

LOVE GOD, LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

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Date: 25-10-2020

Scripture: Matthew 22: 34-40

We have been going through Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees. Jesus has just finished an encounter with the Sadducees and you remember that these are the ones who don't believe in the resurrection. So, they had a question that they brought to Jesus, and of course, Jesus was able to answer it. In vs. 33 it says, "When the crowds heard Him, they were astounded at His teaching."

Matthew 22: 34-40

But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees with His reply, they met together to question Him again. One of them, an expert in religious law tried to trap Him with this question, testing Him: "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"

Jesus replied, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

Then, if you follow through, Jesus turns and, as has been His want, asks the Pharisees a question. And His question has to do with - What do you think about the Messiah, whose son is He? And once again, the Pharisees are flat-footed. No one could answer Him, and after that, no one dared to ask Him any more questions.

But today, I'd like us to concentrate on vs. 34 to 40, just about the question: "Which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?" And Jesus' answer was two-fold: "You must love the Lord, your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. Second and equally important, love your neighbor as yourself. Love God, and love your neighbor. He says, "The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

The first one is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:9 where it says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The second is from Leviticus 19:18 "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

This question was answered in these two ways by Jesus, and it satisfied the Pharisees. They had nothing else that they could ask Him. But as we read this passage, I think a good question for us would be to ask ourselves: Are we loving God in the way that Jesus described? Are we loving our neighbors in the way that Jesus described? Because Jesus says that it is so important. The first and greatest commandment, and another one that is equally important. Therefore, it has bearing on both you and me.

So, it is incumbent upon us to look at it and say: How do we understand this? Because we know this, don't we? We can rattle off "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself," and we can dish it out. But do we really think about it and ask the question: What does it mean? What does it entail? Have I really looked at it and said, "What does it mean to love God in such a way? What does it mean to love my neighbor as myself? That's what I'd like for us to look at today in some detail. Think about and ponder if you will.

JESUS' FIRST COMMANDMENT: LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, ALL YOUR SOUL, AND ALL YOUR MIND.

What does it mean to love God with your heart, soul and mind?

We need to understand what love is.

What is this love that Jesus is talking about? 'You have to love God.' What is this love? The Greek translation uses the word 'agape'. Agape which we know is non-causal love.

I took this word and I looked at it in context with the Greek Interlinear, and then I compared it with Strong's Concordance, which tells us how these words were understood at that time and the meaning that it must have for us. It's out of that, looking at the Interlinear and the Strong's, that I'm going to give you some thoughts.

Love to a Master, God or Christ, the word involves the idea of affectionate reverence, prompt obedience, and grateful recognition of benefits received. That's what love means. Agape love in this context, when it is used towards God or Christ, it means that we have an affectionate reverence for God. It means that we have prompt obedience for him and to the things that He says to us. It also means that we are grateful and recognize all the benefits that we have received.

When I was reading it, I thought to myself – I never add all of these qualities to love. When we look at love we just think: Yeah, I love God, and I'll do anything for Him. Yet, there are three very clear places that we need to land when we talk about this love.

- That we have reverence for Him.
- That we implicitly obey Him – to love God means that we obey Him implicitly all the time.
- To love God means that we are grateful for all that He has given us, and also that we recognize that everything that has come to us has come to us from Him.

I think that this is such a good season to look at this, because we are in thanksgiving season. We celebrated Thanksgiving a few weeks back, and thanksgiving is being celebrated all over the world on different Sundays during this month or in the next month till we get into just before advent. To love God! You and I are saying that we love God. But the question that we must ask is: Do I have reverence for Him? Do I stand in awe of Him? Am I obedient to everything that He is saying to me? Am I obedient to the things that He wants me to speak, the things that He wants me to do, the attitude that He wants me to have, the behavior that comes out of all the things that I am facing? Am I listening to Him? Do I have conversations with Him so that I can hear Him and then be obedient? Do I recognize that He is the giver of all good things, that every good thing that I am enjoying today, God has given to me, and I acknowledge that to Him? So all of that is captured in the word 'love' that is used here in the Greek – affectionate reverence, prompt obedience and grateful recognition of benefits received.

Now I want us to take that word, amplify it just a little bit more, because I want you to see where it has been used again and in what context. This will then give us a little better idea of what it means. Paul uses the same word in Romans 8:28 and he says this: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them." If we love God in the way that we are expected to love Him, with affectionate reverence, prompt obedience and grateful recognition of benefits received, then God causes all things to work together. How often we come to situations and we look at them and say, "Lord, I know that You allowed this in my life, and You will use it for my good." But there's a rider in this verse, and that is for those who love God, God is going to make everything work together.

The second verse is in 1 Corinthians 2:9 where it says, "That is what the scriptures mean when they say, 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared.'" God has prepared a marvelous place that defies the imagination of everyone. But prepared for whom? For those who love Him. Again, we must ask the question: If God has prepared that for me, do I love Him in the way that Jesus said we ought to love the Lord, our God?

So as we begin to look at love, I think it's beginning to open our hearts and our minds, and we say: Wait a minute! I think I need to think differently about some of the things. Maybe I've never thought about the things I received and acknowledged it as an aspect of love. Or maybe I've looked at obedience as something else. I sing worship songs to Him – "I love You Lord" and so on, but I've never thought about love in this kind of context. Just praying that the Holy Spirit would be to touch our hearts and our minds and our souls as we think about love from the perspective of loving God.

Where and how do I apply this love?

The Bible gives clear indication when it says to love God with our heart, soul and mind. What does that mean exactly? If you look at the Interlinear Greek, you will see that it says: "Love whole the heart of you, whole the soul of you, whole the mind of you." So, all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind. There's this sense of everything – all-encompassing that ought to come into play when we love God.

Again, Strong's helps us to understand this. When we look at the heart – of things done from the heart i.e. cordially or sincerely or truly without simulation or pretense. So, we love Him without any kind of pretense or hypocrisy. We love Him sincerely. Then we look at the soul – we find that the soul is the seat of the feelings, desires, attractions and aversions. And then we look at the mind – we see the mind as the faculty of understanding, feeling, desire. As I was looking at the way these words (soul, mind and heart) came together in the Greek understanding, I found that they were just overlapping. I found feelings with the heart, feelings with the mind and the soul and desires – all of them.

So, you get a picture of what Jesus is saying when He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." Everything, every fiber of your being should love God – your attitude, your emotion, your resources, your gifts, your talents – everything that you and I have must be used in our love for God. Every aspect, our wills, our strength, our thinking, must be channeled in love for God. It seems the most important word there is 'all', every part of us. And it seems like, as we pull from Deuteronomy 2, that when God said this, He says, "When I talk about heart, soul, and mind or strength, it means every part of you. Every single part of you that makes the whole must be in a love relationship with Me."

So, the operative words here are 'love' and then 'all'. Love God like this, in this manner, with reverence, with obedience, with gratefulness and thankfulness, and love Him with every fiber of your being.

JESUS' SECOND COMMANDMENT: LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

- 1. How do I love my neighbor like myself?**
- 2. Who is my neighbor?**

That's the question that was asked by the Pharisees at that time when they asked the question. If we look at Luke 10:25, Jesus answers that question with a parable.

1. How do I love my neighbor like myself?

To answer this question, we need to ask ourselves: How do we love ourselves? Well, we take care of ourselves. We take care of our bodies, we take care of our mental health, we indulge ourselves with treats of different kinds. And so, we take good care of ourselves. And Jesus is saying: The same way that we take care of ourselves, we ought to take care of others.

Actually, in the story of the good Samaritan, Jesus shows how somebody, a neighbor, was taken care of, which actually is a reflection of how we take care of ourselves. When we look at the good Samaritan and all the things that he might have been prepared to do for himself, that he did for the wounded person, we get an understanding of this. Let me read that story for us.

A Jewish man was travelling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. A Temple assistant, a Levite, walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, "Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here."

This was the way in which the Samaritan took care of the injured person. What can we see about this? A couple of things:

- 1) He noticed the man. And by notice, I don't mean just looking and moving on as the priest and the Levite did. They too saw, but he noticed. He saw a need and he was willing to get sidetracked from his own schedule and move to this person who was in need. He noticed the person.
- 2) He accepted the inconvenience of helping the man. He accepted it, he owned it. He knew that the moment he stopped, he would be inconvenienced. How was he inconvenienced?
 - He used the oil that he had for himself on the wounds of the injured man. He was carrying that just in case something happened to him. He was willing to take what was for himself and use it for the man.
 - He placed the man on his donkey and therefore, had to walk alongside. He walked while the other rode.
 - He paid for the man to be looked after with his own money. He took money, gave it to the person and said, "Take care of this man" while looking after him for one day until he had to move on.
 - He planned a follow up because he says, "When I come back, if I still owe you money because of what you used to look after this man, I will pay you."

I think this is just a wonderful way. When we look at it, we say, "That's exactly how I would take care of myself. These are the things I would do for myself." And here Jesus has put it on this person and He says: This is the way in which the Samaritan took care of him. You have to love your neighbor as yourself.

So, notice your neighbors and then, be able to accept the inconvenience of helping neighbors.

2) Who is my neighbor?

According to the teaching of Christ, any person irrespective of race or religion, with whom we live or whom we chance to meet, which idea is clearly brought out in this parable, is our neighbor. Sometimes that is the question we ask, and that's what the children of Israel, the Pharisees also were asking: Who is my neighbor? Because for them, the neighbor was an Israelite. And Jesus is saying, "No. Your neighbor is everyone that you come across, and you love them irrespective of who they are. You love them as you would love yourself. And just as the Samaritan was willing to go to great lengths to use everything that he had for himself for this wounded man, so too we must be able to notice the people around us and be will to be inconvenienced as we love them as well. You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and you must love your neighbor as yourself.

So, how do we apply this passage in our own lives? We know that we have to love God deeply with every fiber of our being, mind, intellect, emotions, attitudes, resources, feelings, desires, everything. And we love people around us irrespective of their ethnicity, background, religion, differences from us, or anything. How? We notice them first and then afford to them love, however inconvenient it may be.

Thirteen years ago, it was going to be our 25th wedding anniversary and our children wanted to do a celebration. I realized that I needed to go and see the cardiologist who said that I needed to have an angioplasty and a couple of stents needed to be put in. I went to the hospital and we were talking to the doctor. Our good friend John Samuel who you all know, who used to read our responsive reading, who is now with the Lord, had come to see me. He was down in the parking lot, about to come up to the doctor's office, when he happened to meet his former boss who asked him what he was doing there. John said, "My Pastor is seeing a cardiologist. He needs to have an angioplasty." He asked him who the cardiologist was, and John told him. And that was the end of the conversation. John came up and we talked.

The next meeting that I had with the cardiologist, I was lying on the table being examined, and he said, "I had the strangest phone call today. I got a call from a man who's a very good friend of mine, and he said that he understood that I was doing an angioplasty on John Samuel's pastor. When I said yes, he said, "When John's pastor leaves the hospital, the only thing that he must have are the stents that you put into his heart. I will take care of his bill." Looking at me, the cardiologist said that he had never had anybody tell him that before. I had never met this man, but he walked into the ICU soon after my angioplasty and called my name out loudly. The nurse told him that he couldn't be there. When I heard my name, I looked up. He looked at me, did a thumbs-up and left. That's the only encounter that I had with him. He went down, paid the entire bill. John tried to tell him that we had this covered and he said no. When John pushed, he said, "Why? Can't a Samaritan help?"

Beloved, of course the Samaritans can help. Jesus used that in the model. He was saying that is how we, you and I, need to act to our fellow neighbors, those who are all around us, that we love our neighbors as ourselves, that we love God and love our neighbor. The thing is that this left such an indelible impression upon me. That's the potential, isn't it? When we do things like this it leaves memories of love acts in the hearts and minds of people that will be remembered for a long, long time.

Patrick Morally says this: "The height of our love for God will never exceed the depth of our love for one another; they are directly proportionate." We can't say we love God and not love people. How much we love people is exactly how much we really love God.

The challenge for you and me, as we look at the scripture is to just do a test and ask the question: Today, in my understanding of love for God, do I encompass these three areas? And in my understanding of how to love my neighbor as myself, am I reaching out to people in the proper way? Am I noticing people? Am I being inconvenienced for them? Because that's the way the bible says we ought to reach out to our neighbors. Beloved, that's the challenge. Love God with your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.

That old chorus is so true.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Let's send that love upward toward our wonderful God, and sideways to all the people around us. And they'll know who and what Christians are by our love.

Heavenly Father, Lord, maybe we have not loved You the way we ought to have till now. Maybe we have not been obedient or maybe, we've treated the things that You have given us carelessly. But today Lord, we want to change that. And we want to say that we want to love You with sincerity, with no hypocrisy involved, to be obedient to You, to be a grateful people and to be able to look around and notice people around us who don't look like us or act like us or are like us; and yet, Lord who need to be shown love in the same way that we love ourselves. Lord, we know that this kind of love comes only from You, and so we ask Lord, would You give us that love so that we can then shed that love abroad to all around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.