

A NEW COMMANDMENT

The Transformative Power of Redeeming Love

Camille Fronk Olson

Camille Fronk Olson is a professor of ancient
scripture at Brigham Young University.

Before the scourging and the cross was Gethsemane. And before Gethsemane was the Last Supper. In an upper room that Jesus preselected (see Luke 22:7–13 and Mark 14:12–16), he created an environment to poignantly communicate the importance of what was about to happen to him that would enable the gift of eternal salvation and blessings in mortality for all of humankind.

In a testimony addressed to deeply converted followers of Jesus Christ, the Apostle John devoted one-fourth of his entire Gospel, five of twenty-one chapters (John 13–17), to events and teachings that occurred during or shortly after the Last Supper.

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Leonardo da Vinci, The Last Supper.

Previously, Jesus had reminded his followers that his “hour” was not yet come. His hour was neither at the time he turned water into wine in Cana (see John 2:4), neither at a previous Passover when many in Jerusalem wanted to kill him (see John 7:8), nor when he taught in the temple treasury, “that knowing him was akin to knowing the Father and they wanted to kill him” (John 8:19–20). Now, with the fourth and final feast of the Passover marking his ministry approaching, he “knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which went in the world, he loved them unto the end” (John 13:1). Here in this upper room, he prepared to show his perfect love, poured out through action and word, a harbinger of the infinite redeeming love he would pour out through pain and agony during the next twenty-four hours.

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In this upper-room setting, Jesus gave them “a new commandment” that requires a change in the way we see each other and the way we reverence him. He explained, “That ye love one another; as I have loved you. . . . By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34–35). I want to explore how obedience to this new commandment is at the heart of our being changed forever through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. By serious consideration of how Jesus illustrated and described how we learn to love others as he loves them, we may choose to progress along this transformative spiritual journey. Specifically, I will focus on Jesus washing the feet of the Twelve in John 13, his imagery of us as branches on the true vine in John 15, and the culmination of the upper-room experience, when he prayed to the Father that we be made “one” as the Father is in him and as he is in the Father (John 17:21).

Washing Feet

In what must have been a surprise to the Twelve, Jesus arose during the supper to wash their feet.¹ Hosts often provided water for guests to pour over their feet when they first arrived to their home or right before they dined, but seeing the *host* washing the guests’ feet and *during* a meal would have been wholly unexpected.

The text indicates that what Jesus would do next was purposeful and in full awareness of his role as the Only Begotten of the Father: “Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; he riseth from supper” with the intent to wash their feet

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(John 13:3–4). Here the scene unfolds. As the One sent from God, Jesus replaced his traditional clothing with a towel draped around him, taking upon him the appearance of a servant and doing a task of the lowliest of servants. The towel that he used was long enough to fasten at the shoulder, wrap around him, and allow excess at the end to use for drying.² He began to pour water over the feet of the Apostles to wash them, probably catching the runoff in another container beneath their feet, and then dried them with the towel he wore. Remembering that the men would have been reclining around a *triclinium*, the traditional three-sided table that rested on or near the ground, makes this scene easier to imagine. The men’s feet would have been uncovered, with their legs extended behind them as Jesus came by with the water and towel.

One can only imagine the surprise, even shock, that the Apostles experienced with this unprecedented act during the meal. Only Peter, however, is reported to have objected when Jesus approached him. “Lord, dost thou wash my feet?” (John 13:6) or in the Joseph Smith Translation, “Thou needest not to wash my feet.” Putting ourselves in the place of Peter, we might understand his discomfort. Certainly, Peter would have gladly washed the feet of Jesus, if requested, but not the other way around. Like Peter, we struggle to believe that Jesus can reach so low. Washing of feet was considered so demeaning that Jewish aristocrats would not assign their Jewish servants to perform the task; only non-Jewish slaves could be so charged.³

How, we may ask, can Jesus love and sacrifice for a sinner so proud and rebellious as I am (see *Hymns*, no. 193)? We can readily accept Jesus as our Lord, Master, Redeemer, and

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Savior—but not our lowliest servant! So when Jesus responds to Peter, “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter,” Peter was still confused and again protested, “Thou shalt never wash my feet.” Again, the text reminds us that what Jesus is doing is tied to what awaits him “hereafter.” The Apostles will not be able to fully appreciate what he is illustrating until after his mortal mission is complete. Giving Peter a greater hint, Jesus warned, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me” (John 13:7–8). Peter must have begun to understand, because at this point, he asked Jesus to not stop with his feet but to wash all of him. I have tried to understand why Peter resisted so long and what Jesus wanted him to see.

In an unrelated and unexpected way, I discovered insight to better appreciate how washing feet in this setting illustrates an aspect of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. During the Christmas season several years ago, I came up with a brilliant idea for a gift for friends who have everything. I decided to give them an experience that would provide a brief moment of pampering and relaxed conversation. Without previous appointment, I visited each of their homes with a variety of nail polishes, buffers, and a foot-soaking basin in hand, and an offer for a Christmas pedicure. Each visit began with complete surprise and guarded appreciation but ended with evidence of a sweet bonding experience. All of this I think I expected. What I didn’t expect was the number of my friends who suddenly had a quick emergency in the other room while I was filling the small basin with warm water. It happened often enough that I began to watch for it. Where did they go? What was the sudden emergency? Knowing that every pedicure begins with foot washing, I sensed that they opted

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to first wash their feet in private before putting them in my basin of sudsy water.

Besides the fact that Peter did not want to humiliate the Savior to the position of slave and foot washer, are there other reasons he may have resisted? Because he knew his feet were dirty, was he hoping to hide the filth from Jesus's view, thinking perhaps Jesus hadn't noticed? Remembering Peter's initial rejection to Jesus's act, "Thou needest not to wash my feet" (Joseph Smith Translation, John 13:6), did Peter think he could easily wash himself without drawing help from or bothering the Master? Seen from this perspective, I wonder if Jesus wasn't reminding Peter and all of us that he knows we are dirty—very dirty—including impure and sullied habits, desires, and attributes that we can easily hide from the world—but not from him. Dust-covered feet reflect the hardships and fatigue of the day and can represent all of our needs, even our humblest ones.

The Savior also knows that as much as we like to think otherwise, we cannot truly cleanse ourselves from the filth of the world and mortality. It is only through the cleansing power of the Atonement that we ever become truly and completely clean. When we recognize and embrace that truth, we will run to turn our filthiness over to the Savior, hiding nothing at all, and ask for his unbounded love to thoroughly wash us. His love for us stretches even to become our servant. That may be hard for us to accept, but the Savior is telling us that we must embrace this view of the condescension of God. Considered from a different angle, while the Twelve partook of the bread and wine of the feast, the Bread of Life and Living Water purified them in ways they could never realize on their own. One biblical scholar interpreted the scene

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Del Parson, Jesus Washing the Feet of the Apostles. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

this way: “[Jesus] rises from the settledness of supper and lays aside the protectiveness (and perhaps attractiveness) of clothing. And he washes feet.”²⁴ Like his garments that he laid aside to pour out water to cleanse others, the Savior laid down his life, poured out or emptied himself, and took up his life again—all to save each one of us.

Completing the task of foot washing, Jesus returned to his place at the table and again covered himself in his traditional garments, saying, “Ye call me Master and Lord: and

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ye say well; for so *I am*” (John 13:13; emphasis added). After his descent to a place of servitude, he ascends to his place as Jehovah, the Great I Am, to teach a second reason for washing their feet in that setting. He explained, “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him” (John 13:14–16). It isn’t enough to be willing and desirous to wash the Savior’s feet or even to allow him to wash our feet. We need to be ready to wash each other’s feet, to love one another as the Savior loves us, even to humble ourselves to selflessly serve one another, including those who do not yet know and follow the Master. In short, when we love others as Jesus loves, we will recognize the divine in every son and daughter of God and lose ourselves in service to them.

In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus taught, “For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? Is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth” (Luke 22:27; see also Matthew 20:26–27). Jesus Christ offers us his boundless love whether he appears as Servant or Master. The Apostle Paul recorded a similar truth to the Philippians, perhaps already known as a poem or canticle that Paul applied to Jesus:

Who being in the form of God,
thought it not robbery to be equal with God:
But made himself of no reputation,
and took upon him the form of a servant,
and was made in the likeness of men:

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And being found in fashion as a man,
he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death,
even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

If we will readily and repeatedly accept that Jesus loves us, we will graciously acknowledge our divine indebtedness to him by entrusting him with all our sins and weaknesses, knowing he alone can cleanse us. Then, with our souls filled with the love of Jesus Christ, we will show that same love to others in meek and lowly service. In this way, we invite them to find the Savior’s love. “If ye know these things,” Jesus summarized, “happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17). In other words, happiness comes not by merely knowing and teaching this truth; happiness is the gift we receive when we actively engage in it.

The True Vine

The Savior’s sacrifice for us accomplished more than cleansing us from sin and evil. His sacrifice empowers us to produce good fruit—and lots of it. In the first seven verses of John 15, Jesus illustrated how we may remain faithful and fruitful disciples. In this allegory, he identified himself as “the true vine,” the Father as the gardener or husbandman, and us as the branches that have life only as we “abide” or remain wholeheartedly committed to Jesus, the only true, real, or authentic support for a fruitful life.

Vine imagery was common in the ancient world, including among the Israelites. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel each described God’s covenant people, or Israel, as a potentially fruitful vineyard that repeatedly disappointed the Lord by producing only bitter fruit. The prophets warned that a vine

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that produces no fruit at all or consistently produces bitter fruit is finally good only for fuel (Isaiah 5:1–7; 27:2–6; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10–13; Ezekiel 15:1–8; 17:5–10).

One of the most striking embellishments on the temple in Jerusalem was the vine made of pure gold that adorned the entryway into the sanctuary. Josephus, an eyewitness of Herod's magnificent temple, noted the "largeness and fine workmanship" of the golden vine⁵ and that the golden clusters that hung on the vine were as tall as a man.⁶ In contrast to Israel's failed attempts to produce sustained obedience and loyalty to God, Jesus proclaimed himself as the "true vine," the only sweet-fruit-producing vine. Israel, or God's covenant people, is not the true source of life. Jesus Christ is the only source. In contrast to a golden vine of adornment that can never reproduce, Jesus presented himself as the only way whereby sustained spiritual nourishment multiplies and satisfies forever. In his humble and selfless manner, as the true vine, Jesus then gives all credit and glory to the Gardener, his Father, who oversees and authorizes the entire process of eternal salvation. Considering the sentence that immediately precedes the vine imagery, "Arise, let us go hence," (John 14:31), perhaps Jesus and the Eleven had left the upper room and were walking toward Gethsemane, going past the temple and massive golden vine, when he said, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1).

Jesus explained to the Eleven the consequences for not bearing fruit and the pruning necessary for branches if they will continue to produce good fruit. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you"

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(John 15:2–3). The Greek word here, translated “purge,” is other places rendered as “cleanse” or “purify,” as in morally free from stain, or “moral purity.”⁷ To be morally free from worldly stains requires us to repent through faith in Christ that he will purify or purge us from the evil. The word has also been considered to mean “prop up.”⁸ No matter how low we fall, through faith and repentance in his name, he will lift us up and make us fruitful again. Finally, these verses indicate that purging, propping up, and purifying are supported by spiritual nourishment received through hearing and heeding his spoken “word.”

A vinedresser follows a two-step process in pruning to encourage more fruit. In the winter, he cuts off and removes dry and withered branches, and when the vine spouts new leaves in the spring, he “purges” or pinches off smaller shoots from the fruit-bearing branches to concentrate nourishment on the good branches to produce even more fruit.⁹ To bear good fruit, we must be filled with more and more of his love and develop a deeper desire to follow his teachings. Jesus is the embodiment of all that he teaches. When he lives in us, his words are “written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3). When we obey his commandments because we love him, we become seamless extensions of him. When his word lives in us, the entire plant—stalk and branches—together becomes the true vine without any evidence to distinguish where one part ends and the other begins.

Elias Chacour, a Palestinian Christian who lives near Galilee, wrote of the resulting phenomenon when various grafts are introduced in fig trees to explain how Jews and Palestinians, whether natural or grafted branches, soon merge

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together into God's chosen people of faith. He described that his "father had grafted six different kinds of fig trees together to make a delightful new tree. Beneath the rough bark where my hand rested, I knew that the living wood had fused together so perfectly that, should I cut the tree down, I could never see where one variety stopped and the other began."¹⁰ The imagery of bonding branches in vines and fig trees echoes the Apostle Paul's depiction of the Church as various parts of one body—but that body to which we all may belong is the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

Several years ago, I read a little booklet written by a Christian pastor who reported an exchange with an owner of a large vineyard in Northern California. The vineyard owner related his insights to this scriptural passage after years of working in the fields. "New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground," the vineyard owner explained, "but they don't bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed. The branch becomes sick and useless." To which the pastor asked, "What do you do? Cut it off and throw it away?" The vineyard owner quickly answered, "Oh, no! The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches. We lift them up and wash them off. . . . Then we wrap them around the trellis or tie them up. Pretty soon they're thriving."¹¹

The vineyard owner's experience of washing sullied branches echoes the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah's portrayal of God's people as a potentially fruitful vineyard that too often produced bitter fruit, even after being washed with



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cleansing agents and “much soap” (Jeremiah 2:21–22; see also Isaiah 5:1–7). As inheritors of fallen earth, we have a tendency to bend downwards toward the course of least resistance, where we are easily tainted by the world and lose the love of God in us. Through repentance and the Lord’s cleansing forgiveness, we may again be propped up, nourished, and purified and return to becoming fruitful.

Jesus used the word *abide* seven times in four verses to describe the necessary relationship between fruitful branches and the vine.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it **abide** in the vine; no more can ye, except ye **abide** in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that **abideth** in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

If a man **abide** not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye **abide** in me, and my word **abide** in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” (John 15:4–7; emphasis added).

The imagery intensifies the meaning of *abide* to suggest far more than simply remaining loyal or connected. Abiding with him means that disciples will stand steadfast to his teachings, even when persecution, questions, temptations, or tragedy try to pull them down. Abiding with him means that disciples desire to serve him everlastingly more than they desire the praise of the world. The result for the vine and branches is vibrant, mutual

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in-dwelling that produces the very fullness of joy for everyone. He explained his desired outcome to the Eleven, saying, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11).

In the October 2016 general conference, Elder D. Todd Christofferson explored the rich relationship that results when we abide in the Savior and he abides in us.

To “continue in” or “abide in” the Savior’s love means to receive His grace and be perfected by it. To receive His grace, we must have faith in Jesus Christ and keep His commandments, including repenting of our sins, being baptized for the remission of sins, receiving the Holy Ghost, and continuing in the path of obedience. God will always love us, but He cannot save us in our sins. . . .

Beyond rendering the penitent person guiltless and spotless . . . there is a second vital aspect of abiding in the love of God. Abiding in His love will enable us to realize our full potential, to become even as He is. . . .

To abide in God’s love in this sense means to submit fully to His will. It means to accept His correction when needed, “for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Heb. 12:6). It means to love and serve one another as Jesus has loved and served us (John 15:12). It means to learn “to abide the law of a celestial kingdom” so that we can “abide a celestial glory” (D&C 88:22). For Him to be able to make of us what we can become, our Heavenly Father pleads with us to yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and [put] off the natural man and [become] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and [become] as a child, submissive, meek, humble,

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patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19).¹²

Fruit is the desired outcome in the allegory. God’s greatest redemptive purpose is to produce fruit. He has invited us to participate in this glorious process of fruit bearing or transformation. “I am the vine, ye are the branches,” he stated. Only by abiding in Jehovah, the Great *I Am*—the Always Existing One—and the Great *I Am* dwelling in us can we become like he is. Only as extensions of the true vine do we fully internalize his word, produce Christlike character and attributes, and thereby reach all of God’s children to invite them to learn of him and taste the sweetness of his word. Without his strength, we will wither and die. With his life-giving power, we can do and become all that he created us to do and be. As the Apostle Paul testified, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13).

The Great Intercessory Prayer

Having completed his teaching of the Eleven in the upper room, either still in the room or at Gethsemane, Jesus “lifted his eyes to heaven” to pray to the Father for them and for all those who would receive them. In part, the Savior petitioned the Father as follows:

And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. . . .

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. . . .

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Harry Anderson, Jesus Christ. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their words;

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That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me . . .

That the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:13, 15, 20–21, 26)

In what must be among the most selfless and poignant prayers ever uttered, Jesus imagines something akin to a chain of perfect love that forms a complete circle or an eternal round.¹³ Through the perfect love of God, the Father is gloriously united with the Son who did all that the Father asked him to do (John 17:4). Next, because of the Savior's sacrifice of selfless love, we may be resplendently united with the Son as his covenant sons and daughters. This empowering and fruitful unity occurs when we (1) willingly turn over our filthiness to him, trusting that he alone can cleanse us and (2) steadfastly abide in him to bear the fruit of joy that comes from obedience to his commandments and to represent him throughout the world. Finally, because of the great and infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ, we may become begotten sons and daughters of God and joint-heirs with Christ (see Romans 8:14–17, John 1:12, and D&C 76:24). Through the power of Christ's matchless love and willing acceptance as manifest through repentance and obedience, we are again reconciled to the Father with transformed characters, desires, and capacity to love one another as Jesus loves them.

Jesus taught that if we would come closer to him, we need to change our relationship with the world without departing out of the world. By separating our desires from what the world glorifies, even when surrounded by greed, deceit, and

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vengeance, we welcome the tutoring that uniquely comes through the Holy Spirit. Grace by grace, our hearts and minds are gradually transformed to be like that of our Savior's because we have allowed him to be in us as the Father is in him. In a holy familial reunion, we become "one" with the Father and his Son, even sealed to them as family forever.

On the eve before his crucifixion and shortly before his suffering in Gethsemane, fully aware that his "hour had come," Jesus orchestrated events in an upper room to teach his disciples the transformative power of perfect love. He told them, "Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The fact that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" makes the power of such love all the more transcendent (Romans 5:8). He has given each of us the invitation to abide by his "new commandment . . . that ye love one another; as I have loved you. . . . By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34–35). This Easter season, let us pray for greater faith to embrace the love he offers us and in turn, multiply his love by the way we respect and serve one another.

Notes

1. Even though verse 2 in the KJV reports that the dinner had ended (see John 13:2), one can see that they were still eating in verse 26. More accurately, verse 2 would read "supper being served," the translation suggested by Frank F. Judd Jr., *The Essential New Testament Companion: Key Insights to Your Gospel Study* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2014), 47; or "and supper was now in process," the translation suggested by F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 279.

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2. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 404.
3. Rabbi Joshua B. Levi taught, “All manner of service that a slave must render to his master a student must render to his teacher, except that of taking off his shoe”; the associated note adds: “Only a Canaanite slave performs this menial service, and a student performing it might be mistaken for such a slave,” *b.Ketub.* 96a.
4. Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 447.
5. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.11.3.
6. Josephus, *Wars*, 5.5.4. In latter Rabbinic literature, priests hung free-will offerings on the golden vine in the form of a gold-shaped “leaf, or a berry, or a cluster” until the “Temple treasury was in need” and the “treasurer took from the vine as much as was required” (*Middoth* 3.8). See also Tacitus, *History* 5.5, for the Roman historian’s notation of this breathtaking golden vine.
7. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:414.
8. Köstenberger, *John*, 451.
9. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII–XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 675.
10. Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984), 137.
11. Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of the Vine* (Sister, OR: Multnomah, 2001), 34–35.
12. D. Todd Christofferson, “Abide in My Love,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 48–49.
13. For the basis of this imagery, see Köstenberger, *John*, 457.