



Love Your Neighbor as Yourself, Part 1

Mark 12:28-34 (v. 31), Luke 10:30-37

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Over the last several weeks, as we have been repenting and asking God to renew our affections for Christ, seeking that Christ would, in every way, be our first love, we have been having our minds renewed as we have considered afresh and anew the nature of God's love for us as His people and our love for Him. We have been and are the objects of God's transforming, soul-saving, life-giving love in and through Jesus Christ. We are no longer what we once were – slaves to sin, children of wrath, separated from God and His blessing. God has pursued us by His love in Christ and we are different. Peter says of us in (2 Peter 1:3–8, ESV). Notice that in that description, the crowning characteristics of the one who is saved, who is a partaker of the divine nature are brotherly affection and love. It is love that is at the heart of the greatest commandment that we are continuing to look at this morning. Read Mark 12...

I want us to consider these strong words from Christ this morning, this call to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do so by means of asking some questions of this text. And listen beloved, just as we did with the command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, this command to love our neighbor is going to take a couple of weeks to flesh out. The first question that we need to ask of this text is:

1) How serious is this commandment? This one of the commandments of God, that quite honestly it seems, that we grant ourselves a great deal of latitude in following and fulfilling. We have all sorts of excuses and extenuating circumstances that allow us to sort of demote this commandment. But we need to see how serious this commandment really is. This commandment is so great that the only one that surpasses it in worth and in value and in importance is the first commandment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Look how Jesus connects this commandment to love our neighbor with the commandment to love God. He says: "The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31, ESV) Jesus is not compelled to mention the commandment to love your neighbor, the scribe had asked only about the greatest commandment. Jesus could have simply quoted to him from Deuteronomy 6 and been done with it. But Jesus doesn't do that. First he quotes from Deut. 6 and then He adds to it a quotation from Lev. 19: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:18, ESV)

To Jesus' way of thinking, the two commandments -- to love God and to love your neighbor -- are intimately intertwined, so much so that to Jesus' way of thinking -- which is reality -- they are two commandments that are so intertwined that Jesus cannot conceive of the either one of them truly being present in the saved human heart apart from the other. In other words, real love for God must result in love for one's neighbor and real love for one's neighbor must proceed from true love for God. And of either of them is missing, it is not true Christianity.

In fact, here is how important the command to love God with your entire being and the call to love your neighbor as yourself really are. Jesus said in a parallel passage in Matthew, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:40, ESV) Here, Jesus tells us "There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31b, ESV) Jesus fuses these two commandments together. They are so important that the Law and Prophets depend on them. What does Jesus mean when He says that? In other words a true concern for love toward God and toward your neighbor will draw your heart to obedience to the Law and the Prophets, to the commandments of God, and will restrain your heart from sin. It will make you gospel-centric. It will make you gospel driven. Fulfilling these two commandments will cause you to be concerned for the glory of God and for the souls and lives of men and women and children. When we desire to love God and when we pursue an active love toward God, living for His glory and for His pleasure and His approval and when we live in manner to bless others and to actively pursue their spiritual best and well being, their temporal and ultimate good, we will automatically fulfill the Law and the Prophets, the commandments of God. Every command of God will be fulfilled in this way. (Romans 13:9-10, ESV)

Here in this text, the Lord is making a very serious point by drawing these two commandments together: the commandment to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor in the same way as we love ourselves. That is to say, you cannot really love another human being – not as that person ought to be loved – if you do not love God first and foremost. And you cannot love God without loving others in the radical way in which God commands you love them, the same radical way in which He loved you with a free, gracious, honest, pursuing love.

It is vital that we remember the divine economy of love – where it comes from and how it flows. Love starts with God and flows to us, then from us to God, then from God through us to others. It is like this. The Apostle John makes clear in 1 John 4:19 that we love because God first loved us -- we love God and we love others because God has loved us first. God set His love on us before the foundation of the world and determined to deliver us from His wrath that our sins deserved by sending His Son to be the wrath-bearer for our sins. Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth, determined to lay aside His rights to glory and to put on human flesh and be obedient to the Father on our behalf even unto death on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The Holy Spirit came forth, regenerating our dead hearts and making us alive to God in Christ, giving to us a new heart with new desires and new longings, a new heart that responds in repentance and faith to the call of the gospel, and which can now love God supremely.

The Spirit of God comes to live in us, teaching us to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. God redeems our hearts, our souls, our will, our emotions, our desires, our minds, our understanding and even our bodies, to be used to love and adore Him supremely as Lord over us. Because God has loved us, we now love Him, we now worship Him and honor and adore Him. All of this is the consequence of God's determined pursuit of our souls in light of His love for us. The love that God has graciously poured upon us we give back to Him by the empowering work of the Spirit of God in our souls. But it is it intended to end there.

As we love God and are obedient to God, we know the joy of deeper and greater experiences of His love. We know that we are His children and that we are ambassadors of His great love in this earth. We embrace our role and responsibility to be the instruments of God's gospel centered love in this world. Just as Christ was the conduit of God's love to us when we were strangers to and enemies of God, and we are now the conduit of Christ's love for all whom Christ says are our neighbors.

The focus is not on whether the receiver of love worthy. That is not even a consideration. That leads to the second question...

2) What does it mean to love my neighbor as myself? We would find this much easier if Jesus would have just said "love your neighbor." That leaves us some wiggle room, right? But it is not Christ's intention to give us any wiggle room at all. Love for our neighbor has much in common with God's love for us in the sense that love for our neighbor must be personal, intentional, purposeful, and active – not merely sentimental or some kind of fleeting emotion. I must love my neighbor as I love myself. Let's be honest, we're very concerned with our own well-being, we're very concerned with meeting our own perceived needs, right? We are to care about others the same way that we care about ourselves. When we are hungry – we feed ourselves, thirsty – get a drink, cold—get clothing, hurt – search for comfort, have questions— seek answers, need help – we pursue it. We are to meet others needs as readily, as eagerly, as enthusiastically, as willingly and as completely as we do our own. Let me show you how big this is. It is not simply saying –love your neighbor and seek for your neighbor the same things that you seek for yourself, but seek them in the same way that you seek them for yourself – with the same zeal and effort and determination. It is call to seek the highest good for another and to do it diligently.

This call to love your neighbor as yourself is not a call to social do-gooderism apart from a gospel foundation. It is not simply humanistic, making the world a better place, tolerance and good feelings, but a real, vibrant, durable, unrelenting and active love that seeks to draw people to the fount of love – God Himself. Love is displayed by deliberate, diligent, self-sacrificial service to others, which is intended for their good, at our expense. Ultimately, the greatest good that we can do for another and the highest love that we can show, is that which leads others to know Christ as Savior and Lord, and which leads them ever more deeply into the joy of making much of Jesus Christ now and forever.

This is a strong and serious commandment from Christ. This is a daunting command, isn't it? It can be, but like Charles Spurgeon once said, "Let it never be forgotten that what the law demands of us the gospel really produces in us." The law demands of us that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and strength and that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that produces this kind of love for God and neighbor in our lives. But this love is not just automatic.

Love like this demands the death of self-preservation, self-exaltation, self-magnification, self-centeredness, and self-advancement. You cannot seek to preserve yourself from hurt or pain, or sacrifice, or toil or even betrayal and love your neighbor. You cannot protect your heart and love your neighbor. You cannot make much of yourself and magnify yourself and desire to be made much of by other people and love your neighbor. You just can't do it. You cannot make yourself the center of the world, your feelings, your preferences, all that it costs you, the inconvenience, whatever. You cannot make much of yourself and still love your neighbor. You can't. Your self-advancement cannot be the motivating principle of your life, but rather the well-being of your neighbor. Real love demands that we have the mind of Christ -- (Philippians 2:4–8, ESV)

Real love demands that the flesh, the old man in us, be crucified. Paul writes (Galatians 5:24, ESV) Just as love for God is not a personality trait, neither is loving your neighbor specific to your personality. Sometimes we use our personality as an excuse. "I don't have a loving personality. I had a really bad upbringing. I went through some really bad things in my life..." Listen, your personality is not a rigid, fixed thing. It isn't. Becoming like Christ demands that some of your personality traits change because some personality traits are sinful and our personality is to become increasingly like Christ's. Naturally, you might have a lazy personality, or a violent personality, or a self-centered personality, or an aloof personality, or an arrogant personality or a lustful personality. Those personality traits are not okay or just the way you are. That is why we continually present ourselves to God so that through the powerful means of grace we will be transformed. (2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV) We present ourselves to God so that by His powerful means of grace we become more full of "the fruit of the Spirit... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23, ESV) and thereby having our personalities change.

It demands that we die to ourselves and be alive to God in Christ. (Romans 6:6–11, ESV) Christ not only took our sins to the Cross, but He took us there with Him also and in order to love like this, we must consider ourselves dead to the consuming sin of self-centeredness and self-rule and self-preservation, and alive to God in Christ. That leads to the third question...

3) Who is my neighbor? I want to answer this question by looking at Jesus' answer to the same question in a very similar, though different, passage in Luke chapter 10. In that encounter, the

lawyer who is questioning Jesus asks the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Now, when the lawyer asks this question, he is trying to justify himself, that is, he is trying to prove that he had actually shown love to all who were his neighbors. Now there was a lot of question about who one’s neighbor really was. The Pharisees generally taught that one’s neighbor was anyone who was Jewish and who was obedient to the Law as they defined it, and with whom there were no outstanding personal issues...yada, yada, yada. Basically they defined a neighbor as someone who looked like you and thought like you and acted just like you and had the exact same convictions as you, and that you liked, and that liked you...pretty small field right? But Jesus answers that question with a famous parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Look at it in Luke 10 with me, starting in verse 30.

“Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho (now we aren’t told the nationality of the man but it is a safe assumption that he’s a Jew and in all likelihood he is returning down the mountain from Jerusalem to his home in Jericho), and he fell among robbers (literally he was surrounded by robbers with no place to escape), who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. Here comes a holy man, a priest, a man who had probably been sacrificing and working at the temple. He comes along by chance, meaning that he did not have any pressing business. He just happens by. And when this religious man sees a beaten and bloodied and nearly dead man on the side of the road – a man who is obviously in great need – he gets over on the other side of the road as far as he can get. Rather than rescuing the perishing, he just simply moves to the other side of the road, not wishing to get involved at all. Why? We are not told. Perhaps he doesn’t wish to be inconvenienced, maybe he does not care to get his hands dirty, maybe he thought the man had it coming. The point is that there is no excuse for passing the man by. Keep going, verse 32...

So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. Strike two for the religious establishment. The priest’s assistant isn’t any better than the priest. He too sees the man who is severely injured and makes sure that he remains as far away as he possible can from the problem. This is looking bad. And it get worse. A Samaritan shows up next – the most hated foe of the Jews. Look at it, verse 33...

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 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. Instead of passing by, the Samaritan loved him with a sacrificial love. He didn't wait to be asked, seeing the need right in front of him was enough to move him to action. He also gave freely of both his time and his resources. There is no indication that the man had a first aid kit, so the wine, containing alcohol which would have an antiseptic effect on the man's wounds and the oil which would help to soothe the wounds, came out of his own provisions. It cost him to care. Then putting the man on his animal, meaning he walked, he took him to an inn. He's not done.

And the next day (meaning he stayed with the man and cared for him all night long) he took out two denarii (two days wages) and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' He paid for the victim's room in advance, and saw to it that the innkeeper would check on the guy. He promised to return, and to fully reimburse the innkeeper for any additional expenses. Then Jesus asks the question: Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."" (Luke 10:30–37, ESV)

Now what do we see here? You show yourself to be a neighbor, you show yourself to be loving when you act in mercy toward those who are in need of mercy. You show yourself to be a neighbor when you demonstrate kindness and concern to those who are in need. And who is in need of mercy? Every single person you meet. Everyone, saved or unsaved, everyone is in need of mercy – all of us. And let me show you something else, by making the Samaritan the hero of the story, Jesus expands the definition of neighbor far beyond what the lawyer thought it was – neighbor includes even our enemies, like this Samaritan was to the Jews.

Here is what we need to see. My neighbor is the one with a need right in front of me. Your neighbor is the one in need of mercy, every person that God brings across your path. Your neighbor is the person you encounter in the course of your everyday life who is broken and scarred by sin. The person who is under the curse of God and doesn't even know it, the brother or sister in Christ who is being sanctified daily and learning how to fight sin and grow up in Christ, the sinner who is deluded and deceived by the lies of the world, the brother or sister that you must labor alongside, the one who needs to hear the truth, the one who needs the fellowship of the saints and the kindness of someone to bear the burdens with them. Whatever and

whoever -- neighbors are the people in our lives. They might live in your neighborhood. They may work with you. They may go to church with you. They are the other people you encounter in need of the mercy we've been shown by our Heavenly Father.

It is easy to love the ones that love us, right? But Jesus does not allow us to be selective about who our neighbors are and which ones we will love. Our neighbors are the other people in our lives and we are commanded to love them like we love ourselves. Let me point you to one more thing.

4) Loving our neighbor is a matter of Spirit-driven commitment and obedience. Jesus Christ serves as the template, as the example, for how we are to love our neighbors in whatever context we are in. In our families, the church, the community, even or enemies – Jesus is the perfect example. We love them in the same way that Christ loved us. Jesus is the model for it all.

Here is the truth – there are bad relationships, wrong attitudes towards others, sinful desires, either prideful or apathetic disregard for certain people or people in general, an unwillingness to get involved, selfishness and self-centeredness, – all of them offenses against love -- present in each of our lives. We must pursue loving our neighbor in a more excellent way. Loving our neighbor demands Spirit-driven commitment and obedience. So how do we do this and do it well. We will talk about specific application in our homes, in the church, in our community, etc., next week but for now I want to give you some overarching principles to consider. How do we love our neighbor as ourselves?

First, take stock of yourself and your relationship to others in light of this commandment from Christ and be honest with yourself. Cry out to the Lord: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23–24, ESV) Bring your lovelessness to God and confess it as the sin that it is. Maybe there is a particular person, a particular situation, some bitterness or resentment that needs to be dealt with, some offense that needs to be resolved – maybe it is something specific like that. Confess it to the Lord. Perhaps it is nothing that you have done but instead something that you have left undone that you need to do in order to love your neighbor. Maybe it is kind word you could speak, a listening ear, a burden you could share, or

some service you could give, maybe it is a sin that you need to confront. Whatever. Examine your heart in light of this command and bring your lovelessness to God and confess it as the sin that it is.

Second, fill your mind with Scripture and the instructions that it gives regarding love. Make your prayer that of the psalmist in Psalm 119: (Psalm 119:129–133, ESV) You are going to have to do the work of getting in the Word of God and seeing how to love your neighbor and do it. The Bible gives us a whole range of ways that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, but you need to get in the Word of God and see how it is that you can actively and biblically love your neighbor. You must take responsibility to do this.

Third, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ, live in a loving manner toward your neighbor. Begin acting in loving ways toward your neighbor. Scripture tells us “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” (James 1:22, ESV)

When we look at these two commandments that Christ joins together, we see what is at the soul of being a follower of Christ. It is first and foremost, as Jesus said here, to be a lover of God and of our neighbors. -- radically to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Every other duty of life, every other calling of life, everything right and good and holy before God springs from loving God and loving your neighbor. The truth is that if we are not careful, loving God and loving our neighbor can become just another thing we are supposed to do instead of the be all and end all, the very definition of what it means to be the people of God. All that I do must be driven by one of these two things – love for God or love for my neighbor – all the Law and the Prophets hang on it. Why do I worship – because I love God and want to express my love to God and because I love my neighbor and want to encourage Him in His worship of the Lord and I want for my neighbor who is yet outside the covenant family of God to know the worth of setting apart a day to worship God. Why do I study the Word of God –because I love God and want to know Him, because I love my neighbor and want to be able to speak the truth in love to Him and to bring the word to bear in His life. Why do I pray – because I love God and I want to commune with Him and partake of His wonderful grace and because I love my neighbor and I want to intercede for him before the throne of God. Why do I desire to follow the commands of Christ? Because I want to love Christ by being obedient to Him and because I do not want to harm or sin against my neighbor but instead demonstrate to them the more excellent way of love and the greater joy of obedience to Christ over fleshly disobedience. Why

am I a good steward of my mind -- because I love God and I want my mind to be sharp and strong for him, I want to faithfully use the gift of my mind for good purposes that please him. Because I love my neighbor and I want to use my mind in a way that will benefit them both temporally and eternally. Why do I give faithfully to the church -- because I love God and I want to honor Him with my first fruits so that the gospel of His glory may go forth for the sake of His name and His fame and because I love my neighbor and I want for the word of God to come to bear upon his life and soul, and I want for his physical needs to met as they can be. Do you see beloved, this is how we need to see every calling our lives. This is how we steward our own lives for God.

Love God and love your neighbor and one fulfills the entire law. . Love God and love your neighbor and you “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10, ESV)

Are you loving like this...

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