

Do I Really Have To Love My Neighbor?
Matthew 22:34-40
9th in the Series on Great Themes in the Bible
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Today, we continue in our study of the great themes in the Bible that unite it as one book, with one message, the same message, from beginning to end. The theme today is Love. In the ranking of the Great themes in the Bible it is probably the greatest and the first as it answers the toughest question for theologians: Why did God create in the first place?

Many have tried to answer this, some practically, some theologically, but few get to the core of the question. I submit to you that love is at the core, and summarized simply, it is because God so loved, that God could not help but create. This love that filled God, is God, is of such a nature that it cannot remain contained in any vessel, even God, and as it bubbled up and bubbled out of God, God could not help but make a place and fill it with creatures who could experience this great love that flows freely from God. As God demonstrated for us in creating, then sustaining and finally saving us, God shared with us the essence of this thing called love. Love is something given, and while it is an emotion, even more importantly, it is a verb, it means action, it means doing something, it means sharing and giving.

In the beginning there was love, it is still there in abundance, and it was love that brought God to create, and it is love that brought God to sustain, and it will always be love that brings God to save..

But what is this love? And, how does this love work? And what has God said about love? We're going to look at that today, as we consider this great theme called love.

Years ago I had the good fortune to visit Istanbul in Turkey. While there, I went to the greatest shopping center I have ever seen. It has been there for almost 600 years. It is a covered mall and some of it is underground. It is bigger than any mall anywhere in the world. It has over 4,000 shops spread over 61 streets, covering literally 12 square miles. Almost everything you have ever imagined is for sale there, and there are shops after shops selling the same things, one after another, right next to each other. Remember, I said they sold almost everything. There is one thing they don't sell, can't sell. They don't sell love! Note, I didn't say sex. I said love. The Grand Bazaar doesn't sell love. No one can, at least not the love that is in God and is God and that God wants us to know about.

This love can be found in almost every book of the Bible. Is there any doubt that God loved Adam and Eve? We can see it in their afternoon walks in the garden and in the fact that God still loved them and took care of them after they ate the forbidden fruit. Sure, they were reprimanded. But God didn't give up on them. Did you stop loving your children just because they disobeyed? God walked with Enoch and told Noah to build an Ark because he loved them. God told Abram he had a place for him and then led Abraham and Sarah to a new land. God rescued Israel through Moses and led it into the promised land. God had David anointed to be King, his King, and he loved him, even though David was flawed. God rescued Jonah from a big fish and protected him at Nineveh. God chose Mary and Joseph to raise his son Jesus. God even let his son Jesus take our place as a living sacrifice. All because God loves!

The stories go on. They're continuing today. God calls, God uses, God leads, God protects ---us, all--because God loves us.

I've chosen two readings that speak of this love in the Scriptures. The first is Deuteronomy 10:12-19. (Read).

The second is a New Testament use of this text --when Christ drew from it in answering the trick question of the Pharisees--and there is a similar text in Leviticus 19. Let us listen again for God's words about this idea of love, as Jesus explains it in Matthew 22:34-40 (read)

Love the Lord your God and once you have done that and God's love is filling you, then we must turn and share that love with our neighbors. The structure of the Ten Commandments is this very expression. The first 4 commandments tell us how to love God, the last 6 tell us how to love our neighbor. The first key to loving our neighbors is to realize what we are saying when we say the word love. First love can be a noun, describing a state of mind, an emotion, and it can be a verb, meaning action is required. It is this action, this doing something, that Jesus is talking about when he summarizes the requirements God has for us. Love. Do something!

Do what is best for the other! Seek what is best for the other. Love is not walking by the homeless, pretending they are not there. Love is not refusing to listen when someone is hurting or asking for help. Love is not a basket at Thanksgiving and nothing more.

Love is proactive.

It is a planned way of living.

Love is listening, observing, feeling.

Love means having time, making time, spending time, even when it doesn't suit.

Love can be costly, in dollars and fiends.

Love can be healing by bringing those hurting to good mental health, by bringing those separated or bullied or beaten down to a full communion.

Love is sacrificial --just ask Jesus.

Love is generous and understanding, and unending.

Another truth about love is that it is undeserving. When I think of this, I am reminded of the Beatles song hit from 1964, "Can't Buy Me Love"? The Beatles almost got it right, when in the second stanza the Beatles sang,

"I'll give you all I've got to give,
If you say you love me too."

As I said, the Beatles almost got it right about love. It is giving; it might be all you have, but it cannot be conditioned on "I'll love you, if you love me too."

God's kind of love is unmerited, undeserved, not in need of reciprocation. This kind of love is given because we can't help it. Christ lives in us so fully that we love, even to the nth degree, regardless of what the recipient does or doesn't do. This kind of love is a

learned,
practiced,
experience.

It doesn't say you have to like the person, but it does say, like the good Samaritan, you will stop and help, and spend, and keep up with the victim, and make sure it turns out all right for them, no matter what they might do. This kind of love means that each one of God's creatures is important, and special, and deserving to be loved.

This kind of love lets the Amish help the family of their children's killer. This kind of love forgives Japan and Germany for a terrible war. This kind of love brings races together, replaces bigotry and bias with trust and acceptance. This kind of love accepts unbelievers and immigrants and foreigners. This kind of love lets a Republican love a Democrat or a Democrat love a Republican and erases the hatred our rhetoric for our opposites declares. This kind of love really cares. It listens. It fixes. It heals. And it never asks, what do I get in return?

This kind of love is Christ on a Cross—it is complete self giving—for all in the world. This kind of love is even those who rejected Christ, even those who today hate him and say he didn't really happen – he was just a myth. He isn't.

Any of you have a dog? I do, and no matter when I come in, no matter what else is going on, when my dog sees me, or hears me pass, his tail starts wagging. He's glad to see me, he wants me to know; he'll follow me and wait patiently, just for a touch. He loves me, no matter how I am or what mood I'm in, and he's always there, ready to love. He greets me in the morning with a wet nose as I sleep. He curls up on the floor beside me when I get in bed. He will go with me in my car. He loves to run and walk with me, wherever I go. He loves me. What a great model of what we as God's chosen are supposed to do! We too are to love like this. Never ending, never any lessening, never forgetting.

I recently read Deborah Anapol's book entitled, "The Seven Natural Laws of Love." Anapol reminds us that love is free, that it can't be bought, and then states that it can't be prevented or made to happen, that it has no boundaries, no territory. Anapol adds that love allows anger and grief and pain to be expressed and released, and that it always returns us to a clean slate.

The kind of love Christ cited as the greatest commandments can't be turned on or off, and should never be used as a reward or a punishment. Love, God's love, cares what becomes of the one loved at all times, no matter what.

The question then is (on a scale of ten) at what level are we loving, as Christ commands? If we are not living in the 7 to 10 zone, then we need to let God's love come more fully into us. Folks, we have so much to forgive, so many to love, isn't it time? Isn't it time?

And before I stop today, one other part of this command -- we are to love our neighbor. But, just who is our neighbor? For the Samaritan, it was a man beaten and robbed and left to die on the side of the road. For the world stunned by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is the world seeing the suffering and the devastation and helping. For the kids with no money for back-packs for school, it is an organization that cares. For folks injured by war or facing disease, it is Doctors Without Borders. For those starving, it is the Heifer Project. For us, here, it might be the homeless sitting on the streets around the church, or the family of a man gunned down because he belongs to the wrong gang, or it might even be someone in the pew across from us, who lives somewhere away from us, and doesn't hang around with us.

Your neighbor is anyone, everyone, that God has put in our path. Our neighbor is anyone who gets into our bubble of life.

I will end with this last observation. We can't love others, unless God's love is in us. Let me say it again: We can't love others, unless God's love dwells within us, lives within us, overflows from us. So, where are you? Christ has told us what he expects of us, that we are to love one another, as Christ loves us. This love—it's what this creation is all about. Don't let it pass you by. Today, start loving. It's contagious, you know?

Deuteronomy 10:12-19

12 And now, Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

13 and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees, that I am giving you today for your own good?

14 To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.

15 Yet, the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as He still does today.

16 Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.

17 For the Lord your God is the God of gods, and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.

18 He defends the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.

19 And, you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.

The Word Of The Lord!

Matthew 22:34-40

- 34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.
- 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested Jesus with this question:
- 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?"
- 37 Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
- 38 This is the first and greatest commandment.
- 39 And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself,
- 40 All the Law and all the Prophets are based on these two commandments."

The Word Of The Lord!