

## What's So Hard About Loving?

Matthew 22: 35-40



So, we're in this series where doing this 1-2-3 thing, where last week we talked about the Great Commission from Christ to Go and make disciples, and next week we'll talk about Wesley's three simple rules, but for the next few moments today, I want to talk about the two great commandments and focus on the topic, "What's So Hard About Loving?"

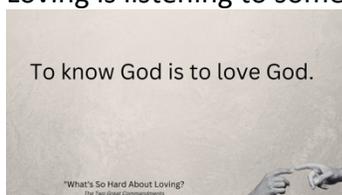
In our text today, we find the pharisees and sadducees had been trying to trip up Jesus by asking questions about whether one ought to pay taxes to the government, and then by asking some eschatological or "end-times" questions regarding the resurrection, and now another Pharisee, who is a lawyer says to Jesus, "ok, since you're laying down and affirming these rules we should follow, which one of these is the greatest? Which is most important?"

And I can just picture Jesus looking at the lawyer, who is supposed to be an expert in Mosaic law, that is the law of Moses, and I picture Jesus looking at the lawyer and maybe saying, "silly wabbit...tricks are kids." But this question you ask, you of all people, ought to know the words God spoke to Moses, in what we frame as the Ten commandments. For in it, the very first one says, "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of bondage, you shall have no other gods before me. Nor should you bow down to them or worship them, for I am jealous God."

And Jesus, in a reflection of this, says to the lawyer, "you should Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment."

And how amazing that Jesus would say that the greatest things, the weightiest of matters that we would concern ourselves with, is love. And that first we ought to love God.

Now I would contend today though, that as followers of the teachings of Jesus, it would seem simple and almost a given that we love God. But sometimes loving God is more than we make it out to be. You see, one of the lessons in life that I come to learn about love, is that part of loving someone is to want to know them. And in that manner, **to love God is to know God**. Loving is listening to someone. Wanting to understand them. Wanting to be there for them.



But too often, our relationship with God, consists of showing up to church, giving a couple bucks in the offering, saying a prayer before meals, and then going on our merry way. But friends, if we truly say that we love someone, and for this portion of the text, if we truly say we love God, then it means letting God have an active role in our lives. Making time to not just talk to God, and drop off our list of needs and thanks for last week's blessings, but to listen to God. To allow God space to pour into us. This happens when we make time in our day to meditate, to have times of devotion, when we participate in bible study to get a deeper understanding of God's word, when we dialogue in small group settings to hear the word of God through the lens of our peers and neighbors, and when we worship.... in which we dialogue collectively with God through the lifting up our prayers and praises and the message God brings to us through song, scripture, communion, and the preached Word.

We show our love to God in many ways, through serving, through giving, through worshiping, through honor and respect, through our witness, and so much. But one way, I would contend today that we can love God, is through this idea of the *imago dei*.



Which literally means the image of God. And refers to how we, you and me, and everyone here, and everyone out there, whether they believe or not, is made in the image of God. **And so to love God, is to see God in all people.** To see the gifts of God in all people. To see the vastness of God in the uniqueness of every person. And to love God, is to love all people.



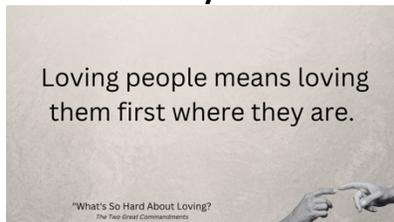
And let me stop here for a moment, and commend you as a faith community, for boldly loving people that a lot of folks seem to be having a hard time loving... and see the great work of God in people that others can't seem to see. As someone, who grew up in an extremely conservative Southern Baptist setting, I thank God Almighty that I can stand in a place like First United Methodist of Moorestown and see the people of God led by now one, but two outstanding women. And I thank God that churches like you are standing up and boldly welcoming people like me. So let me commend you for how you stand together as a church and boldly recognize the imago dei in all people.

But, what about people who make it hard to love? And I know it's not just me. But there are some folks in my family, in my community, in my social circles, and in the church of the living God, that are sho 'nuff hard to love.

And so Christ says in the text, “and the second is like it: that you should love your neighbor as yourself.” And this is where I, Lan Wilson, who is still growing in grace and still trying to be the Christian I am called to be, sometimes stop and ask, “but Jesus...what if my neighbor is a jerk?”

It’s easy to love people, who agree with us. It’s easy love people who love the things we love. It’s real easy to love people who act like they love us.

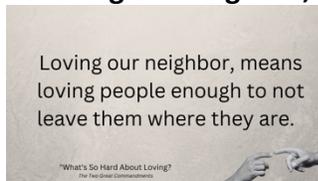
But sometimes, the hardest thing about loving our neighbors, about loving people period, is that we tend to make the human mistake of thinking that loving our neighbor as ourselves also means, “everybody should feel how I feel. React how I react. And love me back the way I love them.” But that, my dear friends, is not how this works. **Loving people means loving people first where they are.**



One of the greatest things about salvation in Jesus Christ, is that in dying on the cross for the sins of the world, Jesus loved us right where we are. In our shortcomings, in our mistakes, in our failures, in all of the ways we haven’t treated people like we ought to, said and done things we shouldn’t have said and done, and yet Jesus loved us enough to save us from these sins.

And in that, he loved us enough to not leave us where we were. But to call us to be greater, to do better, and to love the way He loved us. That’s why I love the words of the old hymn by Dottie Rambo, which say,  
Amazing Grace shall always be my song of praise  
for it was grace that bought my liberty  
I do not know just why Jesus came to love me so  
But He looked beyond my faults and saw my need.

**So loving our neighbor, means loving people enough to not leave them where they are.**



And that could mean a lot of things. For reconciling communities like this one, clearly it means welcoming the excluded. But it also means, finding grace to have the difficult conversations with our peers in the faith who have made folks feel unloved and excluded from the body of Christ. It means sharing our faith and love with people who not only don’t know God, but who have at some point made distance between them and God because of a painful experience. It means accepting the fact, that we aren’t perfect and as both individuals, as nations, and as a

church throughout history, we have time and time again done harm to people, that only love, patience, listening, and true intentional restorative work will even attempt to heal.

And here's the thing, Loving the way Christ calls us to is not something that we are all just naturally great at. I find that becoming better at anything, typically takes practice. And that's one of the reasons we come to church.

John Burkhart, a presbyterian teacher in Chicago describes worship as a rehearsal. He says, we come to worship to practice love, justice, and peace. So, if our goal is then to love our neighbor as ourself, then worship ought to be not just God-glorifying, and what if often is which is self-soothing and a practice of praise within the confines of our own comfort levels, but it ought to reflect who we intend to love, the places where we lack justice, and the ways in which we are fighting for peace. So then, we come to worship not only to experience God, and to quite frankly feel better and to feel loved, but to learn and practice together how to do better, and how to love better.

Because, it pains me to say that our world still lacks love. As I read about constant shootings happening day in and day out in my hometown. As I listen to the news about Ukraine. As I reflect this week on the 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 16<sup>th</sup> street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham where four little girls lost their lives because of racist hatred. As I see the division in our communities and in this great denomination. I am reminded today more than ever, that the work of loving God with all our heart, soul and mind, and loving our neighbors, is not a small task. There is much work to be done.

You see it's easy to come here and say we love God. It's easy to smile in the grocery store as if we love everybody. Ruth Duck in her book, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, writes about a Fifth century monk named Prosper of Aqutaine, who speaks of a latin phrase "lex orandi, lex credenda" which is to say "the law of praying is the law of the believing". But she goes on to mention theologian Kevin Irwin, who would propose a third component to that law, *lex agendi*. The law of acting. In other words to say, that praying and believing are important, but there is a great value to what we actually do. And I'd like to apply that same notion to the idea of love today.

To say we love is one thing. To smile as if we love, is another. But **to actually love in doing, that is the work Christ calls us to today.**



Jesus teaches us to how to love, in so many of his actions. In stopping on the road for someone others passed over and see his people shouldn't be interacting with those kinds of people. In spending time talking to the woman at the well, who'd suffered at the hands of the misogynistic society. In healing sick, feeding hungry, in breathing life into dead situations, being betrayed by loved ones, dealing with difficult people and hateful communities. And in giving of

himself on a hill called Calvary. You see, Jesus showed us what it meant to love, in not only his teachings, but in all that He did.



And so Jesus calls to us, both you and I:

To love God, and love our neighbors. Understanding that this is the greatest of calls by God as Christians. Even in a world where politics and matters of policy and legalities seem to be at the forefront of modern Christendom. And justice seems to take a backseat in anything beyond popular conversation.

To love God by seeing the imago dei, the image of God in all people.

To love people, by not leaving people where they are.

To love one another, by giving ourselves wholly to a faith community that will not leave each other where we are, but hold each other accountable to grow in faith, in justice, and in love.

And to make a commitment to loving, not just in word, but in our doing.

I leave you today, with words I learned in bible study as a young child, from 1 John 4:7-8. Beloved, let us love another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

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