

**“If You Love Me...”**  
**John 14:15–21**  
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Many of you know that Ian and Brittany have moved from Memphis to Philadelphia to do their post-docs. It’s a bit of a drive from here, but it’s closer than Memphis, and they are happy there, even if their living space is much smaller. We saw their new place for the first time last weekend and had a wonderful time with them.

But before we planned this trip, Ian said something on a Facetime call that caused Dana, Brittany, and me to laugh. “If you come to see us in Philadelphia, you need to know how narrow the streets are and how difficult the parking is.” If? He wanted to warn us and he didn’t want to put pressure on us to visit them, but “*if* we come to see them?!” If?!

“Did you think you were getting away from us?” I said. I assured him that his mother had not only found an Airbnb in Philadelphia that was dog-friendly; she had found one on their street, in fact, on their block that would take our dogs! There was no “if” about it!

I wonder if Jesus’ first disciples feel this way about the statement he makes to them in our reading from John. I wonder if we sometimes feel this way. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” he says. If? Isn’t love for Jesus a given for his followers?

I remember worshiping with a mission team from our church and Hayes Barton Baptist Church in Kenya in 2012. When each person from the village of Sisit with whom we built a suspension bridge got up to speak, pray, or sing, they would first say with a broad and genuine smile, “I love Jesus!” Don’t we all?

Well, in scripture, love for Christ is not expressed that often. The faithful love God but have faith in Jesus, believe in him, follow him, far more often than they express love for him. But in John, the love Gospel, there is much more talk of love. After his resurrection, Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” much to Peter’s consternation.

It is very much like what happens in our text today. “If you love me...” sounds a lot like, “Do you love me?” and like Peter in John 21, we want to say, “Of course, we do! There is no ‘if’ about it!” But then Jesus goes on to say, “you will keep my commandments,” somewhat like he says to Peter, “Feed my sheep.” And again, we say, “Of course, we will...” though with a little less conviction. We may need to know what commandments we are talking about here.

What if Jesus says to us something like what he says to the Rich Ruler in Luke 18, that we must sell all we have and then follow him? What if he is serious when he talks about losing our lives in order to find them? We may want some clarity about which commandments Jesus is talking about as an expression of, if not a condition for, love.

The immediate context in John is about things like love and service. In John 13, Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, like a common servant, and then says to them, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” He goes on to say, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” So, our willingness to serve and love one another, as Jesus serves and loves, in practical and self-giving ways, is surely included in the commandments we are to keep or fulfill.

And this alone is a challenge, it is nothing to make light of, but Jesus says many other things that sound like commandments. He tells us to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us. He tells us to forgive those who harm us and reconcile with those who have something against us before offering our gifts to God. He tells us that if someone tries to take our coat, we should give them our cloak as well. He tells us to feed the hungry and give the thirsty something to drink, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick and visit the imprisoned... among other things, many other things.

All these things sound like commandments. None of them seems optional. A cartoon pictures Moses coming down the mountain with two stone tablets. The caption, which expressed the thoughts of one man in the crowd, reads, “It sounds too threatening. How about ‘The Ten Recommendations’?” Jesus’ commandments are not recommendations,

he declares quite a few of them, and then he says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Do we love him in this way?

The good news is — God in Christ loves us first. Our love is a response to this love. And we do not have to love Jesus in our own strength alone. Jesus says in our text that he will not leave us orphaned. Another Advocate for us like him will come, the Spirit of truth, and she will abide with us, live within us, help us to love.

But Jesus is saying that love is expressed in faithful actions. It is not simply about warm and fuzzy feelings or genuine thoughts of adoration. It’s not even about what we say we believe about Jesus. In The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that not everyone who says to him “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, only the one who does the will of his Father. Jesus says he will declare to the others, “I never knew you (Matthew 7:21-23).” Faithfulness is about doing the will of God. Loving Jesus is about keeping his commandments.

So, what exactly does this look like? Loving Jesus begins with our willingness to embrace a life of service and love. It is not the way of this world. We live in time of heightened self-interest and downright meanness. Taking care of number one is the goal and basic human decency is rare. People shoot each other for little or no reason. Simple posts on social media become targets of hateful response. The very mention of a different opinion on any number of issues can send people into a tirade of accusations. If we embrace a life of service and love, put others first, treat others with kindness, we will be swimming upstream, but in the process, we will be offering the best witness to our faith.

Church people have suggested that many different things set us apart. A woman in a church I served said you know who the Christians are because they are the ones who let you out in traffic... Many equate Christian life with not doing certain things like drinking, smoking, dancing, playing cards; and there is wisdom in some of this, though also the risk of coming to believe that God is against anything that looks like it might be fun! But the defining actions Jesus talks about are service and love. As the song says, they will know we are Christians not by our correct views or perfect piety, but by our love.

Service and love shape the life of this church. We care for each other in times of need, not perfectly, but with constant effort, intentionality, and sensitivity. We serve others through the clothing ministry, Toy Joy, Habitat builds, partnership mission work, and many other ways. And our children learn the way of service and love not just through studies and music but through mission projects and by getting to know older members. In all these ways, we express our love for Jesus.

We also express our love for Jesus by taking seriously his commandments about forgiveness and reconciliation. It is not the way of this world either. Even in the church where we pray each week, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” genuine forgiveness is rare. It is not often that people take responsibility for harming others. “*If* I have done anything to offend you...” is not way to begin a confession! “If” is yet again a problematic word. But even when people take responsibility, how often is forgiveness practiced, genuine forgiveness, not the kind that seeks to use the occasion to gain emotional advantage, but the kind that restores health to a relationship?

But it does happen. I remember two men in a church I served who had been at odds for decades. I’m not sure they remembered what drove them apart. It involved some difference of opinion on a church decision they couldn’t remember, but they remembered that they held onto a grudge... until one Sunday they paid attention to a biblical text, the story about Jacob and Esau reconciling, and they were moved to not just tears but forgiveness and reconciliation. It does happen and is needed between people and nations. And it’s how we express love for Jesus.

There is at least one other way we express such love — in our response to human need. As a biblical scholar once said, “Place a mouse before a cat and you discover what a cat is. Place a person in need before a Christian and you discover what a Christian is.” Jesus responds to people in need with compassion and he calls us to follow him. Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and those in prison, he says. He has come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. And he has called us to follow him. When we do, we express our love for him.

We fulfill a part of this commandment in the kind of direct service we have named — through the clothing ministry, Toy Joy, Housing All, etc. But another part of this calling is addressed in the current issue of *First Foundations* which has the theme “Advocate.” I hope you will read it carefully. It includes thoughtful reflections from a diversity of FBC members for whom advocacy of one kind or another has become a central calling. They focus on different concerns and have different reasons for involvement in advocacy, but they all address the basic challenge of Proverbs 31:8 Noel Tucker names — to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.

That’s what we did in co-hosting a meeting on affordable housing last week with One Wake and Pullen Memorial Baptist Church. That’s what members like Bob and Judy Page and CBF field personnel Kim and Marc Wyatt have done over the years for immigrants and refugees. It’s what the Andersons do for people living in rural poverty not very far from here. Meeting an immediate need is a part of our calling, but so is addressing the underlying social and systemic realities that create or intensify needs. As a social work pioneer once said, after helping person after person climb out of a ditch, might it make sense to try to fill in the ditch? Doing that requires two things — advocacy and empowerment, speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves and freeing them to embrace their own agency in this world.

Lest all of this seems unreasonable, we might consider on this Mother’s Day how we express love for our mothers. Gifts are lovely, thoughtful gifts even more so. Simply remembering them, if they are gone; dropping by, making a call, or sending a card if they are living; makes a difference. But what do our mothers really want most? For us to be happy and to return their love, mostly by living in the ways they have taught us and thus affirming the things they value, confirming that their lives matter to us. God in Christ asks no more and no less.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” says Jesus. Or as the hymn text puts it, “I love you, my Jesus, I love you, my Lord; I love you my Savior, I love you, my God; I love you, I love you, and that you well know; but how much I love you my actions will show.”