

Title: Your true mission
Text: Matthew 22.34-40
Theme: Loving God
Series: Matthew #106
Prop Stmt: Loving God is the great and first commandment because it is the source of absolute joy.

Read Text:

It is the final week of Christ before he goes to the cross. He enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies that spoke of the coming Messiah. He is hailed by the crowds and adored by the children. He throws out the moneychangers in the temple area and then begins to teach. The religious leaders of Israel (chief priests, elders, scribes and Pharisees) are enraged. In the middle of chapter 21, they come out swinging. This is their turf. But, every verbal swing misses and Christ simply counterpunches with a question, or a story. It's like a tag-team fighting event, isn't it? These guys have all the swagger and bravado as they charge into the ring, only to get stunned. They stagger back to their corner and tap the next group that heads into the ring in order to take their best shot, only to get stunned and they stagger back and tap the next group. Our text this morning is the fourth round. It is the fourth attempt at taking down Christ. The Sadducees just took their best shot and were stunned, and while the Pharisees were probably happy about that to a degree, the truth is, they were all together in their desire to take out Christ.

But what they are doing is extremely dangerous. They are using the Word of God as a pawn, a tool, a means, to get what they want. For them, the Scriptures and the truths about God do not really matter. They really matter and they will attempt to use conversations or arguments about God, doctrine and commandments in order to advance themselves. So, here is what is deeply ironic, even stunning about this scene. This lawyer (think expert in the Old Testament law), acting as the spokesman for the Pharisees, is stepping back into the ring for one last shot. He takes a swing, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" Jesus answers by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Matthew does not give us any more than this, but Mark does and he tells us that the Lawyer agreed with Jesus and told him that he had answered well. Jesus then told him that he wasn't far from the kingdom. The Pharisee knew (intellectually) that what Christ said was true, but he had not embraced it with his whole being. Which makes it clear that it is not enough to know what the great commandment is. It is not enough to know the facts about God, the evidence for creation, the evidence for the historicity of the Bible, the historicity of Christ and the facts about the gospel. It is not enough to know that we are to love God. We must love God! And Jesus, quoting from Deut. 6.5 shows that God has always wanted us to love Him. It is so important that we love him that he commands that we love him. And it is obvious from the command that love is not limited to having some romantic ideas about God, it means to live for his pleasure and his glory with all of our affections. To

love God with all of our heart means to love him with an undivided heart. If you love your spouse with all of your heart, you are not secretly pursuing another or fantasizing about another. To love with all of our soul means to love with all of our being and mind speaks of all of our intellect. We are to so completely love God that we are totally consumed with him. Loving God is not defined as giving him a Sunday morning here and there. Loving God is your true and ultimate and all consuming mission in life. But why?

I. **Why is loving God the great and first commandment?** (37-38)

A. **It is right.**

God is the highest good. God is the most glorious of all glories. God is the ultimate perfection of everything that is perfect. God is the most beautiful of all beauties. If you could take every superlative from every language and string them together God is greater than them all. If you could take every object of art and beauty God outshines them all. If you could take every expression of power, magnitude, and strength, God is more awesome than them all. He is the sum total of all that is right. He is the sum total of all that is beautiful. He is the sum total of all that is powerful. He is the sum total of all that is awe-inspiring and praise-worthy. God commands you to love God because he is commanding you to love what is the best. He is commanding you to love what is the greatest. He is giving you a wise and good command so that you do not waste your life and affections on loving anything less than the very best. Because the truth is, you love something or someone with your heart, soul and mind. But some of the people and the things that you love in an ultimate sense are going to betray you and they are going to curse you and they are going to hurt you and destroy you. God commands you to love him because this is

B. **It is what God does.**

When God commands you to love God, he is commanding you to do what he already does. Now, this initially sounds egotistical, but let me unpack this a bit for you. Before God was creator, he was God, meaning he was Father, Son and Spirit relating and existing together in perfect harmony. What made the Father, Father? He was the Father because of the Son and the Son was the Son because of the Father. The identity of the Father was based upon his relationship of another. The Father has always loved the Son and the Son has always loved the Father back and together the Father and the Son have always loved the Spirit and the Spirit has always loved them back. They are, that is God is, what he is because of his interconnectedness of his being and because each person of the Godhead has always loved the others. For God to command you to love him is for him to command you to do what he has done from eternity past. God's love for God is therefore not egotistical because not only is his love an outward expression of each member of the trinity to the others but God himself is loving that which is supremely perfect and that is himself. For God to love anything or anyone more than he loves himself would be idolatry. It is also interesting to note that you are to love the Lord YOUR God. This little expression speaks of the personal relationship that you are to have

with God. God's love for God is personal and therefore your love for God is to be personal as well.

C. It is why we were made.

God's act of creation was the Trinitarian outflow, the expression of God's love for God, just as the conception of a child is designed to be the expression of the love that a husband and wife have for the other. It is right to teach children to love their parents because they were conceived in love, birthed in loving sacrifice and raised in love. The love of a child is to be the echo back of the love that parents have for that child. God commands you to love him because you were made in love. You made to be loved. And you were made to love him back. Your love for God is to be the echoing back of God's love for you and God's love for you is the expression of God's love for God. God loves you perfectly because God loves himself supremely.

D. Because we do not love God naturally.

When God made Adam and Eve, he did not command them to love him because they were perfect and were designed to love God and loved God. But sin came because Adam and Eve turned that love for God away from God and turned it in on themselves. The consequences of that are such that every human being since (apart from Christ) has been born with a sinful nature and we naturally love ourselves and we do not naturally love God. Therefore, God has to command us to love Him because if God did not reveal our need to love him and reveal himself to us, we would only look for more and more creative ways to love ourselves. This commandment from God is a gracious act of God designed to rescue us from the bitterness, the depression, and the pit of self-love. Self-love drives suicide and God graciously wants to rescue you from the hopelessness of it.

E. It is the source of absolute joy.

There are so many things that we place our attention on that we think will give us the joy that we long to have. We are going to have the perfect job. We are going to have the perfect spouse. We are going to have the perfect vacation. We are going to have perfect kids. They are going to go to a perfect school, where they will have perfect coaches and teachers. We are going to find a perfect church. The Tigers are going to win! I am going to run a perfect race. I am going to hit this golf ball in the fairway. On and on it goes. We look to so many things in faith that they will bring us happiness and if they do, it does not last. God commands you to love him because He alone is the source of absolute joy.

F. We are deficient without it.

We love. We naturally love ourselves and we are therefore tempted to love anything or anyone that we think will make much of us. But, we are lousy objects of love. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot fix ourselves. We cannot heal ourselves. We cannot live forever and we cannot stop ourselves from sinning and hurting others. We therefore, naturally love that which is inferior and loving something or someone that is inferior is

always going to be depressing because it never give us what we need. We are needy people and a needy person by definition does not have what he needs to fill the need. God commands you to repent of your self-love and self-worship and instead, love him! He is and has exactly what you need.

The most miserable people in all of life are those who refuse to love others and trust others and risk for others. C. S. Lewis famously said, “If you want to make sure of keeping it [your heart] intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, and irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy is damnation.” The heart of salvation is the turning away (repenting) of our love of self and turning to (believing in and loving) God through Christ.

So, while there are truths that we must understand and embrace in order to become followers of Christ, we do not become followers of Christ simply because we change our minds about some facts. We must love God. We must love God with an undivided, uncompromised, undistracted heart. We must love God with our whole being with our affections, our desires, our longings, our hopes (soul) meaning that our entire personhood and identity is given over to the pursuit of and the pleasure of God. We must love God with our thinking, our values, our priorities, our orientation, our aspirations, our logic and rationale (minds). All that we are; all that we do; all that we long to be; all that we think about is to be oriented around our love for God. And our love for God is to drive our love for others. But then Jesus says that there is a second command and it is like the first. He again quotes from the OT (Lev. 19.18). And this command to love your neighbor really blows up the lie that “what I believe is just between me and God.” No it isn’t! What you believe about God is seen in how you treat others.

II. **Loving your neighbor is the fruit of loving God.** (39)

Please do not do what the Pharisees did. If you do not love God, then the commands of God become rules to obey in an effort to prove yourself. Rules that are followed in the absence of affection are awful. Take a man in prison; does he love the rules of the prison? Probably not! So, what kind of a man is he as a result? He is heartless and lifeless, cold and unfeeling. Take a husband who dutifully works for his wife and children. He does what he should. He does what he says, but he does it without affection. Does the performance of his duty day after day delight his wife and cause her heart to beat with gratitude and cause her spirit to be filled with joy? What kind of a wife will she be when her husband only works because he has to? What if that same man, who works the same number of hours, brings home the same amount of money does it because he loves his wife? What if his obedience to the rules is driven by his love, instead of simply his duty? Will his wife know the difference? Absolutely! His work delights her soul if his work is driven by his love for her. Do you see what Jesus is saying here? You can do hard things for others, but it will not delight them or help them unless it is driven by love. Loving

God is the very heart and starting point and high-octane fuel that fires our engine of loving and serving others.

If you love someone, you will take an interest in what they love. If you love God, then you will love your neighbor. You will love others because if you love God, you will love what God loves. I grew up playing and watching baseball. So, I bought my son a glove, a bat and had an entire bucket of balls that I would throw and throw and throw in the evenings in our front yard. He played baseball with me because he loved me, but he did not really love baseball. What he loved was NASCAR. I have no idea how on earth he ever got into NASCAR. I certainly did not love NASCAR, but I loved my son, so I started watching NASCAR. Then I started studying NASCAR. Then I started studying the drivers. Then one day we went to a race. And now, I am in a NASCAR fantasy league and I am beating my son! If you love someone you will take an interest in what they care about and you will let your love of that person change you. That is why God commands you to love others. Sure, it helps the world seem like a better place, but the truth is, God loves others and if you love God, you will love what God loves. God loves himself and God loves other people. So, if you love God, you will love your neighbor as you already love yourself. Does this describe you?

But let's talk about what "your neighbor" means. We are tempted to think that loving our neighbor means that we love someone who is like us, but Jesus blew that up when he defined what that means with his story about the Good Samaritan. We get a more fully developed treatment of this issue in the book of Romans. Paul wrote this book to a church that was struggling deeply because it was made up of Jews and Gentiles who had a very long history and tradition of hating one another. They had different cultures, different interests, different traditions, different menus, different holidays, different clothes, different music, different stories, different educations, different jobs, different parents and different histories. Sociology tells us that there is no chance in hell that these groups would get along. But the gospel tells us that there is every chance in heaven that they will. In fact, that is what the gospel does. It takes people from different tribes, languages, and nations from different walks of life and through Christ forges them into a body. We love people who are older than us, younger than us, different than us, not because it is easy but because God loves them and because God has changed our hearts into being people who care more about others, even the ones who may be different than us, than we do ourselves. When you have a church that is made up of all young people who all dress the same way, talk the same way and listen to the same kind of music, you can explain that. When you have a church that is made up of all old people who all dress the same way, talk the same way and listen to the same kind of music, you can explain that. But when you have a church who are different generations, different educations, different hobbies, different occupations, different tastes, different music, different ethnicities, who serve one another, eat together, honor and prefer one another, and care deeply for one another, that blows up the Laws of sociology. You can't explain that apart from God.

Loving others is why others were made. God made Eve because it was not good that Adam did not have someone to love. In order to be supremely happy, like God is happy, we need to love others. In order to glorify God, to reflect God, we must reflect his joy,

but we cannot reflect his joy unless we are living with an outward view that desires the good of others versus an inward view that is constantly seeking how we can only please ourselves. That is what is so amazing about God and how he has made us. He has made us in his image. Therefore, he has made us with the capacity to have joy. Our world and even our own hearts seek to betray us into thinking that in order to have joy that we have to be in charge. We have to be king. We have to have power and control. No! In order to have joy, we live for the joy of others and make their joy, and their good our goal. As followers of Christ, we are to seek the joy of others as a means of loving God, because the truth is, you cannot love others, as you should, without loving God first. If you struggle with loving others it is because you struggle with loving God. Now, it is true that you can pervert that love and place your love for others over your love for God. When you do that, you not only have made them an idol that you worship, but in placing them into the place of God, you heap upon them expectations and hopes that only God can fulfill. If you love God most, you can never love others too much. If you do not love God first, you will never love others rightly, nor enough.

Let me give you an example. We love him because he first loved us. That is, we love God in response to his loving us. He started it! Our love for God is an echoing back of his love for us and our love for others is an echo of God's love for us. Therefore, my love for others is to be driven by, informed by, shaped by, initiated by God's love and God's love for me. Being secure in God's love frees me to love others. One of the ways that God showed his love for us is that he gave us his law. God did not hesitate to tell us what is right and wrong even at the risk of us getting angry with him. Love is costly. As a parent you are called to tell your child what is right and wrong knowing that your child is going to get angry with you. Why do some of you allow your children to walk all over you? Why do you allow them to dress the way that they do or always get their way? Some of you fear their rejection so much that you are intimidated by your child and you allow your child to set the rules, instead of you. Do you love your child? Yes, but, not in the right way because you love yourself more. Do you see that? You allow your fear of their rejection to stop you from establishing boundaries for them. You believe that above all, you have to have their acceptance and you find yourself held hostage by them because you are trapped by your fear of their rejection. Do you see why God's love for you and your love for God must be your greatest love? God's love for you and your love for God is your security. That security frees you to love your child and set boundaries for him or her. Loving others is defined and driven by our love for God and our love for God is in response to his love for us. Now, the reason why

III. All Scripture is to be seen through the lens of loving God and others. (40)

The Law and the Prophets is an expression that is used to describe the OT. The 10 commandments are essentially a summary of the law that God gave to his people (Genesis – Deuteronomy). The Prophets are the writings of the prophets who were sent by God to encourage the people to follow the Law and to warn them of the consequences of not following the Law and/or to help them rightfully answer the question of “why” things were happening to them. If another nation was invading them, if a famine was taking place, God would send a prophet to let them know that this was happening because

you have forsaken my law and are breaking my commandments. The commandments divide neatly up into two categories. Category 1 – This is how we love God. Category 2 – This is how we love others. Category 1 – We love God by not having other gods before him, by not trying to make images of him or of any other god, by not cursing and using his name in vain and by remembering the Sabbath. Category 2 – We love others by honoring our parents, by not murdering, committing adultery, stealing, lying or coveting. It is all very clear, even in the OT. The laws of loving others are expressions of how we love God. What Jesus is saying is that you can take all of Scripture and summarize it in this way. It is true in the NT as well. What are the gospels? The gospels are the stories of God's love for us designed to drive us to repent of our worship of ourselves (sin) and to embrace God's love for us and to love him back by trusting him and submitting to him. The Sermon on the Mount and the NT epistles explain how our love for God (relationship with God) drives our relationship with one another. Do you see the connection? Our love for God is formed by the gospel and our love for one another is expressed in the church to one another as believers and as a church to our world. That is why...

IV. **Loving God and loving others is impossible on our own.**

You cannot love God by sheer will. Loving God and loving others is a command that you cannot follow unless God has changed you and unless you rely upon his grace to enable you to love God and others. God commands you to do something that you cannot do and then he turns around and gives you the means by which you can do it. He is right to command you to love him and others even though He knows that you cannot do it. But, this command is designed to help you know that and admit that and ask why. Why can I not love God and others as I am commanded? I cannot do it because I have a self-worshipping nature. I have a heart that seeks its own glory above all. I need a new heart. I need the heart of God. I need to be changed by God, which is why Christ came. In fact...

V. **Loving God and others is what Jesus did in his life and death.**

Jesus loves the Father so much that he expresses that love for the Father in loving us so deeply he dies for us. In loving us, Jesus is loving the Father because Jesus loves what the Father loves. Jesus loves the Father so much and so intensely that he loves what and who the Father loves and Jesus loves us so intensely that he dies for us. Jesus loves his neighbor as an expression of his love for God. In his love for the Father, and his love of the justice of God and his love of the grace of God and his love of the righteousness of God and the mercy of God, Jesus offers his life on the cross. His life was a sacrifice to God for the payment of our sin. It was vertical in the sense that he satisfied the holy wrath of God that was aroused and motivated by our sinful rebellion. It was horizontal in that it reaches out to every single person who will ever trust in him and bring every one of them into the fold and family of God, where they will experience perfectly the love of God and will love him back as well as love one another.

Conclusion:

You and I are so prone to forget about God's love for us and that we are to be so captivated by his love that we love him and others in response. We are so tempted to believe the lies that we have to love ourselves above all, be respected, be wanted, be known, be successful, be smart, be strong, be.... None of those things satisfy. Beloved, you are loved by God, forever. That is fact. The cross demonstrates that truth as an undeniable fact. And communion is God's design for us to be reminded of that fact.

Let me tell you a story and then give you a little exercise for all of us this morning. Shelly and Jim were married for 28 years. Jim died a year ago June due to brain cancer. On Valentines Day, 8 months after Jim died, Shelly received flowers and a card that read, "Happy Valentines Day Honey. Stay Strong! Yours Forever Love Jim." As you can imagine she was wiped out and set out trying to find out who did this. She figured it was her kids, but they had no knowledge of it. She ended up going back to the flower shop where she was told that before he died, Jim had come in and set it up for the flower shop to send Shelly flowers every Valentines Day for the rest of her life.

In a very similar way, communion is like a Valentines Day bouquet from God that reminds us that we are loved. So, stay strong, press on, love God and love others. And today as the tray is given to you, serve the person next to you, love the person next to you and say, God loves you through Christ. If the person next to you tells you that, say in response, "Thank-you for reminding me."