

INTRODUCTION

We've come to one of the most important passages in the New Testament. Jesus reveals what He considers to be the MOST IMPORTANT commandment in the entire Bible—to love God. And He volunteers the second most important commandment—to love our neighbors as ourselves. Since this is a very important teaching, I've decided I'm going to make this a two-part message. We'll begin it today, and finish it later this month.

Everybody has a different idea about what love is. As Forrest Gump said to Jenny, "I'm not a smart man, but I know what love is." Do you?

Here are some children's definitions of love.

"Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other." Karl, age 5

"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." Mary Ann, age 4

"My mother says to look for a boyfriend who is kind. So that's what I'll do. I'll find someone who is kinda' tall and handsome." Caroline, age 8

"I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones." Lauren, age 4

"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." Rebecca, age 8

These last two are my personal favorites:

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and just listen." Bobby, age 5

"You really shouldn't say, 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget." Jessica, age 8

The context of our passage is Jesus in Jerusalem a few days before the cross. The religious leaders have been asking Him trick questions to try to get Him to incriminate Himself. But Jesus is too wise. Finally, someone asks Him a serious question.

Mark 12:28-34. "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

This teacher of the law was probably part of the antagonistic crowd questioning Jesus. But when he heard how Jesus answered crooked questions with such straight answers, he decided to ask him a serious question. The Jewish Rabbis had isolated 613 different written commandments and another 1,400 oral commands. Jesus first quoted from Deuteronomy 6 about loving God and then He combined it with a command from Leviticus 19 about loving your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus first established Who God is: He is the One true living God. Then He moved on to reveal the main thing God expects of us. In other words if you could somehow enter into the throne room of heaven right now and kneel before your Creator and ask Him, "God, what is the MAIN thing you expect of me?" He would say, "I want you to love me with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." If you said, "Okay, I've got that. Is there anything else I can do to please you?" God says, "There is one more thing. I want you to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself."

Jesus was talking about three levels of love. He talked about loving yourself, loving others, and loving God. To me, it's like climbing a ladder. You have to start on the bottom rung before you can climb up to the top. I don't think you can truly others and love God until you understand what it means to love yourself. So let's start at the bottom rung and talk about the three levels of love.

1. I AM FREE TO LOVE MYSELF WHEN I SEE MYSELF AS GOD SEES ME

At first, there are many Christians who have a negative reaction to loving themselves. They think, "Wait, aren't I supposed to deny myself? Didn't Jesus tell me to take up my cross and die? And you're telling me to love myself? I'm confused."

That old selfish, sinful nature that used to claim your life needs to be crucified and buried with Christ. But I'm talking about who you are right now; and Jesus said you should love your neighbors as you love yourself. I didn't make that up.

You need to have a healthy self-image of who you are in Christ. I assumed most of you looked at yourselves in the mirror this morning. When you saw that person looking back at you in the mirror, what did you think about that person? Did you look that person in the eyes, or just at your

face, teeth, and hair? Did you think how old, ugly, or overweight you were? Were you happy with that person looking back at you?

Among Christians, there are a couple of self-image mistakes you can make.

A. An inferiority complex

That's actually a psychological term coined by Alfred Adler to describe people who think everyone else around them is better, prettier, stronger, and smarter than they are. Many Christians feel worthless and unworthy. The devil is called the accuser of the brothers and sisters and he wants to constantly keep you on a guilt trip making you think you are too filthy and wicked to matter to God. I think the devil was probably responsible for the lyrics to the Linda Ronstadt's popular song from the 1970s whose lyrics said, "You're no good; you're no good; you're no good; baby, you're no good."

The other self-image mistake is the polar opposite. I'll give it the official theological term:

B. A pompous jerk who only thinks about "me"

Well, I actually made that up because it sounded more descriptive than narcissistic. Have you ever met someone who was in love with themselves? There's a difference between loving yourself and being IN love with yourself. A person who is in love with themselves looks in the mirror and sings, "How Great Thou Art!"

We've all met arrogant, egotistical people who think they are better than everyone else. These people are sick, and pretty much make everyone around them miserable.

Abby, the advice columnist once got a letter from a guy like this. He wrote: Dear Abby: "I'm a guy who has everything. I'm smart and handsome. Women are always flocking around me and telling me how good-looking I am and what a marvelous personality I have I'm beginning to find this boring. How can I discourage these hopeful females?" C.W. Abby wrote back: Dear C.W., "Just keep talking."

Of these two extremes, most of the Christians I know suffer from a sense of inferiority. They feel they are worthless and find it hard to love themselves. This world is a harsh place and there are plenty of people around you who try to tear you down. It starts when you're a child in school. If there's anything that's different about your appearance or how you look or speak, mean kids will make fun of you. Bullying used to happen on the school playground, and now it usually happens in cyberspace.

You might have seen the movie "The Elephant Man." It was based on the true story of Englishman John Merrick who suffered from great facial deformities probably caused by neurofibromatosis. He was orphaned at age 13 and later traveled as part of a freak show. He was once treated by a kind physician who allowed him to live in the hospital and receive an education. In the movie based on his life, John Merrick got lost in the narrow streets of London

and soon a mob gathered around him, ripped off his hood. As they were mocking him, he yelled, "I am not an animal. I am a man!"

The devil may accuse you, and people may try to belittle you. But no matter how people treat you, you should say, "I am not worthless, I am a blood-bought child of God!" When you see yourself as God sees you, you'll be humble and grateful for the grace and forgiveness that God has given you.

The Bible teaches that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. You aren't one-in-a-million; you are one-in-seven-billion. There is nobody else exactly like you alive on the planet. Take a moment and look at the tip of your forefinger. There is a series of swirls and ridges there. That pattern is unique in the world; nobody else's fingerprint matches yours. The design of your eyeball is a miracle, and nobody else's eyeball matches the pattern of yours.

Yes, we are all sinners, and none of us is good in our fallen nature, but if you know Jesus you have been forgiven. Here's how God describes you in Romans 8: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...If God is for us, who can be against us?...Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" (Romans 8:1, 31, 33)

Jesus said the very hairs of your head are numbered. That kind of attention to detail is only possible by our Creator. When God looks at you today, knows you aren't perfect. But He loves you in spite of your flaws.

Years ago I was at a pastor's conference and I heard a preacher say, "God loves you warts and all." He had everyone turn to their neighbor and make that statement. I thought that was a pretty good idea, so the next Sunday at my church in Alabama, I did the same thing. I said, "God loves you warts and all. Now turn to your neighbor and tell them that." Everybody did. After the service, one of my friends came up to me and said, "Pastor, when you had us turn to our neighbor and tell them that God loves them warts and all, there was a guy sitting next to me that I didn't know. As I turned to him I noticed that he had a huge wart on his cheek. So I just said, 'God loves you ... He really does!'" So I'm not going to have us say that, but turn to your neighbor and say, "God loves you in spite of your flaws!"

You will never be truly be able to love others until you love yourself—in spite of your flaws. It's like whenever you're on an airplane and the flight attendants are giving a pre-flight briefing. They say if the cabin loses pressure, oxygen masks will drop from the panel above your head. They always say if you are traveling with a child, put your oxygen mask on first, and then help the child. That makes sense, because if you try to put the child's mask on first, you might pass out from lack of oxygen and both of you would be in trouble. You really can't love others until you see yourself as God sees you and love yourself.

In 1985 Whitney Houston recorded a song that became a #1 hit. It was entitled, "The Greatest Love of All." The last lines said, "I found the greatest love of all inside of me. The greatest love of all is easy to achieve. Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all."

Although Whitney got her start singing in her church, the last few years of her life were pretty rough, and she probably didn't love herself very much. However, the last song she sang publicly, two days before she was found dead was "Jesus loves me." Contrary to her song, loving yourself is NOT the greatest love of all. Loving God is. But you can't love God and others until you love yourself. And you won't love yourself until you see yourself as God sees you. As another great gospel singer, Ethel Waters, used to say, "I know I'm somebody 'cause God don't make no junk."

Let's take the next step up to a second level of love.

2. I AM COMPELLED TO LOVE OTHERS WHEN I SEE THEM AS LOVED BY GOD

Jesus said we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Luke's version of this conversation, the lawyer looks for a loophole. He asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" He wanted Jesus to say, "Why your Jewish brothers and sisters. Your neighbors are people just like you." But instead, Jesus responded by telling one of the greatest stories in the Bible. He told the story of a man who got beaten and robbed and left half dead on the road. A priest and a Levite pass him without helping him. But then a Samaritan man, who was considered a half-breed person, hated by the Jews, stopped and helped the man. He dressed his wounds, put him on his donkey and took him to an inn. Then he left money so the wounded man could be cared for. The Jesus said, "Which of the three men was a neighbor to the wounded man?" The lawyer said, "Uh...the one who showed him mercy." Jesus said, "Bingo. You go and do the same."

So the wrong question is, "Who is my neighbor that I have to love?" The right question is, "To whom can I BE a neighbor?" And anyone who needs your love is a neighbor to be loved. The English word "neighbor" literally means "near dweller," but the original word in the Greek New Testament means anyone around you at any time. You can't restrict your love to any race, any place, any case, any place, or any space, because love is all about grace. We love others because God first loved us.

Let's be honest, it's so easy to love some people. We all know people who love us and show us kindness, and it's easy for us to reciprocate. We love them in return. But there's no grace in that kind of love. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies... If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that." (Matthew 5:43, 47 MSG)

The humorist Will Rogers once said, "I never met a man I didn't like." Well I say he didn't meet some of the people I've met! Because there are a lot of unlikeable people in this world. For years I used to say that some people are unlovable, but I don't use that term anymore. Because God reminded me that nobody is unlovable because He loves them. So I changed my terminology. There are some people who are unlovely. There are some people who are just hard to get along with. And some of them are Christians. There's a little poem I learned years ago that says, "To live above with those we love, oh, that will be glory. But to live below with those we know, now that's another story!"

Can you think of one person right now who you find it very hard to love? You may be tempted to think of four or five, but just focus on one person. This person just rubs you the wrong way. Maybe he or she has wronged you or hurt you. Are you thinking of this person right now? By the way, have you ever considered somebody may be thinking of you right now?

I want you to imagine Jesus Christ walking up to you and saying, "I want you to love that person for my sake." What's your response? You may be thinking, "But I don't FEEL like loving that person!" Love has very little to do with feelings. As we'll see in the next message, there is an emotional component to love, but primarily love is a choice, not a feeling. Drs. Minirth and Meir wrote a book entitled *Love is a Choice* in 2002. We'll come back to that unlovely person in a few minutes.

Let me introduce you to the highest level of love and we'll explore this love in the next message.

3. I LOVE GOD WHEN OBEYING HIM IS THE PRIMARY PASSION OF MY LIFE

Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23) Here are four diagnostic questions – just answer a quick yes or no silently and we'll explore this level of love more in the next message. (1) Do I love/obey God emotionally (heart)? (2) Do I love/obey God willfully (soul)? (3) Do I love/obey God intellectually (mind)? (4) Do I love/obey God supremely (strength)?

CONCLUSION

Let's go back to that person you consider to be unlovely. Does Jesus love that person? You've got to answer, "Yes." Then why don't you say, "Jesus I can't love that person in my own strength. Will you love that person through me? That's a prayer Jesus will answer every time you pray it.

What if I had the financial means to tell you I would pay you \$5 million if you would even pretend you love that person for the next 12 months? Think you could do it? Well, our motivation to love others is more valuable than a billion dollars. It's satisfaction of hearing Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote: "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor - act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him."

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all you've got. That's the highest level. But you've got to love yourself before you can love others. And as the old Gospel song says, "You Don't Love God if you Don't Love Your Neighbor."

OUTLINE

1. I AM FREE TO LOVE MYSELF WHEN I SEE MYSELF AS GOD SEES ME

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...If God is for us, who can be against us?...Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" *Romans 8:1, 31, 33*

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