

# THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT<sup>1</sup>

John 13: 34-35

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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We are all familiar with Ronald Reagan's eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican." Perhaps a little less familiar is the novel by Jeffrey Archer entitled *The Eleventh Commandment*,<sup>2</sup> a spy thriller whose title refers to the well-known version of the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not get caught!"

But today I want to speak of the original eleventh commandment, the one that comes from the lips of Jesus himself: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

I

On this day that has been called Mother's Day since it was established by President Woodrow Wilson at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we set aside a time to think of that eleventh commandment as expressed by Jesus, and especially the love that gives life, the love that is prepared to sacrifice everything for the one that is loved.

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, May 10, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Archer, *The Eleventh Commandment* (HarperTorch, 1999).

No one thinks all mothers are perfect. Still, the failures of mothers (as well as fathers), as serious as they may be, cannot be allowed to overshadow the simple reality that it is possible, in our day-to-day lives, to experience the kind of love Jesus talked about in this eleventh commandment.

## II

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* These were presented as his last words of advice to his disciples before his impending death. They were his parting words, his final blessing on them! At times such as these, times of last goodbyes, people naturally want to summarize everything they have stood for, everything they have taught, everything they would want their children to remember.

Like most ministers, I have observed that many who feel death approaching want to gather their family together and make known to them their final wishes and give to them their blessing. How often I have witnessed friends and loved ones who clearly know they are dying and want to leave some final word of blessing. Many of us have been on the receiving end of such words, and those words become holy to us.

I would guess that many of you can recall some such encouraging words, shared for your sake rather than for the sake of the one speaking the words, words that have stayed with you through the years. They are not superficial words, but words of wisdom that reach down to the core of your being.

I invite you to pause today and think of the kind of deep and profound spiritual encouragement you received from someone who fulfilled the eleventh commandment of Jesus, that you love one another. And whatever that encouragement was, I invite you to pause today and give thanks to God for the care that was given to you, the counsel that was offered to you, the love that was shown to you.

And then, I invite you to do one more thing, and think of the advice and encouragement you could give to a young person today, whether that young person is your own son or daughter, or to a young person you know who needs such encouragement. Or, if this is how your life is situated, even to another adult whom you know needs a word of encouragement.

What single, most important thing would you say to that person to help face the life he or she must live? What is it that we tell those we love, which is the most important thing we wish for them? When was the last time we slowed down long enough to express those wishes in words?

Friends are constantly sending me emails of letters from children to God. Here's one in the form of a prayer: "Dear God, thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are real warm and special. I forgive you, dear God, for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him."

Well, we all are unfinished, in a way! And there are no perfect mothers or perfect fathers. But family and home and security is what we wish for every living person on this earth; it is what we all hope will nourish each new generation; and it is what we are about here in church.

### III

Few people recognized this more than the Apostle Paul, and you can see it clearly in one of my favorite passages in the Bible. Look up II Corinthians 4: 7 when you have a chance, and you will read this marvelous passage: *We have this treasure in clay jars....* What treasure was he talking about? It is the treasure of Christ's love, that unselfish love that he showed us. Paul says that we are just clay jars, not porcelain masterpieces— not golden goblets— and that we are easily broken and sometimes cracked. But this priceless treasure of Christ's love is in our lives, and our lives are like clay jars. One great way of translating this is to say, *We have this treasure in cracked pots!*

Life is sometimes difficult, but we have this treasure called love. Sometimes we are bewildered and we don't know what to do, but we have this treasure called love! God is good, and God has given us this treasure to hold and to honor and to share.

And what a treasure it is! We may be cracked pots at times, but the treasure is as real as it was when Jesus stood before his disciples and said, *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*