

“Love Your Neighbor”

Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-37

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 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. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

– Matthew 22:34-40, ESV

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

- Luke 10:25-37, ESV

Sometimes you get more than you asked for, and that’s often a very good thing. When Marvel first started putting the little teaser cliff-hanger clips at the end of their movie credits, it was a delightful treat – a little happy surprise. Now, they feel compelled to give us two of them, one half-way through the credits and another at the very end, and sometimes they’re honestly not worth the wait.

The lawyer who asked Jesus what the greatest commandment in the Law is got more than he asked for, and it wasn’t because Jesus was pushing a sequel. Rather, Jesus was further unpacking what it means to truly love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The Second is Like It . . .

We know Jesus is continuing and unpacking the great and first commandment because He says, “*And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*” - vv. 39-40

The second great commandment is like the first – that is, it resembles it and corresponds to it. In other words, Jesus isn’t completely changing topics, like someone who says “I really like steak. Oh, and I also like basketball.” No, the second commandment follows from the first logically, as the second commandment resembles the first and corresponds to it.

How? Well, consider two things:

1. All people were created by God in His image.
2. God is invisible and we can often imagine that we love Him in our minds. People are concrete and it's harder to fool yourself into thinking you really love a person when you know you don't.

Both James and John highlight the connection between loving God and loving others.

In James 3, James tells us the tongue *“is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”* – James 3:8-10, ESV

1 John 4:19-21 says, *“We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”*

It is an incompatibility to bless God and curse people made in His image with the same tongue, and the fact that we do so shows that our tongues are restless in their evil, full of deadly poison. We cannot say we love God and refuse to love our brothers.

The connection between these two commandments reminds me of Jesus' healing of the paralytic who was lowered down on a mat by his friends. Jesus first said to the paralytic, *“Your sins are forgiven,”* because this was the man's deepest need. When the Pharisees were shocked by Jesus' words – How can a man forgive sins? – Jesus then said, *“Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”*—he then said to the paralytic—*“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.”* (Matthew 9:4-6, ESV)

Jesus healed the paralytic to prove that He was actually able to do the greater and more important miracle – forgive his sins. We are called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves, and we show that we do indeed love God – the greater commandment but the easier one to say – by the fact that we are loving other people made in His image, as He has called us to do.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

The second greatest commandment is to *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* Some people have taken this to mean, *“Love your neighbor and yourself,”* as if Jesus is giving us three great commandments:

1. Love God.
2. Love your neighbor.
3. Love yourself.

Some people have even said that we have to learn to love ourselves before we can even begin to love others, since we're told to *“love our neighbors as ourselves.”* Well, let's consider this:

First of all, Jesus clearly says these are two commandments not three. He says, *“a second is like it”* and then he says *“on these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* It would be more accurate to say that Jesus gave us one great commandment in two parts than that He named three commandments.

Secondly, the idea that you have to learn to love yourself before you can love others is a bit a pop psychology mumbo jumbo that has led to incredible selfishness in our culture. We'll never love ourselves sufficiently as to make ourselves happy and content with ourselves, for joy and contentment cannot come from self-love. They come only from receiving and giving the love of God. So, the more we think we will achieve peace of mind, satisfaction, and rest for our souls through self-indulgent self-love, the more sorely disappointed and unstable we will be.

Jesus doesn't need to command us to love ourselves because we already do. While sin and Satan will sometimes twist us in knots and we might struggle with feeling worthless and hopeless, and we might even begin to hate ourselves with a very unhealthy and unbiblical self-loathing, the solution to that is not to focus more on ourselves. The solution to low self-esteem is not high self-esteem, but it's getting our focus off of ourselves entirely.

When we receive God's love for us through Jesus Christ and rest in that love, loving God in return, and we then share His love with others as God gives us opportunity, then we begin to be recipients and conduits of God's amazing and unending love. Only then do we begin to rest in knowing we are loved and that we are being used by God to show His love to others. That brings a deeper peace and stronger stability to our lives than self-focused self-love or self-loathing ever could. We need to neither puff ourselves up nor beat ourselves down. Rather, we need to let the truth of the Gospel assure our hearts before God and others in the grace of God that is poured out into our hearts and lives through Jesus Christ who is Himself our righteousness and our peace.

In short, to love our neighbors as ourselves is to see our neighbors as just as human as we are, just as weak and frail and in need of love and forgiveness, just as valuable and worthy of receiving as much respect and kindness as we ourselves would like to receive. In other words, Jesus summarized this commandment quite well for us in Matthew 7:12 when he said, "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*" Treat other people the way you would want to be treated. Would you want others to be patient with you? Understanding of your faults and failings? Generous to you in time of real, deep need? Friendly and kind toward you? Helpful? Then that's how you should treat others.

Who?

But who do we need to treat this way? In other words, who is my neighbor? This was exactly the question another lawyer asked Jesus in Luke 10:25-37:

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own

animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ *And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'* ³⁶ *Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"* ³⁷ *He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."*

This lawyer seemed to have a sincere enough question for Jesus, but he was trying to put Jesus to the test. Still, the question is an excellent one, perhaps the best we can ever ask: *"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* Now, we might expect Jesus to give a different answer, a clearer Gospel call – *"Believe on me for the forgiveness of your sins, and I will give you eternal life."* But this young lawyer was not ready to hear that. We need to hear the requirement of God's Law so it can strip us of our self-righteousness before we're ready for the Gospel. This lawyer was still trying to justify himself by his works. He was a respectable religious expert, a well-behaved and respected part of God's people.

So, instead of giving him the Gospel, Jesus responds by pointing him to the Law. If you want to know what you must DO to inherit eternal life, to earn it, the answer is that you must perfectly obey the Law. The lawyer knew this. He also knew well what the Law required, for in verse 27, he gave the exact right answer: *"And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus commends him for his exactly correct answer and tells him, "do this, and you will live."* If you want to be justified by the Law, it's not enough to know the Law; you have to do it.

And so, *"desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"* Jewish religious experts had debates over this topic: Who did the Law obligate God's people to love? The most common answer was that the Law required you to love your fellow Jews; they were your neighbors, especially those in your own tribe and extended family. Most rabbis did not believe that Gentiles were neighbors; they were enemies. Some even went so far as to teach, *"You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* (Matthew 5:43)

Of all the enemies of the Jews, the Samaritans were held in special disregard. The woman at the well in John 4 was shocked that Jesus spoke to her and asked her for water, for, as John tells us, *"Jews had no dealing with Samaritans."* The Jews had dealings with the Romans and other Gentiles, but the Samaritans were half-breed heretics. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel, which had 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrian king Sargon II. The Assyrians practiced assimilation by mass deportation and forced relocation. So, they moved most of the inhabitants of Northern Israel out of the land and replaced them with outsiders who then mixed with the small remnant of mostly poor and uneducated Israelites who were left behind. This is why we speak of the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel," because they were dispersed in such a way that we can no longer identify where they went or what became of them.

When the Samaritans – named after the capital city of Northern Israel, Samaria – developed their own form of YaHWeH worship, they constructed a temple of Mount Gerizim which the Jews later destroyed, because God had said that His people must worship at His Temple in Jerusalem. They rejected large parts of the Scriptures and had their own errant beliefs. They were viewed by Jews as half-breeds, traitors, and defilers of the true worship of YaHWeH.

Thanks to Jesus' story becoming one of the most famous stories in the history of the world, we now think a Samaritan is someone who does good, as a "Good Samaritan." That's not the way they were viewed in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day.

In Jesus' story, a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was indeed going down a very steep hill. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is less than 20 miles long, but Jerusalem sits more than 2,500 feet above sea level and Jericho sits more than 800 feet below sea level. So, it's a drop of more than 3,300 feet in elevation in about 18 miles. This road was notorious for robbers, as it is lined by caves at many places.

Jesus doesn't tell us whether the man who gets beaten up and left for dead is Jewish or a Samaritan or neither. He is simply "a man." The lawyer would probably assume he is a Jewish man, and that's fine, but the important fact is that he is a human being made in God's image. I think we're all supposed to see ourselves as that man, lying on the side of the road half-dead. By the way, this is the only time the New Testament uses this word for "half dead" – *hemithanes* – which is not quite as bad as "mostly dead," but almost. Without medical attention and care, the man would have died.

We're also not told why the priest and the Levite passed by on the other side. Some people have suggested that the priest was concerned about becoming defiled by being near a dead body which would make him ineligible to serve in the Temple, but the text clearly says that the priest was descending, coming down, which means he was leaving Jerusalem for Jericho, a city where many priests lived. He would have just completed a two-week term of service in the Temple, worshiping and leading God's people in worship. He would have been as close to God as ever, and yet he intentionally got as far away from this injured man as he could. He almost certainly would have told you how much he loved God and how much he loved serving in the Temple and teaching God's Law, but on his way home from two straight weeks in church, he cannot be bothered to even come near to his neighbor in need. And the same for the Levite, who might also have been serving in the Temple, serving more like a deacon, taking care of the Temple furnishings, washing and maintaining things. Two religious professionals, each of whom was an expert in the things of God, leave the poor half-dead man wallowing in his blood.

"*But a Samaritan.*" That's not what this lawyer was expecting to hear. Maybe it would've been expected for Jesus to say, "But a common Jewish man," pointing out the hypocrisy of the priestly class and championing the cause of the common man. But, no, Jesus says, "*But a Samaritan.*"

At the end of His story, Jesus asks the lawyer, "*Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?*" The lawyer doesn't answer the way we'd expect. The simplest answer would have been "*the Samaritan,*" but perhaps he can't even bring himself to say the word, so he responds, "*The one who showed him mercy.*" And Jesus said to him, "*You go, and do likewise.*"

Did you notice how Jesus turned the question around on the lawyer? The lawyer had asked "*Who is my neighbor?*" But Jesus asked, "*Which of these three proved to be a neighbor to the man?*" Instead of asking, "*Who is my neighbor?*", Jesus would rather have us ask, "*Who can I be a neighbor to?*" or "*Who needs me to be a neighbor to them?*"

You and I are called to be a neighbor to those whom God brings into our lives or our spheres of influence who need someone to be a neighbor to them.

How?

Notice how the Good Samaritan was a neighbor to the man in need. First of all, notice, “*when he saw him, he had compassion.*” The word translated as “*had compassion*” literally means “was moved in his bowels.” Oh, how language changes over time and across cultures! The ancient Israelites thought of the bowels as the seat of emotions, especially of pity. So, we could also say he had sympathy or empathy for the man, for his emotion – his *pathos* – was touched and moved.

In the New Testament, this word is most commonly used of Jesus. In fact, it is exclusively used of Jesus and by Jesus. Jesus often had compassion on the needy crowds and was moved to heal them, feed them, or teach them – to meet their need. In the story of the Prodigal Son, the Father is moved with compassion when he sees his son coming home, even when he is a long way off.

Jesus is showing us that to love our neighbors as ourselves, we must be moved with pity, compassion, sympathy for them and must seek to meet their needs, whatever those needs are, according to the best of our ability.

Of course, Jesus is the ultimate Good Samaritan. He saw us lost in our sin, cut off from God the Father, under condemnation, and He knew He was the only One who could meet our needs. He loved us so much He was deeply moved to come and do whatever needed to be done to meet our needs for forgiveness, justification, adoption – our need to be reconciled to our Heavenly Father. The Good Samaritan gave this poor man what He had – oil, wine, money – and cared for him as best as he could. It was a sacrifice. It was costly and inconvenient. But how much more of a sacrifice, how much more costly and inconvenient was our salvation for Jesus?

We are told by Jesus the same thing He told the lawyer: “*Go and do likewise.*” But we can’t do it seeking to justify ourselves. That’s not only impossible, but it’s also unnecessary. Jesus has already done everything for our justification. But we love because He first loved us. We show compassion because we want to be more like Jesus, our kinsman-redeemer, our rescuer and role model. Because Jesus has freed us from the condemnation of the Law and given us His perfect righteousness and eternal life, we respond in love for Him and love for others in His name.