewish teacher. The context of their conversation was the Jewish religion and its sacred Scriptures (the Old Covenant).

The Jewish lawyer asked what “he should do” to inherit eternal life, for the Jews (as so many still today) were persuaded that it was only by the good they did that God would open heaven’s door to them.

Jesus answered his question from the context of the man's understanding: the law of Moses. This man recognized what was at the heart of the law's demands, and Jesus said, *"Do this and you will live!"*

In other words, if you will actually do what you said (and not just talk about it), you will have eternal life. But then...

²⁹ The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Why would the man want to justify his actions? Jesus just told him how to act in order to win eternal life. Evidently, what he heard Jesus say made him uncomfortable, so he wanted to justify his (less than stellar) actions.

³⁰ Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

³¹ "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³² A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

³³ "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. ³⁴ Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

³⁶ "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

*³⁷ The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."
Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."*

Jesus clearly emphasizes in that passage that love *acts*. It does not just feel. In fact, sometimes loves acts in contrast to one's feelings or habits or traditions, for the sake of another person. This is why Christ could *command* us to act in love. We don't have to wait for a feeling to move us, if we have the word of Christ telling us plainly what to do.

Jesus is emphatic about this in John's record:

John 15:9 "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! ¹² This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. ¹³ There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

¹⁷ *This is my command: Love each other.*

Jesus is not referencing the law of Moses here. These words were spoken on the last night that He spent with His disciples. Gathered for a final meal together, Jesus opened His heart wide to express some of His deepest and most intimate thoughts. They shared bread together (*“This is my body, which is broken for you”*). Then, He took the cup and said, *“This is the new covenant in my blood.”*

After nearly four years with them, Jesus introduced them to the New Covenant. It had been announced hundreds of years earlier by the Jewish prophet, Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 31:31 “The day is coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³² This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the Lord.

³³ “But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,” says the Lord. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

At last, the time had come. The Christ had come. The moment had come. *“This is the New Covenant.”*

It was the same momentous night, when Jesus announced the “new commandment”—*His* new commandment.

When God established His covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai, He also gave him commands, written on stone tablets. But that was then.

This is now. Jesus ushered in the New Covenant with a new commandment—*His* commandment: *“Love each other in the same way I have loved you.”*

If we thought the Old Covenant commands—to love God and love your neighbor—were hard, This one is impossible!

I don’t have that kind of love in me. Loving with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength is more than I can muster. Now, loving by laying down my life for others is way beyond that! And if the “others” happen to be my enemies, I cannot even imagine...!

But that’s just why the new command was not given until the New Covenant was announced. The New Covenant doesn’t just tell us what is expected of us; it puts something into us that wasn’t there before!

Ezekiel said it plainly:

Ezekiel 36:26 And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.

As the time drew near for Jesus to surrender His life in a cascading torrent of divine love, His disciples felt untethered—set adrift, without a map, without a sail, and without a rudder. Jesus did His best to assure them that He would never leave them alone. He told them:

John 16:7 But in fact, it is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate—the Holy Spirit—won't come. If I do go away, then I will send Him to you.

A New Covenant required a New Commandment, and it also required a New Connection—not God's words alone, but the Spirit behind those words. He gave us His Spirit! He has come to live within us, so that He might assure us that we can be and do more than we ever could on our own. He has come to impart HIS ability in our weakness. He hasn't come to make you stronger, but to show HIS strength through YOUR weakness.

The New Commandment that was utterly impossible, *HE* makes possible, because we no longer rely on the human love that we brought with us, but on the love of God that He imparts.

Romans 5:5 For we know how dearly God loves us, because He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.

That's His job! That's why He has come to you. To FILL your heart with HIS love.

You can't do this without Him!

We have a NEW Covenant with God, guided by a NEW Commandment from His heart, and empowered by a NEW Connection with His Spirit. Will you receive that today?

There is only one thing you need to focus on in order to please God—not a hundred things or a thousand things; just ONE thing.

Love each other, just as Jesus has loved you.

And you can do that now, because the Spirit of Jesus lives in you.

If you love each other in that way, you'll be loving God at the same time. Didn't Jesus say, "*Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to Me*"?

What would change in your life if you set your focus on this one thing? Your joy? Your peace? Your relationships? Your sense of fulfillment? Your sense of significance? Your sense of God?

Would you choose to be a friend of Jesus today? To do what makes Him smile? To obey what He asked you to do?

Next Sunday, we'll revisit this topic, to explore just what it looks like to live this way. I'll roll out some practical steps from the Word of God that we can take, and we may just learn a whole new way of praying.

Did you just find out today that God really loves you? That Jesus loves you passionately and persistently?

Did you learn that God wants to help you be successful (instead of waiting for you to fail)? That God is for you, not against you?

Are you ready to say "yes" to Jesus, and put your whole life into His hands?

Are you ready to invite His Spirit to fill you and work through you?

It's time to do business with God! You need to approach His throne of grace with bold courage today, and lay hold of God's promise for your life.