

Love or Commandments?

By Andy Robison

A friend once faced a situation where he was told to preach nothing but love for three months; some were tired of hearing about commandment-keeping. When he asked what I would do, I said, “I think I’d preach through 1 John.” Written by the one who became known as the “apostle of love,” the command to love one another drips from its pages. That is how I would introduce the sermon series. I’d bounce from the command of Jesus in the same author’s Gospel, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). From there, I would introduce one of that great apostle’s famed passages as an introduction to the series. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).

Then, I might ask if anyone noticed that the “C” word was in that last verse. There was a commandment. Then, I would try to elucidate, kindly and over several weeks, how the apostle weaves love together with commandment-keeping throughout the letter. There is 1 John 2:3-5, which reads, “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.” Whereas some seem to believe, idyllically, that loving one another is commandment-keeping a-plenty, John reverses it here: If one keeps God’s Word, only then is the love of God perfected in Him.

Or, one could go to 1 John 3:10 where it says, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” Love is not all you need. The practice of righteousness is necessary as well.

One could cap it all off with 1 John 5:2, which records, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments.” Here is a definition of sorts. Yes, we are supposed to love one another. How do we know that such love is real and not merely an empty verbalization or passing feeling of friendliness? If we love God and keep His commandments, then we know that we love one another. A good reading of 1 John sets an “all-love, no obedience” agenda on its ear.

Of course, there are difficulties. How can one love the children of God who are **not** keeping His commandments, but are playing the hypocrite? After all, those false brethren aren’t returning love, by virtue of not obeying God’s commands. In such a case, perhaps Matthew 18:17 is appropriate to consider (after the necessary steps of the context). “...let him be to you as a heathen and a tax collector.” Paul’s admonition is also here relevant; “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). With some, even brethren, it is just not possible. One could and must follow the example of Christ and of Stephen, to desire the forgiveness of their persecutors (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60). Bitterness must be put away (Ephesians 4:31). Even with all of that, if some aren’t going to keep God’s commandments, love, tragically, is going to be a one-way street. Obedience and love must go together for there to be the kind of relationships God desires among His people.

Love • ONE • Another