

2. Commanded to love

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Indeed we ask, dear Father, that the scriptures will be our delight. As Jeremiah said, your words were found and I ate them, and they became to me the delight and joy of my heart.

May that be true for us tonight, as we learn to listen to your voice afresh. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, let's turn to John's Gospel, chapter 15, and this little paragraph, verses 12 to 17, page 902 in the Big Bibles.

Now, I want to begin this evening by pointing out an interesting feature of the way in which Jesus speaks to his disciples here in John, chapters 15 and 16.

A little note on observing the text, if you like. Have a look at chapter 15, verse 11. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Ah, really? Is that so? How very helpful, we might say. Do you see what Jesus is doing there in verse 11? He's telling us how to understand verses 1 to 10.

[1 : 25] He's giving us an interpretative key to verses 1 to 10. I've spoken these things to you, the words of verses 1 to 10, so that my joy may be in you.

So if we read verses 1 to 10 in such a way as to fill our hearts with pain or gloom, we're misreading those words. So in verse 11, Jesus is showing us how to understand verses 1 to 10.

And in the same way, look on to chapter 15, verse 17. Verse 17. These things I command you, so that you will love one another. So isn't that helpful too?

In verse 17, the Lord is telling us that verses 12 to 16 are teaching the disciples to love one another. So verse 17 is teaching us how to read verses 12 to 16.

Well look on to chapter 16, verse 1. I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. Now these things there must refer to the whole section from chapter 15, verse 18 through to chapter 16, verse 4.

[2 : 28] So in that first verse, Jesus is telling his friends why he is giving them this tough teaching about the hatred of the world. We'll look at this next week. It's to keep them persevering under trial, to keep them from falling away.

Or look on to chapter 16, verse 33, the last verse of the chapter. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.

Now there he's probably referring to the whole of chapter 16 from verse 4 onwards. So let's watch out for these little interpretative clues as we read our Bibles.

Now we don't find, we won't find such obvious clues on every page of the Bible. But when we do find them, let's use them, because they can help us not to misunderstand the purpose of a particular passage.

All right, so back to chapter 15, verses 12 to 17, which is our passage for this evening. Verse 17 again, these things I command you so that you will love one another.

[3 : 28] So tonight, let's set our compass, so to speak, by that verse. Jesus is flagging up for us in verse 17 the fact that verses 12 to 16 are on the theme of Christians loving one another.

Christians are commanded by the Lord Jesus to love one another. Now friends, does the prospect of a sermon on Christians loving one another fill you with joy, or does it give you an uneasy sense of wilting, a bit like that neglected cabbage that sits at the back of the greengrocers and nobody buys?

It is a challenging message. I trust we'll feel the challenge. But it's a thoroughly health-giving message as well. So let's gladly open our ears to the Lord Jesus and see what he's teaching his disciples here.

This is a message for Christians. Now if you're not yet a Christian, I do hope that there are some here tonight who are not yet Christians. They usually are in a church like this and it's great to have you here.

If you're not yet a Christian, please do eavesdrop. Because if and when you capitulate to Christ, you'll be under this same commandment as those of us who are Christians.

[4 : 40] In fact, looking at these verses may encourage you to come to the Lord Jesus quickly. Now this little paragraph, verses 12 to 17, it's really an unpacking of what Jesus has already said in chapter 13, verses 34 and 35.

Just flick back over the page to that. 13, 34. Very famous little passage, this. 13, 34. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Well, let's look at this under three headings as we turn back now to 15, 12.

First heading. Christians are commanded to self-sacrificial love. Now we're going to see this command particularly in verses 12 and 13.

But first of all, let's remember the situation in which Jesus was speaking these words. We're in Jerusalem. It's the Thursday evening, the night before Jesus was crucified.

[5 : 46] And Jesus is preparing his 11 disciples. Judas has gone out into the night already. He's preparing the 11 disciples for life after his departure. And these men are going to have to lead the church.

Jesus is no longer going to be with them physically. Now, they're not going to be left as waifs and orphans. Because the Lord Jesus says he will send the Holy Spirit to strengthen them.

So they will be given all the power from above that they need so as to do their work without keeling over. But even so, it is going to be very tough going. And Jesus is preparing them for the toughness.

He warns them in, just look further on to 15, 18. He warns them that the world is going to hate them. The non-Christian world. He warns them in chapter 16, verse 2, that they're going to be thrown out of the synagogues.

And even killed, as some of them were. He warns them in chapter 16, verse 33, that they will have tribulation. Now, that's not a word that we use every day, is it?

[6 : 48] But it means trouble, trouble, trouble. And it's because they are about to be thrown into this bear pit of tribulation. That they need to be the sort of people who love each other.

They are going to need to draw strength from each other. They are going to need to stick to each other like limpets. Because the non-Christian world will do its best to turn them aside, to turn them away from their right path.

To be gently contemptuous of Christians. Or at worst, to be bent on putting them to death. In this country, today, we rarely get more than contempt, do we?

But in many parts of the world today, Christians are literally being put to death for their faith every day. So Jesus is warning his disciples that this will happen. In a sense here, he is foretelling the history of the next 2,000 years, when he speaks like this about the persecution of his people.

The world is going to hate you, he is saying. So you must love each other. And to go back to chapter 13, verse 35.

[7 : 56] It's your love for each other, he says, which will mark you out as my disciples. By this, all people, non-Christians, he means, will know that you are my disciples if you have love for each other.

So if the love that Jesus' disciples have for each other distinguishes them from all other people, what does that say about non-Christian society? It says surely that non-Christian society is not characterised by love.

If the love of Christians is the thing that marks them out, it's obviously different elsewhere. And yet, it's a peculiar fact that non-Christian society does yearn for love.

Yearns for love on the one hand, but is cynical about it ever happening on the other. There was a very good example of this in the papers just last week, and some of you may have seen this. But the announcement had just been made, was it Monday or Tuesday, that David Cameron and Nick Clegg were going to be top dog and second dog in the new coalition cabinet.

And one of the papers gently satirised this, almost as if a marriage were being made. And it pictured the two men looking into each other's eyes. And the Prime Minister says in the caption, I, David, take you, Nick.

[9 : 13] And the Deputy Prime Minister says, And I, Nick, take you, David. And the text, the captions then work them through the marriage vows, until the very last line, which says, Till debt do us part.

Which may be true. That perfectly captured, it seemed to me, the pain of worldly relationships. A yearning for friendship and cooperation. It would be lovely if this new coalition government succeeds, wouldn't it?

Let's pray that it does. So a yearning for something good. And yet at the same time, there's a deep scepticism that anything like this could really ever happen.

Now that's the reality of the world we live in. Conflict. The thing that journalists are interested in is conflict. It's what makes the news. Next time you listen to the news, ask yourself if it isn't mostly about conflict.

Yes, there are some happy items on the news. Sometimes, for example, a pair of ospreys have successfully reared two chicks in Perthshire.

[10 : 18] Now that's very sweet and cuddly. We love to hear about that, but it never quite makes the headlines. The headlines are almost always about the brutal, ruthless behaviour of individuals and nations as they battle each other for supremacy.

Jesus says, by contrast, the world will know that you are my disciples by the love that you have for each other. So the disciples of Jesus are under orders to live in a fundamentally different way. Now, why should Jesus have to use that verb, command? It is such a forceful word, isn't it? Is there in verse 12, this is my commandment, and again in verse 17, these things I command you, or back in chapter 13, a new commandment I give to you.

It's as if he's saying, you know the old commandments, the ten commandments that Moses gave. Well, they still stand, but I'm adding another one, a new one, which is of ultimate importance in this new era of the gospel, and that is that you love one another.

But we might ask, why should we need to be commanded to love each other? I mean, somebody might say, a Christian person might say, don't we Christians have the Holy Spirit actually dwelling in us, which of course we do, and isn't love the very first element of the fruit of the Spirit?

[11 : 44] So won't love grow as naturally out of our hearts as the leaves grow out of the trees? Well, yes, the Holy Spirit will produce love for other Christians in our hearts.

But as Paul insists in that same chapter, Galatians 5, the Spirit in our hearts is constantly battling against the flesh. That's the principle of ongoing indwelling sin.

And it's my sinful self that needs commanding to love other Christians. Let me put it like this. Let's think of it in terms of our actual relationships.

Just think for a moment of another Christian that you find a little bit prickly, a little bit awkward. You might think, I don't really want to get too close to that brother or sister because of those prickles.

That Christian is a bit too much like a porcupine. If I get too close, I might get hurt. Oh, yes, I'll be nice to him. If I bump into him just down there over coffee after the service, I'll put on my very best smile and I'll say, oh, hello, Rodney.

[12 : 49] It's lovely to see you, isn't it? Are you well, keeping well? Yes. Lovely, isn't it? But as soon as I see Henrietta, who is all sweetness and light and congeniality out of the corner of my eye, I'm going to slip away from Rodney and I'll talk to her.

Because it's much easier, isn't it? But the Lord is commanding me to risk the prickles and to get close to Rodney. If there is a Rodney here, brother, forgive me.

I'm not thinking of anybody particularly. Now, most of us are a bit prickly. Isn't that right? I know that you do meet Christians occasionally who are utterly lovely and gracious from top to toe, don't seem to have a drop of porcupine blood left in their systems.

But most of us Christians are prickly and difficult to some degree. And we hold back from getting too close to the prickles because we know that getting close to the prickles will require a bit more effort on our part.

It's a bit harder work. We'll need to accommodate ourselves to the prickles. It'll be more costly and tiring for us to get close to prickly Rodney. Whereas getting close to Henrietta over the coffee will be quite the other way around because she will encourage us.

[14:04] She'll make us feel much better. In fact, ten minutes with her over a cup of coffee at the end of the service will send us home all smiles and relaxation and able to face Monday morning with a spring in our steps.

Now, that's why we need this command. Just look around this auditorium for a moment. Just notice the faces. Catch one or two eyes if you dare.

Now, Jesus says to us if we're Christians, I command you to love one another. Now, the Lord forces us, however, to dig a little bit deeper than I've dug so far.

Look again at verse 12. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. That's just the same.

That as I have loved you. It's just the same in chapter 13, verse 34. The new commandment I give to you that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

[15:05] Now, it's that phrase, just as I have loved you, that's the phrase that really opens out to us what the Lord Jesus means. The quality of love that Christians are to have for each other is to be a reflection of the love that Jesus has shown to his disciples.

And he goes straight on in the very next verse, 15:13, to show us exactly what he means. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.

So, it's a lot more than merely working our way around a few porcupine prickles. Love for others, as defined by the Lord Jesus, is the whole principle of laying down one's life for one's friends.

That's the way that Jesus has acted towards us. and that's the way he now commands us to act towards each other. Now, all this starts way back in the relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

One of the striking emphases in John's Gospel is the way in which Jesus talks of the love that he has for the Father and the love that the Father has for him. In fact, the fourth Gospel is peppered with references of that kind.

[16:21] You'll see one of them just here in chapter 15, verse 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.

So, a great pattern of love is set within the Holy Trinity. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father.

But the way in which the Son proves or demonstrates his love for the Father is by obeying, keeping his Father's commandments. And what has the Father commanded the Son to do?

The Father has commanded the Son to take on human flesh, to come to earth, to be born in squalor and poverty, to live a humble life, to teach, to be persecuted and hated, and finally, to be condemned unjustly to a Roman crucifixion.

And as he hung upon that Roman cross, he was laying down his life for his friends. For the sake of his friends, who were much worse than simply prickly or awkward, who were sinners, rebels against God, for their sake, our sake, he was prepared to submit to nails, nakedness, shame, jeering, and spitting.

[17:40] But far worse than that, he was prepared to submit to the full potency of the righteous anger of God poured out against the rebel race. He was prepared to endure the torments of hell.

He became anathema, ruined, bearing not only the anger of God, but the curse, because cursed is every man who is hanged upon a tree.

Now, Jesus did all that, bore all that, because he was determined to please his father, to keep his father's commandment. That's what it means for him in his words, in verse 10, to keep the father's commandments.

To lay down his life for his friends was to keep his father's commandment and to express his love for you and me. So there's a pattern here. The father loves the son, and the son demonstrates his love to the father by obeying the father's commandment and laying down his life for his friends. And now Jesus is teaching that that pattern needs to be repeated. Just as he obeys his father's command and lays down his life for us, so we now are to obey his command and lay down our lives for yet others.

[19:00] So what is this going to mean for us in practice? Well, in some countries today, it may literally involve martyrdom. One Christian having to lay down his life or her life if by so doing the lives of others can be rescued.

For us in Britain today, it's not likely that martyrdom will be necessary, at least in the immediate future. But there's a great principle here, and that is that our life is given to us so that we should

serve other Christians.

Laying our life down for other Christians day after day, week after week, year after year, expending our stock of energy and time and money and our stores of experience to help other Christians and to build them up.

Imagine the inscription that will rest on your gravestone. Jack McKillop, born 1985, died 2065, and then the inscription reads, he laid down his life for his friends.

That would be a good inscription to have on your gravestone, wouldn't it? And your grandchildren might look at that gravestone and they would say, yes, that was granddad. He was a Christian. He spent his life serving other people.

[20 : 23] He didn't just hold on to his time and energy and money and use them to please himself. He was a John 15, 13 man. He laid out his life in the service of others. He followed the great pattern.

As Jesus loved the Father and gave his life, laid it down to rescue many, so granddad loved Jesus and laid down his life for the sake of many. He was obedient to the new commandment.

So there's the first thing. Christians are commanded to self-sacrificial love. Now I've got two more headings, but I'll be rather briefer on these because we've got to have time at the end to have our coffee and our porcupine prickles together.

Now that commandment in verses 12 and 13 is very strong, isn't it? Very strong. And it may seem rather daunting. And that is why Jesus goes on in the next two or three verses to give his disciples some very great encouragements.

And that's what we'll look at now. So here's the second point. Christians are invited to privileged friendship. Privileged friendship. Look at verses 14 and 15.

[21 : 32] You are my friends if you do what I command you. In other words, if you lay down your lives for each other. You're my friends. Verse 15. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing.

But I've called you friends. For all that I have heard from my father I have made known to you. Now it's worth placing this 14th verse here alongside verse 15 of the previous chapter.

chapter 14 verse 15. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Now just put that verse together with chapter 15 verse 14.

The ones who love Jesus keep his commandments and those who do his commandments, obey his commandments, become his dearest friends. So as the Christian learns over time to obey his commandments, it's a lifetime of learning, isn't it?

As we learn over time to obey his commandments, the Christian learns what it means to love him and to be friends with him, to be part of his most intimate circle of friends.

[22 : 47] But we need to notice something here about verse 14. You're my friends if you do what I command you. This is not a friendship on equal terms. Look at the way Jesus words it, you are my friends if you do what I command you.

Now we can't turn that around in the opposite direction and say to him, and you are my friend if you do what I command you. Well of course not, that would be nonsense. The terms of the friendship are one-sided.

The friendship itself is conditional. It only happens if we're willing to obey the Lord Jesus. If we start to rebel against him, the friendship is bound to be damaged. We can only bathe in the bright beams of his love if we're living as he wants us to.

But when that happens, we discover that he is our friend. So let me ask, are we learning to think of him like that? I wonder if in our churches we've perhaps slightly forgotten this great and lovely aspect of being a Christian.

We often speak and rightly speak of Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We often remember that he's our priest and our king. But what about our friend? What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.

[24 : 05] Grace him. Look how he speaks of this friendship in verse 15. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing.

You'll have seen, I'm sure, some of those delightful television dramas in recent years of the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. And in those 19th century stories, you know, pride and prejudice, sense and sensibility, is it?

Anyway, I forget the things, but always you have a very great consciousness of the division between the masters and the servants, or the master class and the servant class. You have the ruling classes who live in their great and beautiful houses and feed off the fat of the land every day. And then serving them, you have whole armies of butlers, cooks, housemaids, grooms, gardeners with their trousers tied up with string, you know, the sort of thing.

But can you imagine the master one day saying to the gardener's boy, Jones, I'd like to speak with you. Yes, sir? I want to share with you the secrets of my heart, my plans.

[25 : 21] My dreams. Sit with me now for half an hour and take a cup of tea with me. It couldn't happen, could it? The gardener's boy would have an apoplectic fit, wouldn't he? He'd fall over backwards. He couldn't cope with such revelations.

The servant doesn't know what his master is doing. But look at Jesus' words here in verse 15. 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. So Jesus has revealed to his friends the wonderful things that the father has revealed to him.

So the friendship that Christians enjoy with the Lord Jesus is not just a matter of warmth and joy, though it certainly includes that. It is at heart the privilege of being let into the very mind of God the father.

And that's why it is such a sustaining friendship. It's a strong friendship. Ordinary human friendship is lovely as far as it can go. But this friendship with Jesus enables us to understand God better, to know him, to understand his great plan, to understand the meaning of our living and our dying, to understand how good the gospel is and how the gospel is the only answer to the problems of human existence.

[26 : 43] Now we shan't come to know God or to develop this wonderful friendship with Jesus without regular, loving, careful, thoughtful reading of the Bible. But once we've realised that reading our Bible is as important for our friendship with Jesus as eating Weetabix and pork chops is for our daily health, we will turn to our Bibles as naturally and regularly as we turn to the kitchen table to eat.

So Christians are invited into this privileged friendship. And this is all part of learning to love one another. That's why this teaching about friendship with Jesus comes between what you might call the bookends of verse 12 and verse 17.

You see, Jesus doesn't speak here to each of his eleven disciples individually in turn about their individual friendship with him. He speaks to them as a group. You, plural, he says, are my friends. You are my friends. If you do what I command you. That's what he's saying. We're the Lord's people. We're the Lord's church as we learn to enjoy friendship with Jesus.

And we do it as a group. We're a band of brothers and sisters. Loving one another and learning the friendship of Jesus, these are things that go together. And that's why Jesus speaks of them together in the same breath.

[28 : 07] So, if you're a Christian now, just allow yourself a moment of excitement, a moment of pure joy. Steady.

We're British. Not too much. Okay. But just a moment of pure joy as you consider, A, that we are under orders to love each other and, B, that the Son of God invites us to be his friends as he opens to us the very mind of his Father in heaven.

And if you're not yet a Christian, let me ask this. Do you really want to keep all this at arm's length? Don't. Don't. The Son of God has died for you, that you can know these things and enjoy them.

So, commanded to self-sacrificial love, invited to privileged friendship, and now third, Christians are appointed to be enduringly fruitful.

Appointed to be enduringly fruitful. Look at verse 16. You did not choose me, but I chose you. Well, yes, at one level, it feels as if we are choosing him when we become Christians, when we actually capitulate and put our trust in him and begin the Christian life.

[29 : 22] And if we have not yet repented and believed, it's up to us to do it. Jesus himself says, repent and believe the gospel. He's asking us to do something. But once we have done that, and once we've been with him and his people for some time, we come to see that at a much more important level, it is he who has chosen us, not vice versa.

Think again of these eleven men, these eleven apostles, as they heard these words. Of course, they had responded to his call. They'd left their nets and their fishing boats and their tax offices and

many other things too, so as to follow him.

But it was he who had called each of them. And that's what he still does today. He is the one who calls and we respond. But what does his calling and choosing lead to?

Look back again at verse sixteen. I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. Appointed to enduring fruitfulness.

That's the truth about every disciple that Jesus has called and chosen. appointed. Appointed. If you ever go to the little town of Ballata up on D-side, you'll see that one or two of the local shops up there proudly display on their shop fronts the royal coat of arms.

[30 : 50] And underneath the coat of arms, there are words like this inscribed. George so-and-so, grocer, by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen, purveyor of fine foods.

Now, the reason for this, as you perhaps know, is that Ballata, this little town on D-side, is not many miles from Balmoral Castle. And when the Queen is up there in the summer holidays, spending a few weeks up there relaxing, she of course uses the local shops to supply her table.

I don't suppose she hops in the Range Rover personally and drives there. She may do. She may do. Maybe somebody goes to the shop and gets it. But some shops, which have given her long and good and faithful service, receive from her what is called the royal warrant.

And this entitles them to tell the world that they have been appointed by the Queen to serve her.

That's a great honour. Now, think of it. Christians have an even more wonderful appointment.

And this is not to provide fruit for the royal table, but to bear fruit for our royal master. And this is not fruit with a dodgy sell-by date.

[31 : 55] This is fruit that goes on. This is fruit that endures. And you only have to think back as much as we can over the last 2,000 years to see how extraordinarily Jesus has fulfilled this promise.

Here he is in John 15 on the night before his crucifixion talking to 11 very ordinary men. Men who were very perturbed about him leaving them. Men who certainly didn't understand with any clarity what was about to happen.

And Jesus tells them that he has chosen them and appointed them to go. Just notice that word go there because it suggests travel and mission. They're to go and bear fruit.

We noticed last week from the earlier part of the chapter that this fruit is the fruit of Christ-like qualities. Godly character developing. Godly living. And here in verse 16 it's almost certainly the fruit of spreading the gospel.

Bringing more and more people to put their trust in Christ. And it's fruit that is to endure or abide in the sense that it goes on. It develops. It grows.

[33 : 00] It never stops. And isn't that exactly what has happened? These 11 men were filled with the Holy Spirit just a few weeks after Jesus' resurrection and they began to preach the gospel and many others came to believe in Jesus.

And those people too began to travel around the world. And the gospel went out to Judea and Samaria. It went to Syria. It made its way a few years later through the journeys of Paul up into Turkey and on into Greece.

And at the same time it began to take root in North Africa. It went to Rome, to Spain, then to Germany and France and finally to England and Wales and Ireland and Scotland.

And the fact that there is a congregation of believers in this building tonight is part of the abiding fruitfulness that Jesus appointed those very ordinary 11 men to almost 2,000 years ago.

How many people do you think at this very moment throughout the British Isles are listening to Bible sermons or singing hymns or praising the Lord or praying?

[34 : 10] Hundreds of thousands at this very moment now. Now, 7.35pm on the 16th of May 2010, that's fruit that abides, isn't it?

The 11 disciples went. They answered that command to go. And they bore fruit. And their fruit remains. And it continues to increase. Now this appointment goes on.

And it's a wonder for us to know that each of us, if we're Christians, has been appointed. Very few of us, I guess, have appointments that cut much of a dash in the eyes of the world.

We're very ordinary Joe Soaps, aren't we, in our congregation? Some are retired. Some are out of work. Some have very lowly jobs. Some of you are students and you haven't got two brown pennies to rub together.

You're as well nourished as a church mouse. But if we are Christians, each of us has the royal warrant. Each of us is appointed by the King of Kings, appointed to go and bear fruit, fruit which will abide.

[35 : 20] So this command to love one another, it may be challenging, it may be a bit daunting, but it comes to us in the rich context of our friendship with Jesus and his appointment to every Christian to be abidingly fruitful.

Don't let's ever think that there is any kind of life worth living except for the Christian life, life with Jesus and life with each other.

Do we want to be fruitful? We are appointed to it. Do we want the lovely friendship of Jesus to be enjoyed every day? He invites us to it.

Do we want to love each other? Not always. But friends, we're under orders, aren't we? Our captain, the king, says in verse 17, these things I command you so that you will love one another. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Amen. Our dear Lord Jesus, it's almost beyond our comprehension that you should have invited us to be your friends, not merely servants who know very little of what the Master thinks, but friends who know everything that the Father has revealed to you.

[36 : 53] How we pray, dear Lord Jesus, that you'll help us to enjoy our friendship with you better and better as the days go on. We pray too that the fruit that you have appointed to bear, to grow for you, will indeed more and more come from our hearts, from our congregation, our church, and that it will prove indeed to be fruit that abides.

And we ask you too, Lord Jesus, to give us the grace and the transforming change in our hearts so that deeply, truly, and throughout our lives, we're able to love each other in obedience to your command.

And we ask it to the glory of your great name. Amen.