

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Well, confirmands, this is it. Today you will be confirmed. You've studied the Bible years and years to come to this point. You've worked hard. You've memorized all of Luther's Small Catechism. You've memorized I'd guess over 100 Bible passages over the years. The way you've formally studied the Bible will now be changing. Most of you will not be having Bible study as a regular part of your school curriculum. And even if you do, all of you will be facing new challenges to your faith. You yourselves are developing and changing... beginning that difficult part of life where you make the transition from children to adults. What is it you need right now? What is it you need in the coming years to get you through the challenges and changes?

What can I say to you on this important occasion? More importantly, what does God have to say to you on this important occasion?

[Alternate beginning: A wise woman once told me: Life is full of changes. Soon will be the confirmation of 13 teens. This marks a big time of transition in their lives. I also noticed that our congregation has 8 high school seniors graduating this year. What a huge transition to graduate from high school and either go to college or enter the work force. And these aren't the only big changes in life. Our lives are changing all the time, aren't they? Changing jobs, getting married, having children, moving, dealing with illness, unexpected financial set backs, retirement, and more. Our lives are changing all the time. We're constantly having to cope with new situations. Wouldn't it be helpful to have a word of comfort and direction from our God at times like these to carry us through. A word of direction to help guide us on the way? That's just what our God gives us today.]

Today before us are some words of Jesus which he spoke also at a critical time. It was when his disciples were about to go through many changes and transitions. It was the night Jesus was betrayed. He was in the upper room with his disciples celebrating the Passover. He had just identified Judas as the betrayer, and Judas left. And then we hear these words:

“When Judas was gone, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Based on what Jesus says here, what do you need right now? What do you need when we face the changes and challenges that life throws our way? What do you need most? I hope you won't mind if I borrow a title from a Beatles song. **All you need is love.**

To help his disciples and give them direction with these big changes coming in their life, he gives them a new command: Love one another.

Now, maybe the thought crossed your mind, “A NEW command? Love one another is a new command?” The skeptic just might challenge Jesus on that claim. The Jewish person would point out that 1500 years before Jesus spoke these words, God gave Moses the Law in Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And I’m confident that if we had in our church today a Hindu, a Buddhist, and an atheist, they too would nod their heads and say “amen” to Jesus’ teaching here that we must love each other. The Dalai Lama noted, “Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people’s suffering. On these lines every religion has more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.”

So why is it that Jesus calls this a new teaching? Not only is it not new, it’s not even unique to Christianity! Hold on a moment. We’re going to see that yes, it is unique. And yes, it is new. You see it all hinges on properly knowing “love.” And only then, in turn, can we properly show love. Let’s talk about this in more depth.

Have you ever seen advertising campaigns that shout, “New and improved!” It’s everywhere, isn’t it? They take their product which already exists and is well known, and they make it different... better. Then they market it as NEW and improved. In some cases, the improvement is so significant, that what may have been a product that was not worth using before, becomes one that is very useful. The improved product is so much better, it’s really a totally new product.

That’s what’s happening here with Jesus’ “new” command to love one another. Jesus didn’t invent something new with the command to love one another. And yet the kind of love he was talking about was so radically different than anything ever seen or known before that, yes, it was NEW.

Here’s the key: Before you can show this new kind of love, you first have to KNOW this new kind of love. And the only way to know this new kind of love is to know Jesus and the love he showed for us.

1 John 4:10: “This is love... not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Until a person knows Jesus and his atoning sacrifice, he will not know real love. And if a person doesn’t know real love, he certainly can’t show real love. And how do we know Christ’s love? We have to know and study Scripture where Christ’s full love for us is revealed.

Now, do you know Christ’s love well? Absolutely! None of us would be here today if we didn’t know Christ’s love. But listen to me carefully. This is important. **If this love of Christ is not something that grows in your heart daily, it is something that will die in your heart slowly.** It is vitally important that we spend time every day reading and studying God’s Word. *** *Confirmands* in a way you’ve *had* to do that because of the training and assignments you’ve received here. What is going to happen when it’s no longer an assignment?

You see, your faith right now has grown to an 8th grade level with an 8th grade understanding. Let’s say that miraculously, without ever touching a Bible again, your faith would stay at its current level. And we know that’s not true. Without continuous contact with God’s Word, your faith weakens... it doesn’t stay the same. But let’s just say it did. You still have a problem. Your mind keeps developing, your circumstances

keep changing, the challenges you face also keep changing. If you try to apply an 8th grade faith to a high school problem, you're in trouble. Or how about applying an 8th grade faith to a college problem... or a career problem... or a parenting problem. It's not going to help. Your faith needs to grow and change along with you if you're going to have God's strength to deal with whatever comes into your life.

[What happens if your faith is growing? What happens is you're not equipped to deal with the challenges and problems that life throws your way. If you stopped regular, daily Bible study when you were confirmed, then you're trying to deal with current problems with an 8th grade faith. You can't deal with college issues with an 8th grade faith. Career. Parenting.]

I pray to God that I've been able to convey to you in our catechism, not just a knowledge of God's Word. Because it is not enough for you to be confirmed today simply *knowing* a lot more than you knew two years ago. I pray that I've been able to convey to you also a LOVE of God's Word, a PASSION for knowing him better, a THIRST for the life-giving Word, a NEED that drives you back to his Word again and again. I've told you before and I'll tell you... and everyone here... again. Confirmation is not graduation. Confirmation is laying a foundation which you can now build on for the rest of your life. You've got a foundation in the teaching of Scripture. Now grow. Build. Develop... your knowledge of God, his Word, his ways. Make it your life's passion to know Jesus and HIS love better.

This was the Apostle Paul's prayer for the Christians in Ephesus. When he wrote a letter to them he said, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19.) It takes a life time of study and meditation on God's Word to increasingly grasp how wide and long and high and deep is God's love for us in Christ.

But unless we first know God's love for us in Christ, we will never truly be able to love one another. What incredible love God has for us in Christ! Have you faithfully studied Scripture even up to this point? Can you think of memory assignments you didn't get an 'A' on? Did you sometimes forget to do your catechism assignment? Have you ever done catechism and religion assignments as "homework" instead of as joyful opportunities to know Christ's love better?

ADULTS, have you remained in the Word? Do you daily study Scripture, meditate on it and pray? Are you growing in your knowledge of Christ and his love?

How does God feel when we say, "I don't like getting to know you better? I don't have time to spend with you!" God is angry! Yet here is his amazing love. He sent his Son Jesus to our world. He left the perfection of heaven to live here on earth. He humbled himself. He did this so that he could place himself under the obligations of God's requirements. As a man, Jesus had to live a holy and perfect life. This he willingly did so that life could be credited to you and me.

What's more, Jesus – fulfilling the Father's will and the mission he was given – chose a path that would remove the debt of our sin and guilt. He willingly went to the cross of Calvary and suffered its pain and scorn, because that's what our sins deserved.

For our disobedience, Jesus took the blame and endured God's wrath. Amazing love! Self-sacrificial love. Love that only thought of others.

TRANSITION: Jesus showed a *new kind of love* that the world had never seen before. And it's a love that if you know it well, will enable you to fulfill Jesus *new* commandment: To love one another.

So here it is: Loving other people isn't anything new. Loving other people in the same selfless, sacrificing, unconditional way that Jesus loved us? THAT is new! That kind of love does not come naturally to us. That kind of love can not be known or lived unless there is first a knowledge of the love Christ, power from the love of Christ, and motivation of the love of Christ.

You see this Christ-like kind of love is something completely foreign to the non-Christian. They've never experienced such love. They can't comprehend such love. And they therefore certainly cannot live such love. But by God's grace, you can! And when you do, everyone around you will know you are different. They will know you are a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

And when people know by your love that you are a disciple of the Lord Jesus, two things can happen. 1) Seeing Christ's love reflected in your life, they will want to know the source of that love that you show in your life. They will ask you about your Lord Jesus and about the church you go to where he is taught. You have the privilege of being a witness about Christ as his love shines forth through your life to others!

2) But I'll be honest about what else will happen. There are many people in this world who simply hate Christ and his teaching. And when your life reflects his love, and when your mouth speaks his Word and teachings, they will hate you to. Jesus says that you will have to suffer for his name. Expect it. And when it comes, rejoice! That's what the Apostle Paul did. When he suffered for Christ's name, he was joyful because it was an honor and privilege to suffer for Christ's name. Love with Christ-like love, and it doesn't matter how others react to it. You can be confident and rejoice that either way you are identified and recognized as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Dear friends, whatever changes life brings your way, you're going to need something important to get through them. LOVE is all you need. But not love as the world understands... love as God defines it. All you need is LOVE... a knowledge and assurance of Christ's love for you... a love that sent him to a tortuous death on a cross so you would have freedom from sin and eternal life. All you need today and every day is that love, and a knowledge and faith in that love of Christ that is ever growing and deepening. Stay in God's Word daily so that you know his love more and more. Know his love, grow in his love, and then, go out and SHOW his love. Boldly, joyfully, live Christ's love in your life every day. Live daily in Christ's love... knowing it and showing it... and our God promises you confidence, peace, joy, contentment, strength and focus that brings you through the changes of this life to the changeless, eternally joys in heaven. May God keep you faithful in his love until death, and he will give you the crown of life. His love really is all you need. Amen.