

“THE GREAT COMMANDMENT”

Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40

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This morning I would like to share with you The Great Commandment that Jesus gave us when the men were gathering together to try to trick him. It begins with verse 34:

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: " `Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: `Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

In these verses the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were trying to find a way to bring Jesus down, this man that the common people heard gladly. Great crowds were coming to him and they were very jealous, and they thought, well, He hasn't been to our seminary; surely we can trip Him up intellectually. So they asked Him a question about paying taxes to Caesar. Essentially they said, "Master, we know You are a man of integrity. Tell us: Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

And so He said, "Well, bring me a coin." He said, "Whose inscription is upon it?"

They said, "Caesar's."

He said, *Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's.*

They were amazed at His wisdom, but they kept trying. Then they came back with this story about this man that had died and he had six brothers, and the custom then was that the brother would take on the wife. This man married his brother's wife. He died. The next brother married. He died — on down to finally, the sixth brother died. Can you imagine proposing to someone whose last six husbands have died? But, nevertheless, they are very straight forward about this because, the bottom line is — they are not really asking, "Is it wrong to collect that life insurance?" No, what they are wanting to do is trip Him up.

"All right. When they get to Heaven, whose wife is she going to be?"

And Jesus tells them, "You don't know the scriptures or the power of God. In Heaven it is going to be different. You are never given in marriage."

But He points out that certainly though, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and He is the God of Resurrection. But they are real frustrated, but they keep trying. So finally they come back the third time and they said, "Lord, what is the greatest commandment?" These are men that really know their Bibles backwards and forwards — but of all the commandments, what is the greatest? And Jesus answered, (He puts together Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:8) and He says, "Well, you want to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. And a second is like it: You are to love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

You know, today, we may be able to answer that very well. In Luke's account it says, "Love the Lord

you God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It is one thing to know it up here (in your head) and another thing to know it here (in you heart). For how can we really put this great commandment into practice today? What does it really mean to love God and to love your neighbor? What does it mean to really put the Great Commandment into practice? How can you love God today? In fact, just asking people, “Do you love the Lord?”— well, it can make people uncomfortable.

“Well, sure, I love the Lord. I mean, I’m here at Church aren’t I? And I gave some money in the offering and . . . you are going to say that I don’t love God?”

No, but sometimes if God asked you straightforwardly, “Do you love me?” — you can say you love Him, but the real question is: How well do you love Him? And are you wanting to grow in that love for Him? When Jesus appeared to Peter on one of His Resurrection appearances, Peter had denied Him three times, a great lack of courage, but that wasn’t uncommon; the other Disciples had that problem too. But after that great catch of fish, and John, the Disciple whom Jesus loved — that’s how John liked to describe himself — when he realized it was the Lord, that Jesus could be involved with a catch like that, then Peter swims to shore.

They had breakfast and He asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?”

And Peter said, “Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

And He said, “Well feed my lambs (New Christians).”

And He asked him a second time, “Do you love me, Peter?”

“Yes, Lord. You know I love you.”

And, “Well take care of my sheep.”

Then He asked him a third time. And he said, “Lord, you know I love you.”

And he said, “I want you to feed my sheep.” Then He began to tell Peter that, “You know you’ve always gone where you wanted to go, but there will come a time where you are going to be taken to a place where you do not want to go.”

Oftentimes when our Lord pins us down about do we love Him, it’s not so much a question about *do* we love Him, but how *well* do we love Him and do we want to grow in that love for Him?

One of the ways I look in the Bible and see how people love God, is one of the best ways to demonstrate that to Him, is let Him know: Lord, I am available. I am available to be used by You. No longer are they my goals, my achievements, my success, but you look at life through God’s viewpoint. You really want to be used by Him and truly, the people that love God say, “God, I know this is my life that You have given to me, and my life back to You is my gift to You. You have given me the gift of life or I wouldn’t be here. You are my Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, and so, I am available to be used by You.”

I think of Sarah and Abram, who had a good life, living with family — wealthy, healthy. Things were good, but God upset that appplecart, to say the least. God moved them out of their comfort zone. He said, “I want you to move. I want you to go, because, Abram, I’m going to make you the father of a great nation.”

Now that child didn't come for another twenty-five years. Sometimes that's a real faith-tester when God just gives you the first glimpse of what He wants you to do, but Abram and Sarah, though, they make themselves available and they begin moving in the direction that God wants them to go. There were definitely ups and downs in the faith journey, but first of all, they made themselves available. They were willing for their lives to be changed.

I think of Esther in the Old Testament. It's one of my favorite stories. Esther had won a beauty contest to be the queen of Persia. Life was good for this Jewish woman until there was a man named Haman who really had something in for Jews, and he got the king to pass this edict that all the Jews would be exterminated. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, makes an appeal: "Esther, you are the queen; you could intercede for your people."

And she says, "But I can't do that. I mean, if you go to see the king unannounced, you can die."

And Mordecai says, "Who knows but that you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this?"

And so she fasts and prays, and wants everyone else to be fasting and praying, for three days, and she goes in to see the king. And the story ends with her bringing the deliverance for her people, the Jews.

It could be that God has placed you strategically in a place right now for such a time as this — something He wants to use you for. People that love God make themselves available to Him. And often-times, there is this epiphany: Oh, here are some people that God wants me to be used for.

Catherine Booth was a Methodist preacher's wife until, well, William and Catherine Booth were under appointment in the Methodist system and, as you can imagine, William and Catherine kept feeling this calling to serve the poorest of the poor. And the Methodist Church — well, that's all well and good, but we want you to go to this assignment. And one time it finally came to a head at conference about — would you accept this appointment or are you going to allow us to be missionaries — and so they did part ways later on. But on their second appointment, though, Catherine Booth was going to church one Sunday night, to Bethesda Chapel. They had been appointed to Gateshead, England, and she began to have her heart quickened about all the people standing around the streets that, to her, seemed like sheep without a shepherd, that they had no direction in their lives. And so, this naturally timid and shy person began to go to the streets and invite people to Church. In fact, one woman that she invited said, "Well, I can't go."

"Well, why?"

"Well, my husband would never hear of that."

"Well, let me go talk to him."

"You don't want to talk to him; he is a drunkard."

"No, that's fine. Let's go see him."

So she went in to see him. (tape change)

.. available. Can God get into your calendar? Can He get on your schedule?

One of the things He also said, too, was, that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and our

soul and our mind and strength. And then we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In Luke's account of this, a man came up to Jesus and said, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And he said, "Well, how do you read it?"

And he said, "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself."

And Jesus said, "You answered that well. Do this and you will live."

But then the man wanted to justify himself. He said, "But who is my neighbor?"

And then Jesus told him a story. "Well, there was this man who was going down the road to Jericho and, well, he fell among robbers. They beat him; they robbed him; they left him for dead. A priest comes by. He sees that the man is in great need but, for whatever reason, he passes by on the other side. Then comes a Levi. He too doesn't want to get involved. He is probably busy; he probably had things to do. Not a bad person but he passes by on the other side. But then comes along this Samaritan. Now Samaritans tend not to have any relations with the Jews, so you just don't even think about him doing something. But he gets off his animal, puts the man on his animal, takes him to the inn, gives him some money. Not anything big, fancy, but he helps him. He is a neighbor to him. Then Jesus asks the man, "Well, who was the neighbor?" He said, "Well, I guess it was the one that had mercy on him."

How do we keep the Great Commandment? Well, we make ourselves available; we love God. One of the ways we love Him is we say, "Lord, I am available to be used by You in whatever way You want. But also we are willing to love our neighbors, and that is that we are willing to put that Christian faith, that Christian love, into action, and God begins to grow in our hearts. We get stronger when we reach out for Him.

Rick Warren, in his excellent book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, says the fourth purpose is that we are shaped for service. He has an acronym called SHAPE. It is simply a reminder to you that God created you very uniquely. He has given you gifts, abilities, talents, opportunities — that He wants to use you. I find in my life, when you truly recognize how God has gifted you and you really have a focus in your life — that you are doing what God has called you to do — that's where the joy really is. And sometimes you grow weary in well-doing, and sometimes you wonder if it is being effective, but you don't have to wonder. You are on the right track. God gives you a peace and He gives you a purpose in your life when you know that you have been shaped for service.

The first word is S — *spiritual gifts*. You realize that God has gifted you spiritually. In First Corinthians, chapter 12, there is a list of spiritual gifts like teaching and preaching, healing, mercy, administration. I still wish my gift of administration was stronger, but I know that God gave it to me because, when I first went into the ministry, I was so absent minded and forgetful, I know that's just God that I can actually step it up and actually organize a youth program. But I also could tell that when I first went into the ministry that there was something that emerged and I realized, you know, I really like organizing. I really like seeing things being organized. But S is *spiritual gifts*. How has God gifted you spiritually?

His *heart*. That is, what has God given you a passion for? What do you have an enthusiasm for? It may be music; it may be some of the arts; it may be fixing things for people; it may be cooking, or what-

ever, but God has given you a heart for, a passion.

A is *abilities*. How has God gifted you with ability? And are you allowing it to be developed? I remember the first time that I taught Sunday School. It was a youth group. (They are always looking for people to teach in Sunday School, especially to youth.) And I remember thinking, well, this is going to go fine, and I got my lesson together and I thought it would be like some of the devotionals I had done in Bible studies in college: Everybody is going to talk; it will go great. Well, these kid, they were very nice, polite, as they kind of drug in. But they just looked at me. You know, they didn't say anything, and it was about 10:15. I realized, I don't know what else to say, so I dismissed them, and the class, it was a short one. So I kind of thought, well, I don't know, this didn't go very well. But I learned. And one of the thing Rick Warren tells you is that, sometimes, what you need to do is experiment with your gifts. You need to, instead of just saying, well, this is my gift, you need to experiment. See where you are effective; see where you are not effective.

P is *personality*. God has extroverts, introverts, in between, but the main thing is that your personality is fully alive — that God has set you free to lay aside every weight and sin which clings so close to you, and you use the personality that God has given you for His glory.

The last one is E — *experience*, that all your life experiences are preparing you for the next thing that God wants you to do. Family experiences, painful experiences, good experiences, spiritual lessons that God has taught you. God uses those experiences. You are shaped for His service.

St. Francis is someone who truly put into practice loving his neighbor. This man who could have gone into the family business — his father was a prominent cloth maker — chose to go another direction and he paid a price. His family really didn't want him to go in the direction of serving Christ radically and that was difficult for him. But this is a man that had a compassion for people. This is a man that loved animals. He loved people. In fact he loved them in a way that was just very advanced. One story is told about him that there was a leper that some of the other brothers were trying to help. They were ready to kick him out of the home that they had there, because they had had enough of his cantankerous, nagging ways.

Francis said, "Let me have a try with him." Poured him a bath, took care of his needs, shared Christian faith, not so much with his words but just his caring, Christ-like manner. The man changed; a miracle occurred. Not only was the man cured of his nagging, but the love of Christ began to embrace his life. For you see, when you love your neighbor, lives can be changed that way.

He was a sixteen-year old young man named William. As far as we know, it's the only hymn he wrote. But he wrote it as a poem one day, thankful for how God had come into his life as he was converted. He wrote:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I love Thee because Thou has first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree.
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I'll love Thee in life, I will love Thee in death,
And praise Thee as long as Thou lendest me breath;
And say when the death dew lies cold on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

Let us pray:

Lord, the old hymn says, "They will know we are Christians by our love." O Lord, we remember today those who tried to trick You. You simply responded that we are to love You with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Lord, it is not a commandment that is hard to understand, but, oftentimes Lord, it is hard to practice. Pour into our hearts this amazing love through the power of Your Spirit. Help us to love in a way that, knowing You know we love You, but our neighbors will as well. For we ask this today in Jesus' name. Amen.