

October Excurses: Love & Light

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ESV)*

The Great Commandment

October 16th, 2016

Matthew 22:34-40

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Introduction:

Good morning church! If you came today expecting to hear the next instalment of the Revelation series then I am going to be throwing you a curveball. Pastor Paul is ministering at West Highlands Baptist Church in Hamilton and we decided that it might be best to put a hold on the series and instead do a brief excursus. You see, one of the best things about preaching through books of the Bible is that it should theoretically spare a congregation from hearing sermon after sermon about their pastor’s favourite topics. We try to preach on what’s next, and to allow the shape of the text to form the shape of our sermons.

That being said, one of the challenges in preaching through books of the Bible is that sometimes we come across a point that is particularly relevant to our congregation, but it sits as a side point in the flow of the argument. If we make that side point the main point than we’re not really being faithful to the text, so we preach the sermon knowing that sub point 3 is an atomic bomb that really deserves some more attention.

Over the next two weeks we’re going to deal with some topics that have presented themselves and that deserve more of our attention. This week, we’re going to spend some time thinking about Christian love.

When we studied Jesus’ message to the Ephesians, we saw a glimpse of ourselves in the text. We saw a church that was working hard to further the Gospel. We saw a church that was serious about orthodoxy and that refused to settle for anything less than the true proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. We saw those things and we thought, “Hey! That sounds like us!” But before we could reach our arms around to pat ourselves on the back, we read the accusation that followed.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. (Rev. 2:4 ESV)

Unfortunately, that last part also sounded like us. In the same way that it can happen in a marriage, our relationship with God can deteriorate from what was once passionate love into duty and obligation. The church in Ephesus wasn't dead or dangerous. But it was showing signs of becoming dry and of running on empty. We don't want to be in that place. We don't want to be striving by our own strength. We want to be fuelled by God's love! But what does that look like?

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 22:34-40. Because we're jumping into this narrative midstream, I want to briefly remind you of the context surrounding these verses.

Jesus was at the temple and the two prominent Jewish groups of the day were challenging him. They were trying to trap him in his words. It is fitting that a Pharisee, who was also an expert of the law, asked the question that led to Jesus' profound statement. The Pharisees are the picture perfect representation of man's attempt at religion. "If we do enough and work hard enough than we will please God!" In fact, the Pharisees were so determined to elevate themselves up to God's standards that they added to the Mosaic Law to help "beef it up". These men had "dutiful obedience" down to a science. And so this expert of the law came to Jesus with a question in the hopes of causing Jesus to misspeak.

Hear now the Word of the Lord. Matthew 22, beginning at verse 34.

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." (Matt. 22:34-40 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

When Jesus says that we are to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, he is not referring to three distinct kinds of love. He is referring to one all-encompassing love. That is one command looked at through three different lenses. In his commentary on this passage, William Hendrickson helpfully explained how we should understand the functions of the heart, the soul and the mind.

"The heart is the hub of the wheel of man's existence, the mainspring of all his thoughts, words, and deeds. The soul ... is here probably the seat of man's emotional activity; the mind, not only of his purely intellectual life but also of his disposition and attitude."¹

Jesus is here saying, "Do you want to know what pleases God? Love Him with your whole being! Love Him completely! And in the overflow of that love, extend love to others. Love them as you love yourself."

God is looking for a life that is full of obedience, but not just any obedience. It must be obedience that is motivated by a sincere, whole-hearted love for God. This morning, I would like to spend some time considering this Great Commandment. I want to ask the question: What does it look like to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbours as ourselves? Then I want to conclude by considering two responses to this commandment.

Considering The Great Commandment

When Jesus spoke this commandment, it was a rebuke for the Pharisees. It was a rebuke against a people who might be doing all of the right things, but who were doing them for all of the wrong reasons. It's a rebuke for those of us who go through the motions of religion but who forget that our obedience needs to be motivated by love. So let's consider this morning what God requires of us.

1. Love God With All Your Heart

Hendriksen reminded us that the heart was understood differently in the first century than it is today. We understand the heart as our emotional hub, but Jesus understood the heart to be the very core of a person and the source of their thoughts, words and deeds. So let's consider those categories.

i. The source of our thoughts

What Jesus referred to as the "heart" we would probably refer to as the "brain". Look at what Jesus says to the teachers of the law in chapter 9.

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your **hearts**?" (Matt. 9:4 ESV)

Jesus tells us here that our thinking is a reflection of our heart. In particular, **WHAT** we think about is a

¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew (New Testament Commentary)*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1982), 809.

reflection of WHAT we love. Now, if you're honest with yourself, you know from experience that this is true. How is an addict transformed? They stop thinking incessantly about their next fix. Why is it so hard to break free from addictions? Because we can't stop thinking about our next fix! Our thoughts reveal that our hearts still long for what we used to have. I don't care if you're addicted to drugs, pornography, Netflix or gossip. Your thoughts reveal your affection. When Jesus tells us to love God with all of our hearts, he is telling us that our thoughts should progressively and primarily be fixated on God.

Think about God and think about His Word. Think about how you can honour Him. Think about how thankful you are for all that He's done. Set your thoughts on God, and the actions will follow. Secondly, our heart is the source of our words and deeds.

ii. The source of our words and our deeds

Jesus said to the Pharisees,

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the **heart** the mouth speaks. (Matt. 12:24 ESV)

If you're looking for a quick indicator of where your love is, record yourself for the next week. How much grumbling and complaining comes out of your mouth? Do you talk about God, and about how He has saved you in Jesus Christ and about what He is doing in your life? Is that a topic of conversation around the dinner table, or in the car with your spouse, or at work? If you can't remember the last time that you spoke about the goodness of God than you need to stop and ask yourself where your love is directed.

And what about your deeds? Let's not jump from the ditch of legalism that the Pharisees were trapped in only to land in the ditch of antinomianism on the other side. Remember, earlier in this same Gospel Jesus said,

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Matt. 5:17-18 ESV)

He is not directing us *away* from obedience but *towards* an obedience that stems from love. God hasn't changed. He still expects obedience from his people. In fact, Jesus strengthens these commands. He says,

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28 ESV)

And Jesus says,

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matt. 5:21-22 ESV)

So Jesus didn't come so that we wouldn't have to obey. In fact, we should obey even more! He came because we could never obey fully. We always fall short. He came to *fulfil* the law – to obey it completely so as to earn the inheritance of eternal life which he now freely shares with those who trust in him. That's what Jesus did with the law. He completed it. And yet, we are still called to live in obedience, and that obedience – those deeds – flow from the heart.

Are you living in disobedience? Is there sin in your life that you refuse to let go of? If the answer to that question is “yes” then you are not loving God with all of your heart. As long as you allow that sin to linger, and as long as you cling to that disobedience, you evidence with your life that Jesus is not the Lord of you. Our lives and our speech need to tell the story of our salvation.

As a young father, I am becoming increasingly aware and increasingly concerned that my kids will learn more about our faith from their time with Mom and Dad than they will at Sunday School. What do Mom and Dad talk with each other about? What do they talk to me about? How do they live their lives? More often than not, if little Timmy discovers that Mom and Dad aren't very interested in Jesus, he'll take his cues from them and he'll leave his faith behind with Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and all of the other nonsense that Mom and Dad never really believed in. That reality humbles me, and it causes me to stop and self assess. Do I really love God with all my heart? If I do, then that should and will evidence itself in the way I speak and the way that I live.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, when Jesus tells us to love God with our heart, soul and mind, he doesn't mean to love Him in three distinct ways, but instead he's just emphasising three different colours in that one picture of our love for God. The heart was the broadest and most all-encompassing category in the first century. That's why we've dedicated the most time to it. Now let's briefly consider what it looks like to love God with our soul and with our mind.

2. Love God With All Your Soul

Hendriksen tells us that the soul is the seat of man's emotional activity so what does it look like to love God with our emotion? I would argue that we as Canadians struggle with this more than many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. We don't wear our hearts on our sleeves (unless we're watching the Blue Jays, at which point grown men will dance and cry.) Loving God with all of our soul involves feeling and expressing that which God tells us we ought to feel and express. Let me explain:

When we contemplate our sin, that ought to incite some godly grief, should it not? Loving God with my emotions involves allowing myself to hate and to weep over my sin. When we contemplate God's grace towards us and how he transformed us from rebels into heirs shouldn't that incite some joy? Loving God with our souls must include singing joyfully of our salvation and celebrating our Saviour!

Our culture hasn't wired us to express ourselves this way. But if God commands us to make a joyful noise to the Lord, and to shout for joy, and to sing, and to bow down (and He does), than we *must* lay aside our excuses and grow in our emotional response to Him. You see, the reason that Jesus gives us this one command in three parts is because he wants us to see that loving God must include all of our being. Our living, our speaking, our doing, our singing, our feeling and our thinking must all be shaped by our love for God. Finally, let's consider what it looks like to love God with all your mind.

3. Love God With All Your Mind

I mentioned previously that the heart was understood as the source of a man's thoughts. If the heart dealt with the source of our thinking, the mind deals with the way we think. It speaks of our intellectual faculties.

For example, I remember speaking with a young woman who was wrestling with the faith. She had conceded that there was a God, and had conceded that she was a sinner, but she had a multitude of questions about some peripheral issues. She refused to put her trust in Jesus Christ until she was able to wrestle every mystery of the universe to the ground. Now, God does not ask us to check our brains at the door when we become believers. We should think, and reason, and ask questions, but we should not do it in such a way that we put ourselves in a position of judgment over God. He does not answer to you, no matter how many IQ points you have.

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isa. 66:2 ESV)

When we analyse God through the lens of our world and our wisdom than we treat Him as if He is an object to be studied. We treat Him as if He must answer to our rules and understanding. But Paul cautioned the Corinthians against this way of thinking.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:25 ESV)

"Give me your brightest scientist" God says. "In my greatest foolishness I am wiser than him. And send out your strongest army. My pinky finger is mightier than them." There is a worldly way of thinking, and there is a Godly

way of thinking. Stop thinking the way that the world thinks. You are in the world, but you are not of the world. You are of the Spirit. So love God with your mind.

Now, having instructed us that our love for God is the first and the greatest commandment, Jesus directs us to the second greatest commandment.

Love Your Neighbour As Yourself

And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt. 22:39-40 ESV)

Paul picks up this language in his instructions to the Ephesians. We read this last week in our RMM readings. Paul instructed the husbands in Ephesus to love their wives as Christ loved the church. There is no greater love than that. Yet, he went on and he instructed these men,

²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it (Eph 5:28-29a ESV)

³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, (Eph. 5:33a ESV)

It seems to me that loving your neighbour as yourself means extending that self-preserving care that you intrinsically have for yourself to others. If you are hungry, you eat. If you are cold, you find shelter. Well, when you see your neighbour hungry, or cold than what is your response? Do you love them as you love yourself?

Isn't it interesting that God uses this analogy? There are some analogies in the Bible – like the parable of the sower or the parable of the fig tree – that require a little explanation for those of us unfamiliar with agriculture and fig trees. But when Jesus says, “Love your neighbour as yourself” there is no explanation required. We understand that.

But it begs the question, “Who is my neighbour? Who do I need to show this love to?” A Pharisee asked Jesus that exact question and Jesus answered him with a parable.

“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 neighbour 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 10:30-37 ESV)

So who is our neighbour? It is whomever God places in our path. It's every person in need that we so often neglect. Nobody enters your life by accident and if they are in your life it is so that you can show them the love of God.

Now that being said, we are called especially to show love to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul said that to the church in Galatia,

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and **especially** to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10 ESV)

So a Christian is called to love everyone, and especially his fellow believers. If this sounds daunting that's because it is! This selfless love that we are called to show is supposed to be so foreign to the world that it causes them to take notice. Jesus said that.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 ESV)

Our love for one another ought to be so distinct that the people of Orillia stop and wonder. Our unbelieving neighbours should see the way that the church cares for one another and they should want what they see. But church, we will never be able to offer that love until we get our love in proper alignment. What was the greatest commandment? Love God! Any belief system, theology or practice that puts our love of man above our love of God will ultimately fall flat. Do you know why it won't work? It won't work because the love that God is calling us to give is a love that is impossible! Many days I fail at loving my beautiful wife the way I love myself and if I can't consistently show that love to her (the mother of my children!), than how will I consistently show it to God's people and to the people who God randomly puts in my life? The only way I will be able to love like that is if I am being constantly transformed by the love of God. My heart has to be fixed on Him. I need to be loving Him with my whole being if I'm going to stand a chance of overflowing with the love that He requires of me.

This brings us to our two possible responses to this commandment.

Two Streams

When Jesus spoke these words, he erected a great mountain into the religious landscape. The Pharisees were

convinced that they could work hard enough to make their way up to God. By the way, that is the story of every other world religion. Be good enough and you'll be allowed into heaven. Be kind enough and you'll be reincarnated into a higher caste. Be enlightened enough and you'll come closer to Nirvana. But here, Jesus lays down an impossible commandment. God is requiring perfect obedience to all of his commandments but that obedience must also be fuelled by a perfect love.

This is the impossible requirement: Perfect obedience with perfect motivation. If you're going to persist in paddling upstream to try and earn God's love you need to know what is expected of you. So your first option is to work harder.

1. Work Harder

You're staring at this mountain of perfect obedience, and you're gripping your paddle a little more firmly as you say to yourself, "I can do this!" That is the response that we see all around us. The world thinks they can merit God's favour. Other religions think they can earn God's love. Christian, do you?

Church, I want to be very practical this morning. Some of you have been working like dogs to try and earn God's love. You've been doing some really good things: You've been reading your Bible daily, establishing a prayer calendar, volunteering at the soup kitchen and leading daily family devotions. But you still feel dry. You still feel like you're missing something – like God needs more from you. Some of you are brand new to the faith. You said a prayer yesterday and now people are saying you're a Christian but you don't know where to begin. You're wondering what you need to do to earn and then to keep God's love. It all feels very daunting. If we're honest with ourselves, I would guess that every believer in this room has found themselves staring with dismay at the impossible feat of living the life that God has called them to live and has silently asked the question, "How can I possibly do this?"

The answer of course stares us right in the face. Humanly speaking, we can't do this. This is where a church begins to run on empty. We do not have the ability within ourselves to love God with our whole heart, soul and mind at all times. Even on our best days it's hard to say that we have truly loved our neighbour as we love ourselves.

The Pharisees were very obedient men, but they could not meet this standard. The Ephesian church was very busy and orthodox, but they had begun to take their eyes off of the centre. God is looking for obedience – of course He is – but the obedience that He desires must be fuelled in every way by love.

And maybe you're wondering this morning, "If what God requires of us is impossible than why are we here?" We're here because Christianity is the only religion in which God came down and did the impossible for us. You and I were not able to live this out, but Jesus did. He obeyed perfectly. And His obedience was motivated by perfect love. He fulfilled the great commandment! And then He died on the cross to pay for our disobedience. He rose from the grave to prove that the victory was won. He ascended to Heaven so that we could receive His Spirit and so that we could have access to the Father in prayer. He did all of this for us because we could not do it for ourselves. Fuelled by the inner love that exists within the Trinity, God acted to save us.

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8 ESV)

Weary Christian, I want you to see this. This is the secret! The love that God requires of us is the love that God has already given to us! He's not asking us to paddle uphill, against the current. He's picked us up, placed us on the mountaintop and now he's carrying us in His stream with the current of His love. Dead religion glorifies man when it says that if man works hard enough than he can be with God. True religion glorifies God when it says that only God has the power to save and that God acted first. How do we love this way? We love this way *because* we have been loved by God.

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19 ESV)

I mentioned that there are two possible responses to this Great Commandment. The first response was to stay in the uphill stream of trying to work hard enough to please God. But the second stream, the narrow way, the path that leads to life is this:

2. Abide In His Love

The Christian life is different. It is a life that is fundamentally fuelled by gratitude. If we cease to receive the love of God, than we will cease to give it. But. If we stay in the river of God's love we will continue to move along in our faith and obedience.

Church, I fear that some of us have drifted out of the current. Half of our boat is on the shore and we're trying to paddle our way out of it. We convince ourselves that if we work hard enough we'll get back on track. But therein lies the problem – somewhere along the way we forgot that we didn't get here by our own strength. And so we shifted into Christian duty, and we paddled away from the wind and the current that has carried us from the

beginning. This morning, God is calling us to return to a life that is entirely fuelled by love – a love for Him who first loved us, and a love for others. It is a call to remember that we are and have always been carried by God's grace! It is a call for us to obey the Great Commandment but to do it in God's strength and not our own. That which was impossible, God has made possible. He has saved us, restored us, and placed His Spirit in us, and now He calls us to respond to this love by extending it to Him and to the world.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. (John 15:4-5,9 ESV)

Church, let's commit together to love God the way that He deserves. Let's love Him with all of our heart – with our thinking, with our speaking and with our living. Let's love Him with all of our soul – let's cast off the restraints of our culture and worship God with joy and gladness. Let's love him with all of our minds – let's stop thinking the way that the world thinks. And as we fix our eyes on Him, He will change us. From one degree of glory to the next, He will make us more like His Son Jesus Christ, the only one who perfectly loved God and perfectly loved the world.

This is the love that our God requires of us. This is the love that He has given to us. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.