

“One Another”
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This has been an intense week. Of course, the election was held on Tuesday, but the intensity hasn't stopped. And it feels like the last few years have been intense. This week just seems to be the culmination of a lot of intense debates, heated political rhetoric, and various groups of people shouting past each other.

This past week, certain people were relieved and exultant. Their candidate won. Others are in despair. Their candidate lost. And some of these people are saying that they need to work harder, to get better organized, and to build up their communities.

I understand the emotions. Some people are very disappointed. Some are afraid. Some are happy. We should expect such a wide range of emotions in a country that is deeply divided. And I understand that if people are not eternally-minded, they will think that elections are all-important. If this life is all we have, then we are going to think that the government plays a very weighty role in our lives. That is, if we don't think government is *the* most important thing in our lives. And whether we feel the government is on our side or not will determine whether an election brings us joy or pain.

But Christians should have a different reaction. As the apostle Paul wrote, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). But Jesus has risen from the grave, in a body that can never die again. And this shows that God is committed to his creation. One day, God will refashion this world so that there will be no death in it. So, Christians are eternally-minded. We realize that this life is not all there is. We realize that every government has an expiration date.

We also should realize that the church is where God displays his glory. After all, the church is the temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:21–22). The church is the light of the world (Matt. 5:13). Yes, Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), but he told his disciples they are the light of the world. Now that Jesus is in heaven, he shines his light through his church. Also, God displays his manifold wisdom through the church (Eph. 3:10). The church will never die (Matt. 16:18).

So, while we may be encouraged or distressed by what is happening in our government, we should realize that the church is a greater priority. The United States of America will never be

the body of Christ. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts will never be his bride. But we, the church, are both. If we want to make the world a better place, we need to be a healthy, faithful church.

If we want God's light to shine more brightly in this dark world, we need to focus on being a healthy church. We need to know how we're supposed to function, how we're supposed to get along with one another.

This morning, I want to talk about what the Bible says regarding how Christians should live and worship with one another. Of course, there are plenty of passages that speak about how Christians should live together and love one another, but the key passages are the ones that use the language of "one another." By my count, there are at least thirty-five verses in the New Testament that are both commands to Christians and that use the phrase "one another." These verses don't include historical uses of "one another," such as when people are described in the Gospels and the book of Acts as talking to or looking at "one another." These are verses that apply to Christians today. While we don't have time to read through every single "one another" verse in the New Testament, we find that these verses can be placed into one of eight categories. And I want to talk about them all.

The first major category, the one that encompasses all the others, is love. We are supposed to love one another.¹ Jesus told his disciples this on the night before he was crucified. In John 15, he told his disciples that he is the vine and they are the branches. They need to abide in him to have life and bear good fruit. This is, in part, what Jesus said to them. I'll read John 15:9–17:

⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. ¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father

¹ The verses that tell us to love one another (or be kind to one another) are John 15:12; Rom. 12:10; Eph. 4:2, 32; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 Pet. 4:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12; 2 John 5.

in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.²

Notice the links in the chain of thought that Jesus has. He says the Father loves him, and as the Father loves the Son, so should all who are united to Jesus love each other. If we really love Jesus, we'll obey his commandments and his commandment is that we love each other.

That's pretty clear. Love flows from God to us and if we love God, that love will also flow from and through us to one other. Our motivation to love and our example of love is our experience of God's love for us. He loved us first, and we love him in return, and if we love him, we'll obey his commandments, including his command to love. We will want to obey that commandment. We won't find it burdensome. I don't think anyone will object to any of that.

Everyone seems to like talking about love. The world is full of talk about love. We have love songs. We hear speeches about love. We have bumper sticks that affirm the goodness and necessity of love. But when we hear that talk, we are often left with a vague and superficial notion of love. Usually people mean something like, "I feel good." In other words, when they say, "I love you," they mean, "When I think about you, I feel good," and, "When I'm with you, I feel good." In that way, they can say, "I love pizza," because they feel good when they eat pizza.

But God doesn't give us a generic and ambiguous vision of love. Real love isn't a feeling. Real love is a verb. It's an action. It's giving what is best to a person. Jesus himself gives us a clue about what real love is when he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Guys, I love you so much, and you know I love because when I'm with you I have all the feels." No, he said, "I love you, and the reason you know that I love you is not how I feel, and it's not how you feel, it's because I'm about to lay down my life for you. I'm about to die for you."

This is exactly what we find when John, in his first letter, says that "God is love." A lot of people talk about God being love, but, again, they leave "love" undefined. Worse yet, they define "love" in ways that seem good to them. But we can't do that. We must allow God's word to reveal to us what true love is. And here's what we read about God's love. This is 1 John 4:7–12:

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

John says that we Christians should love because love is from God. Anyone who doesn't love clearly doesn't know this God of love because God is love. John doesn't just say "God is love" and let us fill in the details. He says that the love of God "was made manifest." In other words, God's love was demonstrated. And it was demonstrated in the fact that God sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, he died for our sins. His death satisfied the righteous demands of God's justice. God demands that wrongdoing is punished. Since we are all sinners, the only way that God could restore us to righteousness is if someone else paid for our unrighteousness. In other words, the only way that we could be regarded as right in God's eyes, to be considered morally pure, is if someone else could take the penalty for our sins. And that's what Jesus did. He was the propitiation for the sins of everyone who is united to him. Propitiation means something that makes someone favorable. So, Jesus' death on the cross makes God favorable towards everyone associated with Jesus. Jesus took the consequences of our sins.

And here's the point: God is love, but he's also a judge. So, loving isn't opposed to punishing sin. And love is sacrificial. Jesus gave himself for us so God could look on us favorably. Real love doesn't ignore sin; real love deals with sin.

That means that real love doesn't avoid conflict. Sometimes, the truest love involves real, painful, messy conflict. We know that from the example of Jesus. There were times when he corrected his disciples and he did that in a strong way that included some level of conflict. The most famous example is when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die. After Jesus did that, Peter said, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." And then Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Matt. 16:21–23). Peter didn't want Jesus to die, and Jesus told Peter that he was doing the work of Satan. Peter was in the wrong, and Jesus rebuked him in a very sharp way. Did Jesus stop loving Peter when he did that? Or did Jesus love Peter and everyone he would redeem through his death so much that he had to correct him? The answer should be obvious. [Another example: Paul correcting Peter in Galatians 2.]

Real love involves correction when necessary. That means real love can exist in the midst of disagreement and conflict. When the apostle Paul writes about real love in 1 Corinthians 13, he says, in part, “it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (v. 6). We might say that real love is opposed to wrongdoing and lies.

So, the biggest “one another” command is to love one another. And, really, it covers all the other “one another” commands. Another group of “one another” commands talk about living in harmony or peace with each other.³ Here’s one example that we find in Romans 15:5–6:

⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We should live together in peace and harmony. That doesn’t mean not dealing with problems. As we’ve already seen, that doesn’t mean not correcting each other and confronting each other. You can have a superficial peace where people don’t ever have conflict. But that’s not the real peace mentioned in the Bible. Real peace involves being reconciled first to Jesus and then to each other. That involves calling out sin, confessing sin, and turning away from sin.

We see that concept in 1 John 1:5–10:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

If we want to have peace with God—or fellowship, as John puts it—we must confess our sins and we must walk in the light. That means we should walk according to God’s pattern. And if we confess our sins, we are cleansed from every wrongdoing. We’re clean in God’s eyes. John tells us that if we do that, *then* we can have fellowship with one another. But if we are hiding secret sins and maintaining superficial peace, we don’t have real fellowship. Real peace, real fellowship, and real love don’t sweep wrongdoing under the carpet.

³ The verses that tell us to live peaceably with one another are Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor. 12:25; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 John 1:7.

A third type of “one another” command is the command not to lie or grumble against each other.⁴ Colossians 3:9 says, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.” I think that should be obvious. We shouldn’t lie to each other. But there are other sins we can commit with our mouths, and another is grumbling, or complaining, about one another. James 5:9 says, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.” When we see that someone is doing something wrong, we should tell that person. Real love is saying, “Brian, I can’t help but notice that you’re doing this when God doesn’t want you to.” The opposite of love is grumbling or gossiping, saying, “Did you hear that Brian is doing that thing he’s not supposed to?” Don’t complain behind someone’s back. Talk to that person. Don’t stew over offenses, storing up bitterness in your heart. Talk to that person.

Though we are Christians, we are still going to do wrong things. We’re still going to make mistakes and fail. The Lord knows that I do. That means that we’re going to have to be patient and humble with one another and we’re going to have to forgive one another. And those are two other groups of “one another” commands.⁵ In Ephesians 4:1–3, Paul tells us to be patient and to bear with one another in love:

¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul writes those words after he has explained how Christians have been saved only by God’s grace, not through works. If we realize the human condition—that we’re all rebels against God, people who are spiritually dead—and if we realize that God has been patient with us, then we should be patient with each other. And at the end of that same chapter, in Ephesians 4:32, Paul writes these words: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” We should forgive each other in the same way that God has forgiven us through the work of Jesus.

⁴ The verses that tell us not to lie to one another or grumble against each other are Col. 3:9/James 4:11; 5:9; 1 Pet. 4:9.

⁵ The verses that tell us to be patient with each other and humble are Rom. 12:16; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13; 1 Pet. 5:5. Verses that teach us to forgive one another include Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13.

Think about it: All of us are sinners. Every Christian who is here is united to Jesus not because he or she is a moral person, but because God is generous and forgiving. If God has forgiven us, we can and should forgive each other. And if we're all sinners saved by grace, then we are going to continue to stumble. We will make mistakes. We'll step on each other's toes. It's bound to happen. But we should bear with one another. We shouldn't be quick to offend. We must realize that each of us is a work in progress. We should remember what else Paul says about love in 1 Corinthians 13. He says, "Love is patient. . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (vv. 4, 7).

We live in a rather graceless world. This seems to be more and more apparent, particularly in this cultural moment. This last week, I saw both sides of the political aisle accuse and mock each other. Though some people don't like the concept of God's judgment, the fact is that we live in a very judgmental age. And this is true of religious people and atheists, political conservatives, and political liberals. Atheists sometimes claim there is no such thing as good and evil, because there is no God who accounts for an objective moral law. But then they turn around and call certain acts or certain people evil. So-called liberals often talk about the importance of tolerance. Yet they aren't tolerant of people who have different views. My point is not to pick on atheists or liberals, or simply to rebuke conservatives and religious people. My point is that all of us can be very unforgiving, judgmental, and ungracious.

Yet the church should be different. The church should be counter-cultural. It should be an alternative community of real, deep love. The church should demonstrate to the world what it's like to forgive and to be forgiven, what it's like to bear with one another. We can't control the whole world. We can't control how other people speak and act. But we can control our own words and actions and reactions. And we should be gracious.

Here's the sixth category of counter-cultural "one another" commands: We are supposed to serve one other and show one another hospitality. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he tells them that because they have been freed from sin and death by Jesus, they are no longer bound by the law that was given to Israel at Mount Sinai. But Paul says that they should use their freedom wisely. He writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Jesus didn't save us so we could live as individuals. I heard a friend of mine say just yesterday, "When God saves us, we go from 'I' to 'we.'" In other words, we enter into a family, and we have an obligation to our

brother's (and our sister's) keepers. We should serve one another. Depending on our strengths, that service may vary. Some may be good at cooking meals for others, or giving people rides to places. Some are good at helping people do work around the house. Some are good at helping people with their words.

Peter captures all of this in his first letter. In 1 Peter 4:8–11, he writes,

⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

There, Peter talks about love, forgiveness, and not grumbling. But he also talks about service: he talks about using the gifts that God has given to us to help one another. And he talks about hospitality. The Greek word, φιλόξενοι (*philoxenoi*), literally means “love of strangers.” (You may have heard of xenophobia, the fear of strangers.) To show hospitality is to love others, people outside your family, and invite them into your lives and even into your home. We should do that with each other and I think it's very important to show that love to non-Christians.

The seventh group of “one another” commands is to sing to each other and teach each other. Since we talked about this a few weeks ago, I won't say much about it now. I will simply remind us what Colossians 3:16 says: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”⁶ Not only should we sing to and with one another, but we must also teach and admonish one another. Again, that entails instruction and correction.

Here's the eighth and final group of “one another” commands: We are supposed to encourage, comfort, and exhort one another, and we do this by not failing to meet together. There are various passages in the New Testament that discuss comforting each other.⁷ There are verses that talk about the need to encourage one another.⁸ And there are verses that talk about the need to exhort one another, or to urge each other to do what is right and good. Consider two passages in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews 3:13 says, “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is

⁶ See also Ephesians 5:18–21.

⁷ 2 Cor. 1:2-7 and 13:11 come to mind.

⁸ Such as 1 Thess. 4:18.

called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” The author of Hebrews knows that it’s easy to go astray. He says that in the history of Israel, many people hardened their hearts instead of obeying God’s words. He doesn’t want to see that happen in the church. Part of the remedy for that natural inclination to sin is our mutual encouragement and exhortation. We need to help one other stay on the right path. Notice that he says we need to do this “every day, as long as it is called ‘today’.” That means we should be involved in one other’s lives.

Several chapters later, the author of Hebrews writes,

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

We’re supposed to “stir up one another to love and good works.” How do we do that? By not neglecting to meet together. At the least, this means that we should show up to worship together every Lord’s Day. This is huge. If you don’t show up, you’re not able to encourage someone.

It should be clear by now that all the “one another” commands go against our inclination to live as isolated individuals. One of the great problems in Christianity in America is that we often think of evangelism and church life in very individualistic terms. Some people present the gospel in such a way that it’s all about an individual going to heaven when he or she dies. Now, that’s important, but what isn’t stressed is that once a person actually becomes a Christian, he or she becomes part of something larger. When someone becomes a Christian, that person enters into the body of Christ, the temple of the living God, and the family of God. Again, when a person becomes a Christian, he or she is no longer an “I” but part of a “We.”

Church life shouldn’t be “what do I get out of it.” Church isn’t a product to be consumed. It’s a community to live in, a people to love and serve. And when you don’t show up, you can’t love or serve or encourage. No one ever said, “You know, when you weren’t here last week, I was very encouraged.” I have never thought, “I was so encouraged in my preaching because Joe comes every other week (or once a month). That really stirs me up to good works.” Not showing up is not only breaking God’s command, but it affects other people in negative ways. It’s not just

about us when we come to worship together. As the poet John Donne famously put it, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”⁹

It should be clear that this church needs to be one in which we love each other with a true, deep, abiding love that causes us to be humble, patient, and kind. We should love each other so much we’re not afraid to correct each other. It’s also clear, as I think about all of this, how often I’ve failed to love others. Let us continually repent, turning away from our selfishness and our false love and turning to God and his love. That means being involved in each other’s lives. That means showing up. In fact, I think the more that we put into church, the more we get out of church. The more you’re involved here in the life of the church, the more you’ll get to know people and be a part of their lives.

My hope is that as a church we can figure out how to have greater community. I have some ideas. I would like to change some of our meetings and meeting times so that we can eat regularly together and have more time for conversation. That might not happen for a while, however, because that takes planning. In the meantime, I would encourage you to come not only Sunday mornings, but also Sunday nights and/or Wednesday nights, if you’re available. I realize that we all have different schedules and different obligations. But showing up to what we offer now is one way of obeying these “one another” commands.

I also want to say this: Even though these commands are presented to Christians to obey in the life of the church, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t love, forgive, serve, and teach non-Christians. We can’t be two-faced, acting one way in church and another way outside of church. We need to show non-Christians what it’s like to be a part of God’s family. We need to show them love and forgiveness and grace.

Before I came here, I served on staff at a church in Washington state. There was a member of that church who was a very macho guy, very proud and stubborn. He worked at a very large, internationally-known company. He worked on a team, and one of his teammates was an atheist, and this man used to get under his skin. One time, the team went out to eat lunch, and the atheist provoked this man, and this man lost his cool and made something of a fool of himself in public. He talked to me about this situation the next Sunday. My advice was to go to the

⁹ John Donne, “Meditation XVII,” in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, available at <https://web.cs.dal.ca/~johnston/poetry/island.html>, accessed November 13, 2016.

people on his team and ask for their forgiveness. In particular, I told him to go to the atheist and ask for his forgiveness. I said that the atheist probably never had someone do that to him before.

Now, I'm not sure if the man in my church took my advice. But I hope he did. We need to demonstrate kindness and love and forgiveness to others. And when we make mistakes, we need to seek the forgiveness of non-Christians. In any event, we need to apply the gospel to all of life. We must always remember that we are no better than others. We are sinners saved by grace, beggars telling other people where to get the bread.

Now, if you're here today and you're not a Christian yet, I hope that this message has given you an inside look at the way Christians are supposed to act. I hope that a description of this community would provoke you to think more about the claims of Christianity. And if we Christians have wronged you, I ask for your forgiveness. I would also say that if you want to know more about Christianity, I would love to talk to you about it.

For the Christians, I want to close with this. The way that we love one other is part of our growth as Christians. Without deeply loving one other, we will not grow. Paul himself said so. In writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, he said,

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thess. 3:11–13).

Loving one another is the way Jesus establishes our hearts to be blameless and holy, as we await the day we will see him face to face. Let us love one another as Jesus has loved us.