

A New Commandment

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 12th of March 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A New Commandment, and is from John chapter 13, verses 21 to 35. Let's pray that God helps us to understand what we've just heard read. Almighty God, we thank you that you do speak to us through the words of Scripture.

We pray that you'll do so now, not only that we may understand these words, but that also our lives will be changed by them. Amen.

Stories of betrayal and love fill our bookshops and cinemas. Whether it's a spy during the war who betrays his or her country for ideological reasons, or whether it's a corrupt policeman who betrays his colleagues for money or gain, or a jilted lover betraying an ex-partner for reasons of revenge or spite, or perhaps a greedy employee betraying his or her boss for gain.

[1 : 34] Sometimes the betrayer is an honourable person. Other times it is the betrayed person who is honourable.

Sometimes the betrayer is the hero, the rescuer. Other times it is the one who is betrayed who is the hero.

And today's passage falls into the latter category. Jesus is the honourable one, the upright one. He is betrayed.

The betrayer is Judas, of course. A greedy treasurer. Now most stories or films that involve betrayal are fairly poignant.

And this is no exception. In this case, the one who betrays is in the place of highest honour at the meal. Let me explain how the people would have been seated at this last supper of Jesus, the night before he died.

[2 : 46] They wouldn't have eaten at a table like we would eat at, with chairs. It would be a low table, not unlike, say, one of our coffee tables, but much bigger.

And they would seat three sides of this table, like a big capital letter U. And at the point of turning at the U would be Jesus, probably.

And to the host's left would be the place of highest honour. And people would recline at this table by leaning on their left elbow and feeding themselves using their right hand.

And their legs would drift outwards from the table, as I explained briefly last week. So there's a sense in which, around the circle, they are all facing in the same direction.

Jesus, in a sense, at the centre. The place of highest honour at the left. Now we're told in this passage here that the disciple whom Jesus loved, or the beloved disciple, who's not named in this gospel, but most people think, probably rightly so, that he is John, the author of this gospel, and one of the twelve apostles.

[4 : 01] He is the one who, we're told, leans on Jesus. That seems to imply that he's on Jesus' right. So that as Jesus is leaning here and feeding himself with his right hand, the next person around in front of him is John, who perhaps can lean back and over his shoulder can talk to Jesus, perhaps quietly.

It also seems that Judas is at the place of highest honour, on Jesus' left, in a sense behind him, the person on whom Jesus could lean back and rest his head.

Because we see that Jesus dipped a morsel of something in some food, possibly bread, or maybe it's bitter herbs as part of the Passover meal, and passed it to Judas.

Now unless Jesus got up and walked around the table, which is a possibility, Judas is probably to Jesus' left, the place of highest honour.

It's a sign of affection to dip a morsel in some liquid or sauce and pass it to somebody else to eat. This seems to show the affection with which Jesus is treating Judas at this point.

[5 : 28] That makes the betrayal all the more poignant. But doubly so, because Jesus knows what Judas is about to do. Jesus is not ignorant.

He's not being fooled or deceived by Judas' probable outward show of loyalty. Jesus is not blindly trusting of Judas.

And though Jesus is fully human, his knowledge exceeds that of everyday human beings. He knows that Judas is about to betray him.

He's already said that at this meal earlier on. So Jesus has said in verse 10, passage we looked at last week, one who has bathed does not need to wash except for the feet, but is entirely clean.

And you are clean, though not all of you, for he knew who was to betray him. And then again in verse 18, I am not speaking of all of you.

[6 : 36] I know whom I've chosen, but it is to fulfill the scripture. The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. I tell you this now before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.

Clearly Jesus anticipates that one person, and he knows who, will betray him. And so the way that he treats Judas with affection, and tenderness, and honour at this meal, heightens the sense of betrayal that is going on.

Having said all that, Jesus is nonetheless deeply agitated. So the opening verse of tonight's passage, verse 21 says, after saying this about the fact that he's about to be betrayed by somebody, Jesus was troubled in spirit, stirred up on the insides.

No doubt there are times when you've felt like that, where your stomach seems to be a sort of roaring mess. You know you're not quite going to vomit, but you're stirred up on the inside.

Jesus is agitated, anxious, upset, etc., because of what is about to happen. To the end, Jesus loves even his betrayer.

[8 : 01] You may remember last week, how the chapter began by introducing the theme of love. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

He loved them to the end of his life, and he loved them to the full, to the extreme. He loved them utterly. And Judas is included as an object of that love, despite the fact that Jesus knew that he was about to betray him.

At no point does Jesus give Judas any reason for betrayal. At no point does Jesus give any grounds for Judas justifying his betrayal.

It's not as though Jesus has singled out Judas for poor attention. He's not being rude to him. He's not thrust him to the end of the table because he's about to betray him.

He's not forced him to wash their feet. Jesus has done that himself, of course. At no point does Jesus show anything less than love to Judas.

[9 : 11] Why then does he betray Jesus? We're not told to the full. Some hypothesize that Judas was a dissatisfied political person, what was called a zealot, one who wanted the overthrow of the Romans, and they were prepared to see force to do that.

And Jesus has gone about for three years and has shown anything but force. He's now come into Jerusalem. Judas thought maybe this is the time, and it's not. And now at last he's given up on him. Perhaps that's the case, but we're not told. We are told that Judas was greedy, that he was the treasurer of the common purse of Jesus and his disciples. And it seems that he probably stole from that purse.

But other hints are given as well. The beginning of this chapter in verse 2, we're told that Satan entered Judas' heart. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray him.

And the same thing happens in tonight's passage in verse 27. After he received the morsel, the piece of bread that Jesus had dipped, Satan entered into him.

[10 : 36] Could it even be also that God has something to do with this? Certainly the betrayal of Jesus, though an horrific act, is part of God's own plan for Jesus' life.

So it could be that to some extent or other, the reason why Judas betrayed Jesus was due to Judas' own greed and sin, Satan's involvement in his heart, and maybe even God's own purposes, maybe hardening Judas' heart, though we're not told that explicitly.

Having said all that, it remains true to the end that Judas is responsible for his sin. He cannot say, Satan made me do it.

The devil made me do it. It's not my fault. It's the devil's fault. Blame him. Whenever anyone opposes the work of God, whenever anyone opposes Jesus, whenever anyone, either in the gospel, seeks to avert the cross, or since Jesus' death, seems to denounce it or sideline it, then we can say that Satan is at work.

But Satan is never an excuse for the person who thus pulls down the cross or puts it to one side or seeks to avert it or renounces or refuses God's work.

[12:07] Satan is never a cop-out for our sin. We can never stand before God and say, Satan made me do all that sin. It's not my fault.

It's Satan's fault. Adam and Eve tried that with God and they failed. Adam blamed Eve or Eve blamed the serpent and God made it clear to them that it was their fault.

Yes, the serpent's fault too. The same with Judas. It's not Satan's fault entirely. Judas is fully to blame.

And God won't be fooled by Judas' attempt perhaps to say, Satan made me do it, just as he wasn't fooled by Adam and Eve's attempt to pass the blame, nor will he be fooled by ours either.

Perhaps it's best to think on Judas not as the archetype of evil, but as there but for the grace of God go I. For we know that the heart of people is desperately sinful in its core, apart from the grace of God.

[13:17] And any act of sin in a sense betrays Jesus. Jesus' announcement that he's about to be betrayed stuns his disciples into silence.

We read in verse 22 that they looked at one another uncertain of whom he was speaking. You can imagine the pregnant pause as they look around the table, wondering who it is.

The facial expressions, maybe even pointing. The shrugs of shoulders. They're stunned. They're anxious perhaps that it might even be them.

When they say to Jesus, Lord, who is it? It's a sense of, do you mean me? They're thinking in terms of somebody who's inadvertently going to betray Jesus.

Such as when you pass on a secret to somebody and they swear to you that they'll keep the secret, but by accident they let it slip. But no, Jesus doesn't have in mind some inadvertent betrayal.

[14:30] Somebody has schemed in his heart to do this. The disciples ought not to be concerned that it's them perhaps. Jesus says to John that he will give a sign of who the betrayer is by dipping this morsel and then passing it to somebody.

Presumably, John alone knows that that is the sign because John's leaning on Jesus. Maybe he's just whispered it to him. He does the sign. Judas later goes out.

The disciples don't know where he's gone or why he's gone. They think maybe he's gone to give money to the poor or to make a special offering as you would do at Passover. That is, it seems that this sign has been for John's benefit only, not for all the disciples.

The disciples remain confused about what's going on. The only one who's in control here is Jesus. Certainly not the disciples.

They have no idea what's going on. But not even Judas. For humanly speaking, we might say that at one level, Jesus is a victim of Judas' betrayal.

[15:42] Judas leads Jesus to a trap. He's stuck. Judas has pulled the strings and is in control. But Jesus always makes it clear that he lays down his life.

Nobody takes it from him. He lays it down. He said that back in chapter 10. And that is exactly what is happening here as well. For notice that when Judas actually leaves, he does so at Jesus' command.

What you're about to do, go and do quickly. And Judas leaves. An ironic obedience, really. Judas thinks that he's in control in effect.

But it's actually Jesus who is in control to the very end. It is he who lays down his life. It is he who dies of his own accord on that first Good Friday.

He's never an unfortunate victim. Judas leaves. After receiving the piece of bread, we read in verse 30, he immediately went out.

[16:57] And it was night. Bad things happen at night. Whenever you see a movie with betrayal or evil happening, it's more often than not at night.

Watched a murder film on Friday night. They're always occurring at night. In the dark. When you, the viewer, couldn't quite work out who was the murderer in the park there.

So you kept guessing to the very end. But that's a loaded comment in John. He's not just telling us the time of day. It was night.

Light has come into the world, John said, what Jesus has said earlier in the gospel, but men loved darkness because their deeds were evil. And it was night.

Because Judas loves darkness for his deeds are evil. In fact, several times in this gospel, the same sort of theme of light and darkness has been sounded.

[18:04] Jesus said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. And Judas leaves and it's night.

He's walking in darkness. And then just in the preceding chapter, in chapter 12, Jesus said to them, the light is with you for a little longer.

Walk while you have the light so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going.

And so true was that statement of Judas at this point. It was night. It was dark. He didn't really know where he was going.

His deeds were evil. He'd refused Jesus' light. And he's walking off to hell. Deep darkness dwelt in the soul of Judas that night.

[19:15] After Judas departs, there's a sense in which the machinery leading to Jesus' death is now fully operational. It's almost an inevitability about it.

The arrest, the trial, and the death have begun. Now the hour has come. The hour for him to die. The hour of both dark death, but also the hour of brilliant glory. When we think about glorifying God, we tend to think in terms of brightness, success, and achievement.

Before the service, we were praying for the service and those taking part, and we prayed that what would happen tonight would bring glory to God. And it's a good thing to pray. And part of behind that would be that things would work well, and people would speak well, and sing well, and play well, and all that sort of stuff.

We can't imagine that praying a prayer that this service will bring glory to God will end up in fisticuffs across the pews, or the church building falling down in an earthquake, or something like that.

[20:31] We tend to think in things that will be successful and smooth. Sometimes we think in terms of God's glory being revealed in the beauty of the creation. The psalmist said that in Psalm 19, that the creation spells out or tells us about the glory of God.

And sometimes when people are in the Australian bush and they look up to a sunset or trees or birds, they'll talk about isn't God's glory wonderful, or something to that effect. Sometimes people talk in terms of seeing God's glory when there are miracles performed.

Somebody miraculously cured, for example. When signs or wonders will happen in a church or amongst Christian people. Sometimes God's glory is referred to in terms of beautiful and majestic music, with towering church spires and overwhelming cathedrals and so on.

I'm not wishing to put those things down. But God's glory is a little bit more fundamental than that. God's glory is about His presence being revealed.

Several points in the Old Testament, the glory of God filled the temple. Before that, it filled the tent, which was like a portable prototype of the temple.

[21:50] Isaiah saw a vision of God in the temple and His overwhelming glory filling the temple and He fell down prostrate before it. They're all pictures of blinding light and dazzling brilliance.

How then can John's gospel and Jesus refer to Jesus' death as being glorious? If God's glory is about the revelation of God and His presence, then nowhere is God more clearly revealed than in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Because there is the clearest picture in world history of God's love and God's holiness come together. There is the clearest revelation ever of God's mercy and His wrath together.

There, in Jesus' death on the cross, the heart of God beats visibly. His pulse is pulsing for everybody to see.

He's revealed His heart to the world there more fully than at any other point, more fully than in the beauty of the creation, more fully than in the majestic dazzling brilliance of a vision in a temple, more fully than wonderful church music or towering church buildings or miraculous cures, more fully than full churches and mass conversions and revival in God's church.

[23 : 35] The place where God's heart is seen bared to the world more clearly than anywhere else is when Jesus hung on a cross to die.

That is the supreme moment of divine self-disclosure. There are times on TV news and current affairs when I cringe when grief-stricken people are interviewed.

I sort of want to say to the intrusion of the media, stand back and let these people grieve privately. Don't interview them and ask them, how do you feel that your whole family's just been wiped out in a car accident or a flat?

I mean, we know, well we don't know how they feel, but we don't want to know in a sense. We want them to be private and protected. That intrusion of grief-stricken people is sometimes a bit cringy, isn't it?

But God chose to publicly air his grief, his broken heart on the cross when Jesus died. It is there that we penetrate to the depths of God more than anywhere else in this world.

[24 : 49] And that is why there is the glory of God seen to its full. Even though it's a hideous, humiliating death, even though on the surface it looks to be defeat and disgrace and shame, even though it looks at one level that Jesus is just a victim and the powers of darkness and evil have triumphed, the truth is that there on the cross is God's glory fully seen.

sin. Because there his holiness and love come together to deal with the sin and evil of this world, to extend unconditional love to people, even enemies and betrayers in this world, to welcome them into God's heavenly presence through the death of Jesus Christ for our sins.

There and there alone is the clearest picture of that. There is glory to the full. Not only is Jesus glorified, but God the Father in heaven is glorified because as Jesus reveals God's heart, both are glorified together.

It really is an inseparable glory where Jesus glorifies the Father so the Father glorifies the Son.

That's why Jesus said when Judas left that room, now the Son of Man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him.

If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. He's speaking about the cross, but beyond that too, to Jesus return to heaven.

[26 : 41] God this is the hour that John's gospel has anticipated, overtly from chapter 2, implicitly from the very opening part of the gospel.

There's been a steady build-up to this revelation of glory. Ever since John said back in chapter 1 verse 14 that Jesus has come and dwelt among us revealing God's glory or full of glory, we've been leading inexorably to this point of his death.

That's where John is right heading towards. That's what his gospel is all about. That's what the signs and miracles were pointing to. That's what Jesus teaching was pointing to, to this hour that has now come.

The cross you see is not an accident. It's not a hideous mistake, a miscalculation by God in the eternal economy. It's not a bad event from which somehow God bleans some good.

it is where God is deliberately heading. Nor is the cross a disastrous defeat, a triumph of evil or Satan or Judas.

[27 : 50] It is God's success to reveal his own character and heart and to accomplish his purposes for this world and for us.

imagine you have 24 hours or less to live. What would you do?

What would you say? What are the most important things on your mind and on your heart to tell your friends or your family or to write down for future posterity?

Judas is gone and Jesus is left with 11 faithful disciples. He has just a few hours left to live and with his disciples maybe just some minutes before they leave for the garden of Gethsemane to pray. He's going to prepare them for his departure. But the very first thing he tells them about, the most important thing of all then that he tells them to do is to love each other.

[28 : 58] In contrast to Judas who betrayed, they are to love. Now love has always been a command of God. In the Old Testament, the Old Testament law was summed up by the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.

So important was that verse that they'd write it on their doorposts or bind it on their wrists or on their foreheads. Love was the supreme commandment. And as Jesus rightly explained the Old Testament law to an inquirer, he said that that is the first and great commandment and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Again, quoting from the Old Testament, this time from Leviticus 19. But now Jesus tells his disciples that he gives them a new commandment to love.

Well if love is the sum and total and goal of the old commandment, what's so new here? Why does he call this a new commandment that you must love one another?

The new thing is the standard that is defined for love. I give you a new commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you.

[30 : 16] Love finds its definition and model in Jesus' death. The cross defines what true love is. It's sacrificial, it's humble, it's active, it's unconditional, it includes enemies and betrayers as well as friends.

It is love without limit, love to the end, love to the max as we saw last week. this is love so amazing, so divine.

This is love divine, all loves excelling. This is an amazing love. This is not the sort of love that our pop songs are about.

What kind of love is this that gave itself for me? I am the guilty one, yet I go free. What kind of love is this?

A love I've never known. I didn't even know his name. What kind of love is this? What kind of man is this that died in agony?

[31 : 34] He who had done no wrong was crucified for me. What kind of man is this who laid aside his throne that I may know the love of God?

What kind of man is this? By grace I have been saved. It is the gift of God. He destined me to be his son.

Such is his love. love. No eye has ever seen, nor ear has ever heard, nor has the heart of man conceived.

What kind of love is this? is that how you love your husband or wife? Is that how you love your parents, your children?

Is that how you love your grumpy next door neighbour? Is that how you love your school teachers at school who treat you badly or unfairly? Is that how you love the old people at church or the noisy youth at church?

[32 : 46] Is that how you love the uncool person, the newcomer you've never met, the person who sits next to you on the train, the person who's rude to you on the end of the telephone, perhaps the grumpy shop attendant, is that how you love them?

It's how Jesus loved you. It's how Jesus loved Judas. Sadly, Christianity is no longer known in our world for its love.

And that is to our shame. It ought to be. Jesus commanded us to love so that by our love this world may know that we are his disciples.

We have no excuse but to love each and every one to the full as Jesus has modelled. Without limit, without ruling anybody out, Jesus' love was for his enemies as well as his friends, for his betrayers like Judas and for us as well.

There is never any excuse not to love like he did. Ben