The Greatest of These

The Greatest Commandment – Matthew 22:34-38

Slides highlighted

This morning we are starting a series discussing what Paul describes as "The Greatest of These" – love. God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for others and how this exchange of love is done in such a way that God receives the glory for it: **Why do I start here?**

1) We are building a church. If we don't build with the labor of love for God and others we are nothing and we are doing nothing.
2) I am convinced that the world has a very poor understanding of what love truly is. Ask anyone outside of the church what love looks like and you will get a very thin, trivial, and weak explanation about love that is void of God, void of the gospel, void of Christ, and limited at best regarding what the Scriptures teach about love. As a culture we need to have love defined for us.
3) I am also increasingly convinced that in the church today, we too have lost the sense of what love is in the Scriptures. In response to the worlds mushy definitions of love we have limited love to only mean duty, or action. We say well-meaning things like, "love is not about feeling…it is about action and sacrifice". We describe Biblical love as a "higher" type of love that isn't about affections or feelings, but about sacrifice and duty. We emphasize certain passages of Scripture on love while neglecting others that bring balance and clarity. We have a hard time describing God's love alongside of God's wrath. We often fail to clearly make a distinction between God's love for the world and God's love for His covenant people. As the church we too need to have loved defined or Redefined for us.

I want to start this morning by looking at a single passage where Jesus gives a VERY HIGH standard for what love for God is. But first…two illustrations:

1. **The Roses – love is always more than doing**

First an illustration I heard years back that helped me immensely. It's my anniversary with Lorrie…and I go to our house wearing a tuxedo, dozen roses in my hand. I knock on the door. She answers shocked…and I say, "happy anniversary" and hand her the flowers. "Oh wow! Why did you?" "It's my duty. I read it in the Bible and a book I've been reading. I'm supposed to give you these flowers as a gesture of my love. Here, I did my part…I did my duty."

- Ladies, how would you respond to that?
- Didn't I do what I was supposed to do? I gave her the flowers! I spent the money! I put forth the effort!

Change the situation…I knock on the door, she answers, "Oh wow! Why did you?!", "I couldn't help myself. I was thinking of you all day and I REALLY WANTED TO surprise you. I REALLY WANTED for you to know how much I love you and there is NOTHING I DESIRE MORE than to spend the rest of the evening together." "YOU REALLY WANTED to surprise me. NOTHING YOU DESIRE MORE than to spend time with me? It's always about you…what YOU want, what YOU DESIRE to do…you're so selfish…all about you!"

- There's no way she would respond that way – my desire to make her feel loved honors her and shows her that I love her. So LOVE is NOT devoid of my own desires, my own passions…LOVE is in many ways my desires, feelings, emotions being fulfilled, IN HER…and that honors her and makes her feel loved.
- So too with God! To simply do things for God while my heart, my desires, my passions FOR GOD are not present…does not honor Him…it is not received by Him as being loved. And when we make LOVING GOD more manageable by stripping it of feeling, emotion, passion, desire…we limit the VERY HIGH standard of love given to us in Scripture. We make what is really an IMPOSSIBLE command possible by turning Christianity into what YOU DO rather than WHAT GOD DOES IN AND THROUGH YOU.
- There is a word that we use when someone does the right action, but with the wrong desires or motive – hypocrisy

    - ***"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' - Mt 15:8–9.***
        - God doesn't receive their praise, because their *desires* or *motives* to praise are not *generated from the heart*.
        - They worship "in vain", because their worship is external, and not from the heart
        - Box checking (church, devo, worship, fasting, sacrifice for others)
        - God doesn't only command the action, but He commands the *desires* and the *motive* underlying and producing the action.

    - ***"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." – 1 Corinthians 13:1-3***
        - You can speak angelically, you can have prophetic power, you can have deep understanding and knowledge, you can have all faith, you can lay down your life….but have not love.
    - **Conclusion**: "love is ALWAYS more than doing."… "Love is ALWAYS more than acting." And obedience to the command to love requires not only action, but heart, soul, mind, strength – everything…that's the standard.

2. The Robber – true love always acts

Let's say that it's now after our anniversary dinner. We're at home getting ready for bed and we are just talking in bed, holding hands, enjoying one another. All of a sudden the door is kicked open….a robber just entered my home. "Honey! Someone kicked open the door! You should get down there!" "Well honey, I am so enjoying your company…I just want to lay here with you and…you know who cares about our safety, we're together…LET'S JUST DIE IN ONE ANOTHERS ARMS."

- You fool…get your butt up, go downstairs, and do whatever it takes to protect your wife and your home!

- I don't care if your wife is tougher than you are…you go down, get your butt kicked, she cleans up behind you…THAT'S FINE!...but you better be the first one down those stairs! That's what love does!

- ***Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. – Jn. 15:13***
    - Love is more than simply doing…but true love is dutiful and always acts if it is true love.
- ***Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. – 1 Jn. 3:18***
    - Love has to be more than mere talk…it has to be "in deed and in truth".
- **Conclusion:** Love is ALWAYS more than doing…but true love DOES (acts)
- **Do you see how defining love, MUST be done within the context of the verse?**

Knowing that God not only requires the action, but the heart that underlies the action has RADICAL implications for the Christian life. God not only commands my actions, but He commands my affections, my desires, and my passions, my motives…the heart, soul, mind…which are the root of all loving action. Things that I have NO CONTROL OVER…God commands us, for example, to "be cheerful givers" – go ahead and DO cheerful…you can't! You are either cheerful, or you are not! It also shows us that "dead religion"…centered on doing, ritual, checking boxes…is NOT what God means by loving Him. Also, this means that much of the Christian life is lived out in response to being loved by God – He is the source of love, the teacher of what it means to love, and I am first and foremost the recipient – the one being loved. Also, it means that God sets a very HIGH standard of what loving Him and others looks like…in fact, it's an impossible standard because it requires ALL OF YOU. Apart from a relationship with God through Jesus Christ you CANNOT keep this standard. \

Love and church planting: We're starting a church and we're called to love this community…what would you expect me to say? "YOU CAN DO IT! WE CAN DO IT!" I'm actually coming this morning with an entirely different message….NO YOU CAN'T! NO I CAN'T! But God can do it in and through us!

Let's now look at our passage, because here we see this HIGH standard..

Matthew 22:37-38 - [37] And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment.

- **Context:** In Matthew 22 Jesus is being interrogated by two different groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were two different religious sects of Jesus' day that disagreed on many things including what Scriptures were to be considered as given from God and also concerning the resurrection from the dead. In the first interrogation Jesus is questioned about giving to Caesar by the Pharisees, in the second section Jesus is questioned about the resurrection by the Sadducees. Now in this section we read that a "lawyer" (an expert on the Mosaic Law) from the Pharisees was asking Jesus what the "Greatest Commandment" was. They loved to argue back and forth about the commandments, and he is probably seeking to draw Jesus into one of these futile arguments so that he can discredit His authority as a Rabbi while at the same time make some arguments against the Sadducees. So this is really more of a political ploy than him TRULY wanting to know what Jesus thoughts are…we read in v.35 that the question is to "test" Jesus.
    - Jesus is willing to play their little game, and actually uses it to draw attention to the very thing that the religious leaders were missing. They were so caught up on the 613

commandments of the law and how to carry them out, that they missed the greatest commandment which was to love God and the second greatest, to love their neighbor.

- They were missing the forest for the weeds. They were so busy squabbling over what constituted a "load to not carry on the Sabbath" that they missed loving God and others.
  - Isn't that just like religion…making a mountain out of the small details while missing the greatest and most important thing – love.
- **Jesus gives a masterful answer** – to Love God would in turn fulfill all of the commandments because one who truly loves God will in turn keep all of His commandments. He once again escapes their trap and right after this passage He finally turns the tables on them and they were unable to answer His interrogation.
- ***"And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." – Matthew 22:46***
  - **modern day translation – "and after that they all shut up and left Him alone having put their own feet in their mouths".**

2 things in this text about loving God

- **LOVING God is MORE than simply DOING**

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

- **To say that "love" (agape) is not a feeling but an action, is misleading**. First of all, love is a very big word that is used in many different ways. There are also many different words for love and these words are often used interchangeably. Also, the words Jesus uses here for "heart, soul, mind" are used in many different ways. One of the reasons we have defined love poorly in the church today is because we fall victim to what is called the "word study fallacy"…we take a single definition of a word and then import it into different passages with different contexts.
  - **In order to define what loving God looks like, we have to define it, as we do with any word or series of words, *within the context*.**
- **Notice that with those surrounding words, Jesus is emphasizing the parts of man that are NOT action oriented – "Love God…with heart, soul, mind"**
  - **Heart –** the heart is used in Scripture as the seat of our emotions, passions, desires, feelings. It is used to describe the center of our inner life. An inner place where only God sees. It's used to speak of our attitudes. It is distinguished as "opposite from what is external". It's the place from where praise, worship, singing comes from. Our hearts can be foolish, our hearts are difficult for us to know, our hearts can desire and praise God, our hearts can worship idols rather than God.
  - **Soul –** the soul is a word used to describe the "inner life" as a whole. That which inhabits and animates the physical body. It's what makes a body "alive". Our souls can hunger, can express longing. The soul is subject to temptations.
  - **Mind –** this is the faculty of thinking or our mental disposition. This part of us can be given ignorance. It's the place from which we make plans, fantasize,

dream. In our fallen, non-believing condition it is described as being at enmity and hostile with God. It's the place of thoughts, reason, intelligence.

- **Notice that all of these things are effected by things *outside* of my control.** They are effected by the fall. They are effected by Satan. They are effected by circumstances. They are effected by God. My thoughts can be under attack, my heart is subject to my nature which attaches itself to idols and fleeting pleasures rather than to God. My soul is subject to all sorts of temptations.
- **Each of these are causal to my actions.** My actions flow out from the heart…from the heart the mouth speaks. The state of my soul, the immaterial part of me, directly affects my actions. My mind directly effects my actions.
- **So the emphasis here is NOT on my action, but on that which produces my actions. The inner part of me is the root…the action is the fruit.**

- **Loving God requires ALL of me**

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

- **One interesting thing about these words: they are each used interchangeably. The heart is described in places as reasoning. The Mind is described in places as feeling. The soul is described as having passions.**
  - **Why is that important? When Jesus is telling us to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind – His intention is NOT for us to compartmentalize each…He is emphasizing the TOTALITY OF WHO WE ARE. It would be like me saying, "Love God with everything, with all that you are, with every part of you!" That's the sense of this commandment.**
- **Notice that we are to love God with "all" our heart, soul, mind – "all" means "all"!**
- **Deut. 6:5 (the Shema) includes "might". Luke 10:25 – "strength"…the focus isn't on the "parts" of who we are but the "TOTALITY" of who we are!**
- **Loving God requires my entire life.** All my thoughts, passions, desires, actions, strength, might, feelings, emotions, reason, intelligence, all my fantasies, all my dreams….EVERYTHING…everything that makes up who I am internally, everything that makes up who I am externally. God cannot be loved in this way if He is simply a "part" of your life, or to the "side" of your life. And yet that's often how we relate to God…like a ***vending machine*** – when I need something I'll push the buttons and out comes the answer or the help I need. No! He is to be first, He is to be supreme, He is to be the center….and none of this you are able to do without God first loving you and awakening your eyes, your heart, your feelings and emotions, your passions and desires to Him…this is exactly what He does through the New Birth.

What are some responses I should have to this HIGH AND IMPOSSIBLE STANDARD to love God with EVERYTHING?

- **YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN: this is why we use that funny, curious phrase…we mean it quite literally. You heart, soul, mind are dead to God…and you NEED TO be born again. Also, to love your spouse, your neighbor, others around you…you MUST BE BORN AGAIN.**
- **Jesus sacrificed everything, so should I: Jesus gave everything, I should give everything. Because Jesus gave everything for me, I should give everything for Him. Jesus is the perfect example of what loving God and loving others looks like.** Jesus gives this command, knowing that He is about to give everything to God and everything for us. God doesn't just tell us to love with everything…He gave His everything to demonstrate what true love looks like. Jesus became a man with a heart, soul, mind…and He gave all of it to God and He laid it all down for you on the cross where He died and paid the penalty for your breaking this very command! What should you do in response to such a demonstration of love?
    - **Romans 12:1 - I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**
        - Paul, the Jew, is no doubt thinking of the whole burnt offering in the OT where the worshipper was to burn the entire sacrifice, every part of the animal was to be given to God as an act of worship.
        - But here YOU are the offering… "present *your bodies* as a living sacrifice"…you can see the imagery here. God requires all of you in order for it to be "holy and acceptable to God"
        - God asks us to do some pretty difficult things! Love that unloveable spouse. Forgive that person who doesn't show signs of repentance. Surrender that sinful habit to Him. Persevere faithfully through your physical suffering. Do all things (all means all) without complaining or grumbling. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
            - We can only do these things in response to God's example of love for us…***those who*** are unloveable, who at times show no signs of repentance, who caused Jesus to go through physical suffering. Whose sinful habits cost Him His life on the cross. Those who were enemies of God. He gave His life for us…we now are to give our entire lives for Him.

- **Loving God Requires a Miracle: This is why Jesus said, "abide in me…apart from me you can do NOTHING." He meant that quite literally. He must pour into us that which we do not possess without Him…every day, every day, in order for us to give HIM EVERYTHING. You must pour out, what is first poured in…if you have not first received, you have nothing to give.**

Watershed: "We receive, we enjoy, and we supply the love of God in Christ unto the glory of God."

Let's pray