

A Shepherding Church

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[This is an imperfect transcript from a pre-recorded sermon. Our volunteers work hard, but we appreciate your grace.]

John 13:34-35

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. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Greetings, Hope Church. Thanks for joining us online for our service this morning. Let me pray, as we jump into our topic today.

Father, we ask for you to minister to our people. They're your people, first and foremost, but it's our congregation here at Hope Evangelical Free Church. Whether it's those this morning, even right now, worshiping with us here in the church building or those in their homes, watching alone or with their family members and, Lord willing, discussing the things that we talk about and learn from your words. So teach us this morning, work in us, Father, and minister to us by your Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're in the second week of a series I'm just calling *Hope Church 2025*. And if you were with us last week, you heard me kind of give the origin of that. But just as we want to be faithful with who we are and where we are and what we're supposed to be doing, the elders have been discussing thinking strategically, longer term.

Meaning, not just kind of reacting to the moment and the needs that are here, but thinking about strategically developing making disciples more faithfully, being on mission more faithfully, and just being more strategic in the assignment we've been given as an embassy of God's kingdom here, at Hope Evangelical Free Church. And then I shared with you last week, my kind of reticence to even like vision talk, only in the sense of the church is not Google or IBM or Apple. The church has been given a manual by which

it is supposed to respond, to be faithful and disciple. But even with that manual, we talked about last week and in the sermon, I just called the need for vision, even with the manual of God's Word. It is clear that our ministry needs to reflect the people to whom we're ministering and the people with whom we're ministering and the nature and the season of life that we're in. And so there's room for that, and being Biblical.

So we've wrestled with as a staff and ultimately as elders, four visional goals that we want to begin to think about implementing as part of the culture of our church. And you're going to hear me say that the culture of a church, not just a program, not just something that kind of you turn on and off, but the culture of a church so that it's embedded in our DNA. It's how we think it's how we work and how we act. I think you'll find that each of these four visions are deeply biblical. In fact, I'm going to start this morning by explaining how a church's vision for ministry needs to obey what I'm just going to call the three commands of King Jesus. If you were going to step back and - sometimes it's good to do this, right? - cause the Bible can just be loaded with so many verses and so many chapters and so many Biblical books, it's kind of hard to get the big picture. To see the forest in the midst of the plethora of trees. But if you were just to step back and look, you will find that in the New Testament, that is in the new covenant, the relational situation, in which we now exist through Jesus Christ, Jesus gave three specific commands to his church.

Now these commands, I think, fit not only what a church is supposed to be doing and guiding its ministries to look like, but even what an individual Christian should see as his duties. Jesus gave three specific commandments that explain the purpose of the church.

The first two are called the great commandments. And later in the gospel of John, he gives a third, called the new commandment. Or you could even just translate that as another commandment. And those three commandments you may know if you've been discipled or catechized in the church at all. You may have heard these.

They are simply to love God, to love neighbor, and to love one another. Brothers and sisters, that is such a helpful and important category to understand what it means to do the Christian life. Everything we do should fall under one of those three commands. It should be reflecting and motivated by a love for God, a love for neighbor, and a love for one another.

A love for God means that the church has an upward ministry. In many ways that "love God" commandment carries the force of all the commands in scripture, that everything we do should be directed toward and devoted to God, everything we do. Now, when we think about love for God, that's kind of an all-consuming category. Everything should be love God, everything should be about him. And that is that upward worship. That might my vocation, my work, my family life, my personal/private life, my finances, my gifts, my body - all of that should be used to declare a love for God. That's an upward ministry.

What about love neighbor? Love neighbor is an outward ministry. Again, think of the categories. Love God is upward, love neighbor is an outward ministry. In fact, we can think of the commandment to love neighbor as an extension of Jesus's ministry in the world. When God says that we're to love neighbor, we are to reflect the love Christ had for the world, and the church, as the body of Christ, is an extension of the ministry of Christ in the world. That is not just an add on and "neighbor" isn't just simply the people that we like, like friends or entertainment. It's connected to the categories of hospitality, of special grace ministry - declaring the gospel to people, and of common grace ministry - of loving and caring for one another in practical and tangible ways.

So there's the first two: "Love God" is upward ministry. "Love neighbors" is outward ministry. "Love one another" is the third commandment. You may be able to tell where I'm going to go with this. If the love of God is upward and love of neighbor is outward, love one another is an inward ministry - it's ministry that's done in the church.

If the love of neighbor is an extension of Christ ministry in the world, love of one another is an extension of Christ's ministry in the church. The church is this family and, in the family, there is love and care for one another. The church has assigned to display the father's love and care for God's children.

Brothers and sisters, I just love the simplicity of those three commandments of King Jesus. "Love God" - upward ministry, "love neighbor" - outward ministry, "love one another" - inward, in the church. Ministry with "love God" being this all-consuming category, and love of neighbor and one another reflecting Christ's ministry, and extension of Christ ministry in the world as the body of Christ, and an extension of Christ ministry in the church as the care of the father for his children.

Those are the categories, and kids if you're listening to me, you can memorize that too. If I were to come up to you and say, "Hey, what are the three commands that King Jesus gives to his people? Young and old?" You could say them, and maybe even with mom and dad practice them this week. "Love God, love neighbor and love one another." And everything we do, and everything we say should be aiming to obey those commands. And those aren't just kinds of checklists, like to-do lists you put on the fridge or put in your phone and your calendar. That becomes the kind of people that we are, that we have an upward and outward and an inward ministry as we obey the three commands of King Jesus.

So, step back with me now, when you have a church being faithful, then everything that church should be doing should fit the three commands of King Jesus. And that's the first vision that we're going to look at today. Vision one fits one of those commands, specifically the third command, the "love one another" or the inward ministry that Christ commands in his church.

So let me move on to the second point this morning and it's this; let me give you "vision one" and talk about it with you for a few minutes. Vision one is that we would be a *shepherding church*. Now the image I want you to think when you think of a shepherding church is the image of a **heart**, which kind of brings to mind love and affection, care and compassion, that we want to be a shepherding church.

Our goal is to forge a church culture - there's that word again. Not just a program, but a church culture of shepherding in congregational care that begins all the way at the top, with the shepherding responsibilities of the pastor elders, and extends throughout the

congregation to the mode and the manner of engagement between and among every participant in this local family of God. This kind of culture will manifest itself not just in programs, as much as there may be some that facilitate this, but this kind of culture will manifest itself in postures and practices that reflect family love, family respect, personal care and spiritual intentionality. That's "vision one".

And part of you might be hearing and say, well, that isn't actually remarkable at all.

No! What would be remarkable is to actually seek to implement this. That is, to strategically and intentionally hear this command from King Jesus and to strive in every way to obey this.

Let me talk about this commandment of "love one another". It comes from a passage in the gospel of John, John 13. It's at the beginning of a long speech called the farewell discourse. Right when Jesus is celebrating the first Lord's supper, literally just before he moves to the garden and is betrayed and arrested and crucified, these last few moments of his teaching ministry before his death on the cross, he's explaining the Christian life to his disciples.

He explains that ministry on earth is changing because of his impending Ascension. And he says that literally in John 13, verse 33, - he's talking about his leaving - so his ministry is going to look different. Remember we talked about that "love one another" commandment as an inward ministry. And what is this inward ministry? It is an extension of Christ's ministry in the church. So right before Jesus gives the verses we're going to look at, the same morning, verses 34 and 35 of John 13, he's explaining that he is about to go, but he's also explaining, and he will give this later in the farewell discourse, that ministry is not supposed to stop.

We the church, Jesus is saying, are his body. We are the body of Christ, who are filled with his spirit, who ministers to us, the ministry of Jesus Christ. How beautiful is that image to think about the church literally being the hands and the feet, the heart of Jesus? And compelled by the Holy Spirit to show that kind of love to the children of God? Who would not want to be plugged into a local church that's doing that?

Look with me at verses 34 to 35, John 13. Jesus says this: "a new commandment I give to you." (I wonder if he could almost just say "another commandment", this being the 'third I give to you.')

"that you love one another."

And then he explains this, here's the teaching, here's the "how" (you got the "what" - here's "what" I want you to do - I want you to love one another). Here's how: " just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

That may be one of the scariest statements in all of scripture, because do you know the magnitude of the love of Christ for you? Do you know how

much he sacrificed for you? Do you know how much he was gracious with your sinful rebellion and misunderstanding?

And you're telling me, Jesus, that I'm supposed to show that kind of grace, that kind of mercy, that kind of compassion, that kind of sacrifice to people that can offend me, that they would vote different than I would vote, that they would disagree on masks that I might have an opinion on, that they would say things that are rude and at moments be selfish?

You're telling me I got to be that gracious to them? Wait, I get it, Jesus. Because I was that to you. I was offensive to you. I was rebuking, I was prideful to you. I wasn't interested in you. I was filled with sin and death and you, in spite of my broken condition and selfish response and poor behavior, you gave up your life for me, that's love.

And now I, after receiving new life in Christ, after being filled with the Holy spirit, now I have the privilege and responsibility of being a conduit of your love for brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's the commandment.

You and I are to love one another, our brothers and sisters in Christ in this church, as Christ Jesus has loved us. That's not a program. That's a culture, that's a family. That's where we are willing to forgive. We listen, we are slow to anger. We love people, even when they're different than that, even when they offend us. We love them as Christ, as Christ did show that love for us.

Notice what verse 35 adds "by this," (like when this is happening in the kingdom embassy of a local church, like Hope Church) "by this, all people will know that you're my disciples. If you have love for one another."

It isn't just as conduit of love that is experienced in among the body of Christ, it is a witness. It is a banner. It is a declaration to the world that this place is different, that in this place, the love of God moves, and exists, and is at work.

Clearly the command that Jesus is giving is reflecting the way Jesus will manifest his presence through the indwelling Holy Spirit in the church, after his Ascension and under the new covenant. The departure of Jesus demands, and now plans, that God's love for the world that Jesus brought here is expressed between the children of the Father.

See, it's known it's not enough anymore for Christians or the church to speak of the love of God as a mere truth to believe. The Bible didn't want you just to believe that God is love. It doesn't even just want you to accept and receive the love of God. It wants you to be a conduit of the love of God. It's not just a belief that God is love. It is a command to obey. It's a promise that we are blessed to practice.

Now it's so easy for us, because we're just trained to be consumers. And we shop in these stores and they provide a service, and we eat in these restaurants and they provide a service, and it would be so tempting for you and me to come to church and the church provides a service.

And before you go there, I want to remind you from God's word that the church was never merely an audience of Christ's work, but an associate minister in and of Jesus Christ. In fact, if you have your notes, in Ephesians 4: 11 - 12, I give you a text, and we've used this text before. Because, as a free church, as Congregationalists, we believe that the Spirit empowers not just a few paid staff members to be conduits of the love of God, but he empowers all of its members, all believers in Jesus Christ, to be conduits of the love of God, so that you can love and care for people by the Spirit, in obedience to Christ's command, to love one another. You, every one of you, as a believer in Jesus Christ can do that just as effectively as I can. Why? Because it's the Spirit of God working in us. Because it's the love of God moving through us. It's not just gifting or training. It's new life in Christ that makes this possible. But Paul explains this in Ephesians 4 11-12, he's explaining that God gave -and he gives a list of these offices in the church, like prophets and apostles, but I'll cut to the chase - God gave shepherds and teachers.

Why?

Verse 12 in Ephesians 4: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry."

Brothers and sisters, we need to hear that so much in our service-oriented church experience - who are the ministers at this church? Well there are some staff ministers, I'm one of them, but the entire membership is a collection of lay ministers in the gospel, Ephesians 4:12. You are associate ministers of the gospel if you are a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of this church. God gave shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ - Ephesians 4:11-12. So literally when I am doing right now is fulfilling Ephesians 4:11-12. I'm

reminding you or teaching you as a shepherd and teacher of Christ's command for you to love one another as part of your ministry, and you then fulfill that to do the work of the ministry. How beautiful is that?

So when you think of a shepherding church, don't think a program, think a *culture*. And the image I want you to have, the one that we'd like to use to regularly instruct us in this way, is the image of the *heart*. Think of a heart.

Let me give you one more example, before I end with some practical applications.

The church has long used the metaphor of mother to describe its ministry, the ministry of the church among the brothers and sisters of Christ, the children of God. The church has long described itself as a mother.

John Calvin in a famous comment in his Ephesians commentary, give these words.

" The church is the common mother of all the godly, which bears, nourishes, and brings up children to God, kings and peasants alike; and this is done by the ministry."

I love that quote! Think of the church, like a family and the church and all of its members are like a mother. With God as the father, the church serves like a mother. This is just an image, a metaphor, a symbol to describe the actions that the church does. It bears, it evangelizes, and God gives faith to people and they become believers in Jesus Christ. But that happens in the womb of the church, with brothers and sisters in coffee shops and in living rooms, in sanctuaries, gathering around - God gives new birth.

Calvin used the word "nourishes". It takes a young, new Christian and raises them up. Whether children in our kids' ministry, or youth in our youth ministry, or an adult in one of our classes, or in one of our small groups, are meeting with people in the church - the church is nourishing them like a mother would her child.

And it brings up children to God from new in the faith, when they're just drinking milk, all the way to solid food. The church, like a mother is raising the children of the father, kings and peasants alike. Doesn't matter what you bring in categories of this world. That is what the church looks like, it's what it does.

Having been loved by the father, the church is commanded by Christ to love one another, like a mother nurturing all the children of God. But men, before you think that the church is a collection of soft and tender caregivers (realize there's truth in that, and there's a place - God is clearly described as a father in the Bible, and there are times when the depictions of God maybe fits more of the category of the gender of male than we're used to thinking in this culture), but there's so many places where God, the Father, has this nourishing characteristic that maybe we would logically slot next to the activities of a mother. God is not limited by that. He's both sacrificial in giving and loving, and yet he can be firm and strong and supportive. In fact, I would hope that I, as a father could have those same traits. I could be firm and supportive and protective, and I could cuddle with my children, love them, care for them in intimate ways, emotionally connect with them well, just as God the Father does with us.

So before you think the church is just a collection of soft and tender caregivers, realize that the Bible also describes the church's warriors facing a fierce enemy and the church's ministry as a battle requiring strength and endurance. At one place in Hebrews, the author says: "Make strong your weak arm and feeble knees", like basically saying lift weights, lift the weights of the gospel. You gotta buck up. You gotta build up some muscle. Toughen up. Let's go. The same God who can describe ministry in the Christian life as a vigorous athletic competition, can also say that you should love these people, that inward ministry of care.

Just in the last few months, I can think of scenes in our own church where that has happened. Let me give you a couple little mental images of things I've seen. I've been in a living room with a sister in Christ, in this church, who lost one of her siblings who lived in a different state. And I sat in there in her living room with two other sisters in Christ from this church, mourning with her, encouraging her, being with her.

I've seen meals delivered to people and know of activity done: the cooking of meals, the delivering, the organizing for that to happen. I've seen the generosity of financial gifts to people where money has been tight. This wasn't through church activity, this wasn't through some kind of work-for-pay system. This was just brothers and sisters sharing of their resources with their family because they care. I even have that image of a brother taking a screwdriver and going up to someone's engine that was struggling and putting the screwdriver to his ear, which shocked me to death. That

somebody was so gifted mechanically that by putting the screwdriver to ear to part of the engine, could try to determine what was wrong with the car.

But then these, brothers and sisters, these things I'm describing are happening by men and by women, but all of them are describing a culture of a shepherding church, where we love and respect and care and are spiritually intentional with one another.

Let me end by this third and last point this morning. And it's a question that I'll try to answer. So, what does a shepherding church look like? Again, don't think program, think culture.

What would a shepherding culture of a church look like?

The New Testament is stocked full of explanations that try to explain this command-ment in John 13. Loving one another happens, for example, when the church forgives one another, when they pray for one another, when they edify one another, when they reconcile with one another, when they serve one another, when they teach one another, when they submit to one another, when they offer generosity and hospitality . . . that's just to name a few

Let me just end by giving you five postures and practices by way of application.

Now, while these reflect the culture of the church, I think these five are also useful for you as an individual believer. These are postures and practices that you could adopt to try to be faithful in living out a shepherding vision of a local church.

The first is this: be present.

One of the most important ways you can show love to one another is to gather and be present. You're just present. You're there. The Bible commands, regular corporate worship attendance. And there's wisdom in that. That's just one way that we honor God. And again, this isn't about attendance, it's about presence. There are so many ways that you can plug in.

To be honest with you, think about this with your kids. Whether they're grown or still in the home. Most days in your family are unremarkable;

they're just quite simple. Every- one gets up - that argument over what to wear, that shirt wasn't washed, we are out of toast, we need more cereal, off to school, off to work, come home, get some homework, done, have dinner as a family, get in a little argument between two siblings, clean the room, go to bed - let's do it again the next day. Most days are unremarkable.

But the cumulative impact of those days raises children.

The cumulative impact of those days is our life together.

Most Sunday mornings would be unremarkable - sing some songs, some we knew, some we didn't, meet with people that we regularly get to see, hear from God's Word, try to grow together, fellowship, serve in a certain capacity - it's not like we just walked into Disneyland and there's a brand new ride.

They're unremarkable days, but the cumulative effect of those days is the life of the family. Because I have a feeling, long when my kids are gone, that I will not be remembering a trip to Disneyland several years ago, but just the cuddles on the couch, or the bedtime stories, or sitting around the table together.

And there's probably hundreds of those that cumulatively remind me that I was part of something bigger than me, of great significance. And that is so true of the family of God and the church. Be present. Be here for a long time. Be here on Sunday mornings, be in small groups and classes, men's and women's activities, and youth group, and children's classes.

Be involved; be present.

Number two, be personal. Learn people's names, greet one another, invite people over to lunch or out for coffee. Right now, the introverts are kind of cringing inside. So do it at your pace and in your way. Socialize after service, be a faithful member of a small group. You don't need to be an extrovert, know everybody - but you just try to connect. You find a select group, your small group with whom you have communal life together. Be personal, be known, and know others.

So those are the first two: be present, be personal.

Third, be persevering. Anything worthwhile takes time. If we're going to create a shepherding culture at Hope Evangelical Free Church, it's not going to happen with a sermon series and a couple of teaching sessions. It's going to happen because the spirit of God fills us with a desire to have a life that is a conduit of Christ's ministry in the church. Be persevering. Love and relationships are cooked better in a Crock-Pot than a microwave. Love and relationships are cooked better in a pot than a microwave; it is unremarkable most of the time, but perseverance develops deep trenched connections that are rooted in the ground that lasts for a lifetime.

Fourth, be practical. Love is often described as an action, and in the church love should be regularly given in acts of service. Think wisely and generously about using your time, your talent and your treasures for your siblings in Christ. Be generous and hospitable, but be practical. And that's something we can all do. We can all cook a meal. We can all mow a lawn. We can all help somebody move. We can all help with someone's kid. Or many of us could do these things. We can all pray for somebody. We can all send a note or make a call of encouragement. That is the love of Christ happening in our midst.

That's what Christ would do. He would help somebody move. He'd load a truck. He'd make a meal. He'd watch someone's kid. He'd be praying for you. He'd sit in your living room when you lost your sibling. He'd give you money, when you can't make a bill. He'd be helping you fix your car. He'd meet you for lunch. That's the church.

Those are four: be present, be personal, be persevering, be practical. Last, be pastoral.

This year, we have encouraged our church in our summer series to see that evangelism and discipleship and spiritual growth is done by means of relationship. We spoke about relational disciple-making as a way of life. Be pastoral. That doesn't mean you have to be in the office of the pastor as I am.

It simply means you are a shepherd "lowercase S". You're shepherding people. You're intentional spiritual with people. So, a question I would ask - in whom are you investing right now? Brothers and sisters of Christ, if you have just a small amount of spiritual maturity, there must be somebody in whom you're investing in.

You might have a bunch of little kids around you or teenage kids, and a lot of your investment time goes there. Fair enough. But if you have space to invest in somebody else, in whom are you investing? Who are you meeting for early morning breakfasts? Who do you call or text with notes of encouragement? Who? There has got to be a couple of people on your list?

I remember I was getting orange juice, my junior year of college. And I've told the story here before, but my coach, Leslie Frazier, currently a defensive coordinator for the Buffalo bills, but he was the head football coach at Trinity when I played there. He was very intentional in relationships and in ministry. I was a junior and I was getting orange juice and here comes coach Frazier.

This is the morning of training camp, before school starts, when we would come in about three or four weeks before school and do football stuff, basically all day. I'm getting some orange juice and Frazier comes up, stands next to me, not even looking at me, he's getting, I think, apple juice, and he says, "So Mickey, who are you going to pick?"

And I had no idea what he was talking about. Who am I going to pick? And I'm kind of looked at him. I said, "Coach, I don't know what you're talking about." He says, "Who are you going to pick?" And I said, "Coach, help me with this." And he goes, "Did you notice that there was an older player kind of keeping tabs on you, checking in on you the last two years?"

The guy's name was Travis. I knew exactly what we'd talked about. I said, "yeah, that was Travis." He goes, "He picked you, and I asked him once who he was going to pick. So, who you going to pick?" I got it then. See, what coach had done is he wasn't himself just investing in people, but he was encouraging his students, his players, when they got to be a junior, when they'd been there a couple of years, that they would then start investing in the players younger than they were.

So, I literally turned back and he's standing there. I'm looking at this table of a bunch of freshmen and I see a kid named PJ and I say, "I choose PJ." He goes, "good choice. That would have been one of the two I would have selected for you." So, he puts his hand on my shoulder. "Have at it. Let's go. Don't delay; invest in him."

That's a football coach, a Christian football coach encouraging me, an older football player, to invest in a younger football player. What should that look

like in the church, brothers and sisters? Who do you pick? Who do you pick? Who are you going to invest in? See that's what a culture looks like. People are present, they're personal, they're persevering, they're practical, and they're pastoral.

That's our first vision. It's big. Isn't it? It's a big vision. You can't put that in a program or it doesn't even fit on a plaque of some sort. You can't make t-shirts out of this. But man, when we become, Lord willing, a shepherding church, it is palpable. And as Christ explained in John 13, it's not only those inside the church that know and feel that love of God, but those outside will point and say, "Those people follow Jesus."

That's my prayer - this first vision - that's my prayer for us, that we would be a shepherding church.

Father, thank you for your word, which ministered to us today. Help us as we try to become a shepherding church, to know and follow what that means each and every day as part of a culture of Christian life in this place. I pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.