

Commanded to Love, Matthew 22:34-40

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Introduction

Jesus tells the world that the greatest of all the commandments, bigger than any one of the Big 10, is to love God. The second follows, that we are to love our neighbors. In Biblical logic, loving our neighbors grows out of loving God. The First Letter of John explains that if we cannot love the people we see, we cannot love God whom we do not see. Later in Matthew Jesus promises that when we love our neighbors, even those whom we find hard or inconvenient to love – the sick, the poor, the prisoner – we love and honor Christ directly. This takes us straight back to Genesis 1; human beings are created in the image of God; to look upon another human being is to look upon a rendering of the very face of God.

If then we think we love God, but we despise other people, we only pretend to love God. We are really loving an idol, God in MY image, by which I can tell myself that I can despise other people and I am still okay. We are not okay if we despise other people whether they are poor, or strangers, or they have hurt our feelings.

Some think they are all right because they are nice to other people, giving them cuts into line at the supermarket, putting loose change into the Salvation Army kettle, wishing for peace, and that sort of thing, but they have no concern for truth. They do not mind trying to be like Jesus if what is meant is being a nice person, but all this business about Jesus being God and the only way into heaven leaves them feeling, well, you know, *uncomfortable*.

The truth is that we are incapable of keeping these commands. We need Jesus living and loving through us.

Let us pray: Lord God, Ancient of Days; as we end one year and look ahead, we ask you to anoint us in your Spirit that we may begin anew with you, that you would reassure us that you have forgiven our past mistakes and that you have our future in your hand. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. Law and Grace

For a long time I had been under a false impression that Jesus' commandment to love God and other people is good news. It would be good news if we all obeyed this command, but that is true of all other laws too. The Ten Commandments would be good news if human society kept them. If no one coveted anything anymore, the vice of envy would disappear and the world would be a much better place.

But no law is ever good news. Every law demands a holiness no one can reach. Earlier in Matthew Jesus reminds us that even if we are not out committing murder, we have the corruption of murder in our hearts when we despise other people. When we look within and see our own loveless, thoughtless actions, God's law of love fills us with fear knowing that we fall short.

This, then, is where we come to the good news: Jesus Christ has ransomed us from our sins through the shedding of his own blood, his sinless death defeating the power of death to hold him; by His Spirit and this alone he gives us the power to put this commandment into motion. Even as we walk in the power of God we still only manage to do God's will imperfectly, for we are hobbled by our sinful flesh. Even with the Spirit of Christ dwelling in our bodies, what we call having Jesus in our hearts, our old natures rebel against all that God wills. Sometimes we listen to the flesh first, and we fail. We need mercy. We are nothing apart from God's grace.

There are many who live by the notion, whether they have put it into words or not, that the Big 10 Commandments plus the two greatest commandments of all, can be followed if we put our minds to it. If I have failed in my love for God, in that I have spoken his name or the

name of Christ inappropriately or even blasphemously, then I will first of all tell God I am sorry, and then, with this New Year, I will put in on myself to do better by making a Resolution: I will not swear or cuss or curse or speak the holy name of God profanely. That resolution will only last until the next round of televised bowl games.

I cannot will into myself the cure for my sin. I don't need a new resolution, I need a new solution. I need more than God's forgiveness; I need God's ever-present help to rebuke and astonish my conscience, to provide escapes from temptation, to warm my heart and renew my mind so that I can see past my own nose to the one whom I might be able to help.

When it comes to God's law and my failures, my repentance is a daily event. Some people in my life when they look at me, Pastor Jonathan, might think they see a virtuous person. They are wrong, but even so when they find me in sin they may go ahead and accuse me of being a hypocrite. What I try to show and to teach is not heroic virtue, but a repentant life, one that is broken before God and able to receive God's gifts and purposes for me as they come, inviting me to pass through the open doors of God's will, rather than striving on my own, under my own power, to make things happen in my own ambition. A life that is repentant before God is a grace-filled life.

2. Prophets and Grace

When Jesus said that the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments, he had in mind the whole of the Hebrew scriptures. There are over 600 laws in the Old Testament, but that is only a fraction of its length. The Old Testament is filled with story, and songs, hymns and poems, and, it is filled with sermons and comments by prophets themselves. All of that together describes the laws of God in terms of human response. Certain things happen as these laws are

obeyed, and other things happen as they are broken, and all of that is woven together in the faith of the people of God.

The most vivid, expressive book in the Old Testament to describe a human being's love for God, is the Psalms. These were composed over a period of a thousand years; Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses himself, other psalms describe worship in the Second Temple after the return from exile up to about 300 years before Jesus was born. Without the Psalms, the Old Testament would give a very incomplete picture about people loving God. The Psalms model for us a human response to God, showing the depth of love for God even with all the questions and expressions of doubt and grief that fill the Psalms.

There are some who have supposed that love for God means keeping a perfect emotional calmness and joyfulness at all times and in all circumstances. There is a superstitious fear that to express an honest feeling of disappointment with God, or even anger towards God, is a sin that alienates God. The Bible shows us a different pattern in the Psalms, in most of the prophets who find lots of things to complain about, and in the life of Jesus. His prayers before his arrest were very human. On the cross the next day he quoted Psalm 22 verse 1, **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Yes, that really is in the Bible. You have permission to be human too.

The Hebrew scriptures teach us that loving God is not easy when we feel the sting of God's anger on our sin, when we endure the consequences that overtake us. For in loving people with all kindness, mercy, and grace, God has also set a boundary of holiness. God will not be mocked. In God's desire to win us to repentant faith, we may feel the blows of judgment, the shattering of dreams, the pain of failure and defeat. This tough love is part of God's grace.

Sometimes that is the kind of love we are called to bring to our neighbors; we put our money in the Salvation Army kettle and that is where we advise the panhandler on the street to

turn for true redemptive help. Because the panhandler receives nothing from your hand, he might think you despise him. I hear all kinds of stories from guys who come by the church looking for cash. We know that the best news he can hear is that he can receive real help, not just cash toward his next fix, at ministries such as Salvation Army and Wayside that are geared to redeem.

When the prophets spoke this way, that God gives all good things but also channels us toward redemption, they were ridiculed. No one likes to be told that they are sinners. Everyone likes to think that they have their own lives under control. *All I have to do is turn over a new leaf, make a resolution to be a better person.* That is NOT the gospel. You need Jesus to be Lord of your life; that is the only resolution to make, because it allows him to take care of the rest, to lead us on paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Jesus is the solution.

Conclusion

We are called and commanded to love God and others. This is not good news. The good news is that Jesus Christ is ever present to help us when we have received him as our Lord and Savior, claiming the merits of his blood to cover and cancel our sins, and he has sent his Spirit into our bodies. By this Spirit alone we are able to obey God's will and keep God's commandments. By this Spirit alone we are able to turn to the faith of Israel and find there the heart's response to God in every situation, even when our love for God is angry and perplexed. By this Spirit alone we discern when our love for our neighbors will be expressed in random acts of mercy, and when our love will have in view our neighbor's longer-term redemption.

By this Spirit alone we are able to journey beyond the remorse of our past, through the grief of our present, into a future that is blessed. For if by failing at one command we become guilty and face the judgment of the whole law, so by loving God and our neighbor in the power of Christ we fulfill the whole law, and the Spirit of God brings us to eternal glory. Amen.