

Matt Henry
John 15:9-17
06 May 2018

“Commend and Command”

God’s grace and peace...

Well, happy Confirmation Sunday! Each of the confirmands has taken several tests, completed ten sermon notes each, done lots of homework. And that doesn’t even take into account all of the assignments that their dogs ate! It’s a great group of youth and they are to be commended. This is the largest confirmation class (17) in the history of Friendship Celebration. It was a lot to grade! I don’t know how teachers with 30+ kids keep up.

Confirmation Sunday is not just a day to commend and also semi-embarrass youth. It’s a day to give thanks to God for the life of the church. It’s a time to acknowledge all that has been poured into them. It’s a good day to appreciate their personal relationship with the Lord as well as reflect on your own. How is your relationship with God going? When’s the last time you sat down to really look things over in the spiritual realm and assess progress or areas of improvement? This is what the Holy Spirit does; He brings these things out and identifies the areas we need to grow in as well as what’s going well. If you were to grade yourself for your part of your relationship with God, what grade would you give yourself?

As I was grading the confirmands final exam, tallying up all the grades, I wondered since there are As, Bs, Cs, Ds, Fs, why are there no Es? It turns out, there once was! There were once all kinds of grading systems—some with words, some with points. But you can only go to so many parent teacher conferences until you want something standardized. The modern letter grading system we have today began in 1897 at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Within twenty years, other schools picked up on it, and it became the national norm. Here's how they tallied up grades. 95-100 was an A. 85-94, B. 76-84, C. 75 exactly, no more, no less, remarkably was a D. You almost have to have talent to get a D on the spot like that. 75 as a "D" was still passing. But less than 75 was an "E" and that was considered failing. It was quickly replaced by "F" for failed because, as I'm sure many children tried to convince their parents, "E" did not really mean excellent!

Fortunately, our salvation is not graded on our efforts, but on Christ's! So in that aspect, we get an A+. Or even better, to recall the scene from A Christmas Story, where Ralphie is dreaming, we get an A++++++! Except this is no dream, it's reality! That's because when it comes to salvation, God grades on the cross, not on the curve. It's Christ's efforts, not our own efforts. It's not about making the grade, it's about receiving His grace. That's what our relationship is built on.

Instead of ABCDE grading system, God has instituted a new system: A, B, I, D, E.

Abide!

Jesus tells His disciples to do is abide in His love. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” That’s it. Abide! How does one abide? What does this mean? If we don’t abide in Him, nothing else matters.

John 15 is all about the vine and the branches. Abiding is about staying connected, growing and bearing fruit.

It’s what we want for these confirmands, is it not? But not just them, all of us, right?

- 1) Stay connected—Jesus is life itself! When He said, “Apart from me you can do no good thing,”(v. 5) He meant it. We draw life, strength and joy from Him not just because we need it, but because He’s happy to give it! So stay connected in prayer, and the fellowship of the church, but especially in those means of Grace, in Word and Sacrament...those are the ways that Christ connects to you. Stay connected to Jesus.
- 2) Grow—Healthy things grow naturally as a response to having what is needed. Growth is a gift, growth is a God thing. It’s what all living things are made for. The farmer can’t explain it, but he knows how to bring it about. Give it time, give it what it needs, invest in the process. It’s worth it. We’re bringing something

into maturity for a greater purpose beyond themselves. People are meant to grow spiritually.

- 3) Bear fruit—In the end, this is what we want to see—fruit! Jesus said to the disciples. “I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (v. 16). Fruit is the means of reproduction. Healthy things reproduce. A healthy church makes churches. A healthy disciple makes disciples. He is telling the disciples how they are to multiply.

Staying connected, growing, bearing fruit...these are the signs that we are abiding in Christ.

The nature of abiding recognizes that “Before we can do, we must be.” You can’t give what you don’t have. You can’t make what you’re not. It’s a really fundamental thing. Jesus says, “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.” Now Jesus didn’t obey the commandments to earn the Father’s love. Nor should you obey the commandments to earn God’s love. It doesn’t work that way. We are loved to begin with. And our obedience of the commandments that follows His love becomes then our expression of love for Him.

Abiding and obeying go together. Love and obedience go together. They are even the same thing! If you love the Lord, you’ll obey. If you don’t love the

Lord, you won't obey. Well, you say then, "I obey some of the times." That's right, because you love some of the times. See, this is what we can measure...obedience!

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." We're commanded to love one another. How do we know what that looks like? Because of how Jesus' perfect love for us. Sacrificial love. Greater love no man has but this, that he lay down his life for his friends. In this section, Jesus changes the identity of the disciples from servants to friends.

Why would a servant obey? The motive here may be fear of getting punished. Is that the kind of obedience God wants. No! A servant doesn't know his master's business. He doesn't know why he has to do something. He can't see the larger picture. When we don't understand the purpose for obedience, then we begin to believe that our behavior doesn't really matter. Or we'll only obey when someone is looking.

Why would a friend obey? The motive here is love and appreciation! The friend knows why something is commanded and he delights in doing it because he can see the purpose behind it. Jesus said that all he has heard from the Father, He has made known to the disciples, so they could be in the know. A friend's obedience has loyalty behind it.

The big picture for us is knowing God's will is to love as we have been loved. That's the abiding and obeying. That's what brings maturity.

"You are my friends if you do what I command you." Are we hearing this Friendship Celebration? We're commended, but we're also commanded.

In confirmation, we talked about how all the law can be summed up into two commandments. Love God, love your neighbor. But here, Jesus pushes it even further. Love for God and love for neighbor are merged together. How? Jesus wants us to obey his commandment, "Love one another." Because obedience is the same as love, when we obey commandment to love one another, we're at the same time showing love for God. The singular command is to love. Love is always the answer. Confirmands, and all the people of God gathered here, love is the A+ way to live and glorify God.

In Jesus' name, Amen.