

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

You Shall Love

Sermon Reflection Notes

When Pastor Ron arrived at Manchester UMC, one of the first things he began to do was organize the church's staff, budget, and ministries according to the two great commandments: to love God and to love neighbor. There are pictures and words on the walls in the lobby that subdivide these two commandments into public and individual acts of love: worship and devotion, justice and compassion. Everything we do, whether we are talking about finances or building maintenance or planning missional work and worship, centers around loving God and loving our neighbors.

It's worth asking then, as a pretty famous song did in 1993, *What is love?* Sam Wells wrote this: *"Imagine a word that everyone knew but no one ever explained. Imagine if that word named an experience that everyone was supposed to have but no one was directed where to get it. Imagine if everyone assumed this word referred to something that was very good, and almost everyone in the world seemed to want more of it. Imagine if that word was taken to be the summit of human experience, the distillation of all the world's religions. And imagine if almost every popular song was about what it was like to find it, to express it, or to lose it. We have such a word. And the word is love."*

Today's scripture lesson contains one more attempt from the Pharisees to Jesus to see if he might slip up. But they give him a softball question this time, one everyone would know the answer to. And Jesus, of course, knows the answer too: *Which commandment in the law is the greatest?* they ask. Jesus replies, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* These commandments are at the very heart of the Jewish story. Renowned sages and Rabbis said that the Levitical command to "love your neighbor as yourself" is the "great principle of the Torah" and that "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; this is all the Torah, the rest is commentary."

Love. Love God. Love neighbor. Love. It's so simple, yet it takes a lifetime to live out. To fully understand the commandment itself, it's helpful to break it down by word...

You shall love the Lord. Not a generic deity, but Yahweh, the divine name for God. The God who created you, who brought you out of slavery and into the Promised Land. The God of Abraham, Moses, Sarah, and David. To love is to remember God's steadfast love for us, even when our love fails.

You shall love the Lord—your God. The God of Israel is also the God who adores us, who yearns for us, who will go to unfathomable lengths to be with us, even dying for us in the person of Jesus so that we might share life together eternally. The Lord cherishes every creature He has made, but He cares for you, for me, as if we were the only creature ever made.

You shall love the Lord your God, with all. God has given us life and breath and created this wonderful world and all that is in it. What God wants in return is your *all*.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. Our hearts are the organs that pump blood and oxygen throughout the body and keep every other organ alive. We feel every emotion in our hearts. It is the center of every viscerally motivated move we make. God says: love me with all of that.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Not the disembodied essence that floats away when we die, but the spark of life that animates all we do. God breathed the breathe of life into us, and this, our souls, connect us with the divine. To love God with our souls is to love God with our habits, practices, and desires.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Our minds are perfectly suited for wonder, curiosity, and exploration; they are perfectly suited to marvel at the wonder of divine love, to be in awe of all creation.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor as yourself presumes we love ourselves. Loving ourselves is not about selfishness. It is also not altruism, assuming love is a zero-sum game. We are not our status, our accomplishments, our degrees, or our bank statements. We are what Jesus thinks of us, because Jesus is God, and Jesus is your neighbor. Jesus fully knows us, and Jesus, our God and our neighbor, adores us because we bear the image of God. But as we look at those around us, we see the image of God reflected in every individual we meet. God adores that person just as much as God adores us.

Each word of the commandments is pregnant with meaning, filled with the story of salvation. The Lord who created the heavens and the earth, adores us. And the Lord who created the heavens and the earth, and us, gave us neighbors who are just as beloved as we are. To demonstrate that we are cherishing the precious gifts God is giving us, we must listen to our neighbor's hearts, nourish their souls, and drink from their minds as eagerly as if we really believed our neighbor's have the divine image impressed upon them, and that they may just be the way we come face to face with God. Love. Love. Love. It's not easy, but when we figure this out, the rest is just commentary.

Scripture

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet"?"

⁴⁵"If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Take one minute to write down one word or one phrase to define love.
2. It can be nearly unimaginable to understand the love God has for us if we have never experienced unconditional love from another person. And yet, Jesus is the perfect human example of unconditional love, for strangers, for friends, for family, for all. What ways did Jesus demonstrate the love of God to all his neighbors?
3. Pastor Ron said "self-love is not altruism." What is altruism? And why is love not a zero-sum game?
4. A first-century sage named Hillel once paraphrased Leviticus 19:18 for a non-Jew, saying "*Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is all the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go study.*" How do we 'go study' to live out these two great commandments?

5. Pastor Ron shared with us that one thing his father instilled in him is that anytime you speak ill of someone, anytime you treat someone unkindly, or anytime you are dismissive of another person, you are doing so to someone that God adores. Someone that is worthy of dignity. Someone that God was willing to die for. And someone who bears God's image. If this is the goal, if this is who we want to be and how we want to live, what are the steps to get there? How do we help hold each other accountable?
6. Maya Angelou once said *"I'm grateful to be a practicing Christian. I'm always amazed when people say 'I'm a Christian.' I think, 'Already?' It's an ongoing process. You know, you keep trying. And blowing it and trying and blowing it."* What is she talking about? And how does it relate to the scripture and sermon this week?

Closing Prayer

O Love, that will not let us go, we rest our weary souls in you; We give you back the life we owe that in your ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller, be.

O Light that follows all our way, we yield our flickering torch to you; our hearts restore its borrowed ray, that in your sunshine's blaze its day may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seeks us in our pain, we cannot close our hearts to you; We trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be.

From the Hymn Text "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go"

Words by George Matheson, 1882 Hymnal No. 480

"When we figure out love, the rest is just commentary."