

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 22:34-40, 1 John 4:20-5:5

Sermon Title: "How Love Lives and Is Made Complete" (A Journey through Matthew)

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A lawyer approaches Jesus in the temple courts. He is a Pharisee, one of those "righteous ones." He offers a question to test Jesus. Why are the Pharisees and Sadducees always testing Jesus? The King James Version says that the lawyer is tempting Jesus – the Spanish version of the Bible agrees with this translation. Tempting, testing, but why? Are they trying to gain something over Jesus? Are they trying to catch Jesus saying something false, so that they can expose him for the charlatan that they think he is?

The lawyer's question really is a softball question. Any one of us should be able to answer it easily. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of [Moses'] law?"¹ There it is: the lawyer has set a trap. Of the Ten Commandments, which is the greatest? Of the over 600 laws that rabbis and elders and priests have created, which single one stands out above them all? If you are a serious rabbi who knows every religious law, you would say that they are all equally great, "since whatever God commands is great, no

¹ Matthew 22:36.

matter how insignificant it may seem... to be.”² If it is of God, it cannot be ignored, so all the commands are great, right? But we already stated that this is a softball question: “Which law of Moses stands out as the law to know?” It is an easy question to answer, because Jesus is the Fulfillment of the law. Jesus means to do everything that the law requires. He has come to “fill it full’ with obedience and meaning, to set it on its feet, and not to set it aside.”³ The way Jesus fills the law of God full of obedience and meaning is by filling it with love. This is what the Ten Commandments is based on: love.

This isn’t new information that Jesus shares. He is looking directly at the Ten Commandments themselves, ten solid decrees from God that are divided into two segments. The first four Commandments deal with the love of God. The last six deal with the love of neighbor. Back in Deuteronomy 6, Moses commands the people “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.” Devout Jews would pray this every morning and every night.⁴ So every law-abiding rabbi knows about the love of

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, 793.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 1, The Churchbook, Matthew 1-12*, 166.

⁴ Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2*, cf. 794.

God and of neighbor. Even the lawyer with his Pharisee and Sadducee cronies knows that the law boils down to the two most important commandments a person could follow. They all just need to hear the One who fulfills God's law with love to say it.

I know there are two commandments that Jesus cites in Matthew 22. However, you might have heard me say that there really is only one commandment that we should observe, because love of God and love of neighbor can never be separated. They act as one law based on love that we may observe. I got this idea when I read 1 John years and years ago.

John loves to talk about love. He is the Christian Love Guru. That famous verse, "For God so loved the world," is found only in his Gospel. And John doesn't stop with this topic of love in his first letter at the back of the Bible. Years ago I am reading Chapter 3 of 1 John, and he says, "What manner of love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God." And then he goes on to say that whoever loves God loves others. If you are a child of God, God loves you and you love God, and you love all of God's children as God does. John says in Chapter 3 that the ways of the children of the devil are displayed, when said children do not practice the righteousness of God and love their

fellow brothers and sisters. So I began to understand that love of God and love of neighbor, the two greatest Commandments, are sown together. We cannot have one without the other.

And then later in Chapter 3, John says this, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers [and sisters]. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need but has no pity on him [or her], how can the love of God be in him?”⁵ If we have no love for others, John says, then how can we say we have the love of God, or even love for God?

If a person cannot show love to another human being, then he or she breaks the commandment of loving one another. By breaking that commandment, one breaks the first as well, because we are God’s children. God loves all his children. God wants us to love all his children. If we cannot do as God does, then there is no love. No love for God, because we ignore him; and no love for others, because we reject them. Maybe you can see why I say that the two greatest Commandments that Jesus talks about in Matthew 22 are really one great Commandment.

And then the last straw came when I read the

⁵ 1 John 3:16-17.

passage we read this morning. “We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother [or sister, that person] is a liar. For anyone who does not love [a brother or sister], whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And [Christ] has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother [or sister].”⁶ That did it for me. The two Commandments are effectively one. We cannot have one without the other, although sometimes Christians try to do so.

Christians can be really good at the “Love your God” part, but the “Love your neighbor” part they try to fudge. It is easy to love God because we can shape God into our own image. We may believe whatever we want about God, because God isn’t going to react like a person standing in front of us. If we try to shape people in our image, they will respond quickly, and loudly. They will tell us what they think right away, and then we have to apologize and clean up the mess. But not God. God doesn’t seem to respond so quickly. God doesn’t seem to correct our view of him, or our understanding of love, with an obviously loud rebuke. We don’t see burning bushes or writing on walls as soon as we misinterpret God. So we can keep loving

⁶ 1 John 4:19-21.

God as we want and ignore others.

It is easy to worship God as we like, saying, "It's me and my God," because we don't seem to get into an argument from God. You see, when it comes to worshipping God with others, we could have many different opinions. One person wants more music, and the other more prayers. One wants a shorter sermon, while the pastor wants a longer sermon. People feel strongly about worship, and they could more spend time in arguing about styles of worship than actually worshipping God. But we Christians can easily love God on our own, and worship God as we like, and all is perfect with the world. We fulfill the one Commandment, and feel so good about being in the presence of God, while we completely erase the love of neighbor, worshipping without our neighbors, which is not what God intended for us.

Most Christian music on the radio doesn't help the matter. The messages are very worshipful, very inspiring. One cannot help but feel great after singing a few Christian songs. But those songs are selfish in their adoration of God. Have you listened to the actual words? "*I will bow down, I will worship, I will wait upon the Lord.*" What about everybody else? Is it just me and God, and forget others? The songs do not express the importance of community. We are

individually bowing down and worshipping in these songs, when we should all be bowing down and waiting for the Lord. The problem can be solved so simply, if only these Christian artists would write, “We will bow down, *we* will worship, *we* will wait upon the Lord.” By changing I to We, we are placed immediately into community, and we fulfill the great two-in-one Commandment.

But somebody could argue, “If you are in church and at a concert, everybody together is singing, ‘I will bow down and I will worship.’ We are in community, worshipping God.” Not exactly. The worship is still selfish, when we sing only about ourselves and God, and not all of us together and God. Even in a public space, we may only think about ourselves and not the person standing next to us. Besides, when we are driving down the road, singing at the top of our voices, “I will bow down and worship,” nobody else is considered. It is only me and my God in that small space: me and my concerns and what God can do specifically for me. But if the words are, “We will bow down, we will wait for God,” then the idea of community is planted in our minds as we are driving. It is not me and my God, it is we and our God. Notice the difference. That magical word We thrusts us into the middle of the great Commandment: Love of God

and love of neighbor.

Loving neighbor is so difficult to do. We don't agree with all of our neighbors. Some of our neighbors bug us for various reasons. We don't look to be bugged, but we are. In this book I've been reading, the author says that he knew a guy who annoyed him. He thought he was sarcastic, lazy, and manipulative. He didn't like how he ate with his mouth open, and he didn't like how he ended every sentence with Dude. The author said he doesn't enjoy not liking people, "but sometimes these things feel as though you are not in control of them."⁷ The author never chose to dislike the guy; it felt more like the dislike of him chose him.

And isn't that one of the keys to loving our brothers and sisters. God never chooses for us to dislike anybody. The command from Jesus is to love everybody unconditionally, without restrictions, without bias. God loves us unconditionally, so much so to send his Son to die for us. Never did God send his Son to dislike anybody. That idea doesn't come from God – we know where it comes from. So if we find that certain people are bugging us, we need to fight the feeling of disliking them. That dislike wants to put a barrier between them and us. God would

⁷ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 219.

never want that barrier to be constructed.

The author said in his book that he repented of that feeling. He knows that God loves that guy who calls everyone Dude. He loves him no matter how he chews his food. God wanted the author to love him too, just as the command says. So he repented from that feeling. He didn't allow the feeling of disliking him to overtake his thoughts and actions. He soon discovered that this Dude guy was really funny. Had a great sense of humor. And he was brilliant, offering insights that the author had not imagined. "I felt as though I lost an enemy and gained a brother." Through their friendship, the Dude guy became more serious about his relationship with God. He started praying and attending church regularly. "He was a great human being getting greater" and "I could feel God's love for him."⁸ All because the command to love neighbors was not removed from the command to love God.

In Matthew 22, Jesus tells the lawyer straight up what he should do. John is even blunter about it: we cannot love God if we do not love our neighbors, or else we are liars. God is love, John also tells us. Whoever does not love doesn't know God, for God is

⁸ Ibid., 221.

love.⁹ Martin Luther puts it this way: God's love lives and is completed as we "exercise ourselves in grace." In other words, God's love doesn't live in us, and cannot become complete and whole among us, unless we share love with others. So, the two greatest Commandments are one. We cannot love others without loving God, and we cannot love God without loving others. But when we do love God and love our brothers and sisters, as we love ourselves, then we all grow closer to God. We all become great human beings getting greater. Our relationship with God together grows stronger, and nothing can touch it. Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁰

⁹ 1 John 4:8.

¹⁰ Cf. Romans 8:39.