

## Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Matthew 22:34-40

Happy Valentine's Day!

This week we find our world is decorated with red hearts and cupids. Lovers are sharing cards, candies, flowers and other gifts in an effort to express their love. It truly is a beautiful week. Love is not a strange word to Christians. In fact love is the cornerstone of our faith. The Bible tells us God is love. Jesus came because of love, "For God so loved the world, He gave his only begotten Son..." So I would like to share the message along the theme of love today.

Once, Jesus was asked by a Pharisee that was considered to be "an expert in the law," "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus answered by saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." Then for good measure Jesus added, "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments".

**Jesus gave us two commandments that summarize all the laws and commandments in Scripture.** At first it looked to me that he had just made life much simpler as He condensed every law down into only two sentences. Then as I attempted to keep them, I found that it was not an easy task. Do I really know how to love God and love others? Suddenly it seemed it was a lot easier when I was being told to do this or don't do that. Back then I just needed to simply follow the rules. How do I love God with all my heart, my soul, and with my entire mind? Am I really able to do that? And really "What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself?"

For a long time, when I read the second commandment, my main focus was “loving our neighbor”. It seems, Jesus was telling us, “don’t be selfish, make sure your neighbor is right up there with you in importance. When I am hungry I feed my body, when I am sleepy I go to bed to rest, when I am cold, I put on warmer clothes or raise the temperature on my thermostat to make my house warmer and when I am sick, I go to see the doctor. It made sense to me, "Love you neighbor as yourself". If we take care of others the same way we treat our own selves, what a beautiful thing that would be! That is what I thought... until later.

As I grew older, perhaps hopefully more mature, I learned that many people even though they took care of their basic physical needs, they do not love themselves.

In fact, so many people struggle with their self-esteem that there is a whole industry with books, videos, speakers, and counselors attempting to help them.

A few years ago, when Reverend Bob Smith was our District Superintendent, he came to our church to conduct the Church Conference. Early that day, news swept our nation that a senior pastor of one of the mega churches had admitted to moral failure. I was devastated when I heard the news and shared my feeling with Bob. I still remember him saying, “HeyYoung, perhaps that pastor wants to feel that he is a real person.”

I struggled with that answer. Honestly I was not able to truly understand what he meant. Do you?

Then I encountered a book “The Gift of Being Yourself.” In this book, the author David Benner shares a similar story about a renowned pastor who had had an affair and misused church funds. David Benner describes this pastor’s relationship with God as one based more on what he believed about God than

true experience. In other words, this pastor knew about God, but he did not know God.

This pastor performed his duties as expected for a long time, but he did not know how to be true and real to himself. When he was no longer able to sustain the false image he had created, he snapped into “moral failure”.

David Benner explained this further in later chapters. He said we are born with basic human needs, a need for love, security, and acceptance. Innocent babies cry out loud for these needs. And we find as we grow older, life is not all fields of green. We experience rejection, pain, and brokenness. Life does not always provide love, security, and acceptance.

**To defend ourselves** we develop what Thomas Keating calls a *personal emotional program*. This is our plan for coping with life and achieving happiness. It is our best guess about what we need to do in order to feel good about ourself. It is our strategy for meeting our basic need for love, survival, power, and control.

So we create a false self to make us feel that we are special.

Initially, the masks we wear reflect how we think others want to see us. But over time they come to reflect how we want to see ourselves. It is no wonder why we become thoroughly confused as to what is the mask and what is our actual self. Like the air we breathe, we become so accustomed to wearing this mask that we no longer are aware that we are living with a false self.

David Benner said **we lock our true self in the prison we created without knowing how to get out of it.**

These are the characteristics of a person with a false self:

1. Security and significance achieved by what we have, what we can do, and what others think of us.
2. Happiness sought in autonomy from God and in attachments.
3. Identity is our idealized self (who we want others to think we are).
4. Achieved by means of pretense and practice.
5. Maintained by effort and control.

Living behind these masks is not easy. We constantly put on psychological defense mechanisms to help maintain a sense of safety and security.

This often sets us on a treadmill of required performances. When we fail to sustain this, we get angry, irritated, and sometimes even fall into a deep depression.

How can we free ourselves from this prison of a false self? It's sad to say that many of us do not even realize that we are living in this false self. It is interesting to read David Benner's testimony as to how he revealed his own false self.

*"I have always disliked being called Dave. Sometimes I corrected people who do so. More often I remind myself how trivial the matter is and attempt to ignore my irritation. The obvious question, though, is why I am making such a big deal out of one consonant at the end of a name. The answer points back to the core of myself. David -I confess- seems to fit better with the image of seriousness I want to project. Dave seems too common and ordinary, perhaps too familiar. In the puffed up state of self-importance associated with my false self, I want to be unique and I want to be important."*

Obviously David Benner found his security in becoming important and superior than others.

How about you/me? What helps you/me to feel safe and secure? What makes you/me feel respected and accepted by others?

Do you know who you truly are? Or are you living in an image you created to please others **so you could avoid being rejected.**

How can we discern our false self?

David Benner gives us this practical advice. He said:

First, ask God to help you see what makes you feel most vulnerable and most like running for cover. It may be conflict, or perhaps failure, pain, an emotional upset, or loss of face. Allow yourself to feel the stress that would be present if you did not avoid these things.

Second, prayerfully reflect on the image of yourself to which you are most attached. Consider how you like to think about yourself. Ask God to help you see the ways you use these things to defend against feelings of vulnerability.

**How can we break out of this false self and restore ourselves back to who we are?**

The first step is to **acknowledge** that our human efforts are not able to maintain the desired things such as love, security, acceptance, or control for good. We are human beings, not human doings. ***It is in this recognition that our worth lies in who I am, not what I can do or how I am perceived by others.***

The second step is to **find the true source** of love, security, acceptance, power or control, that which doesn't make us put on a false self. The Bible is clear on where this other source is.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:17-19, *"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

God's love calls us to come to Him just as we are. When we open our heart to God, His grace pours into our lives. God's love will break down every wall of the defense mechanism of the false self you have created.

God created us loving and joyful, **capable of giving and receiving love** without fear of rejection or retaliation— that's who we are.

This authentic self was not manufactured by our performance, but created by God who loves us first, who loves us unconditionally without reservation, no matter where we have been, no matter what we've done.

David Benner said, "When we find our true self we find God, and if we find God, we find our most authentic self. **Identity is never simply a creation, it is always a discovery. True identity is always a gift of God.**"

When we are able to find our true self by soaking in God's love, there we can find our soul's home and true rest. No more performing, no more pretense, no more mask... Because we are loved just as we are, God loves us who we are, not what we are able to do! When we discover this love, we will be able to love ourselves as God loves us.

Let's go back to the second great commandment of "love your neighbor as yourself." It seems much more than providing basic physical needs. It is

accepting others in the love we have experienced in God. It is only possible when our true self is touched by Divine love.

My prayer for you this Valentine Day weekend:

May you be able to take off your masks  
and toss away all the burdens to perform in order to feel loved,  
May you find your true self, and, soaking in God's grace,  
May you begin to learn to love yourself as God loves you and be able to accept yourself as God accepts you.

When we are able to love our own self, we will be able to love our neighbor as ourself! Listen, God is calling us to stop hiding and come out of the bushes. Let's step out and embrace God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. Amen!