

The Priority of Love

Matthew 22:34-46

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Some of you may remember the movie *City Slickers*, which first hit the silver screen in 1991. In the movie, three men from New York City spend a vacation at a dude ranch, partly as a result of the midlife crises that they are experiencing. They have flown across the country for the express purpose of driving a herd of cattle across the wilderness. The main downside to their experience is that they have to put up with a snarling trail boss named *Curly*, played by Jack Palance.

One day, *Curly* lets the three city slickers have it. They are soft, flabby, undisciplined New Yorkers, and *Curly* has had enough of their whining. *Curly* looks at them and says, "You don't know this," as he holds up one index finger.

Mitch, the character played by Billy Crystal, responds, "We don't know what--your finger?"
"No," says *Curly*. "One thing. You don't know what your One Thing is."

Do you know the One Thing? The One Thing is that which informs all the rest of your life. The One Thing is that around which everything else has its meaning.

One of the Pharisees came up to Jesus and asked him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"¹ In other words, Jesus, out of all the Law, what is the One Thing?

"The One Thing," replied Jesus, "is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Of all the Law, this is the One Thing."² But then Jesus added another: "And the second is like it--'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."³

So Jesus is saying that the One Thing is really two things, but the two things are inseparable, so they're really One Thing. And that which ties the two together inseparably is the commandment to love. Loving God and loving neighbor--together, that is the One Thing.

Some people think that to love is to be soft, to be warm and fuzzy, to let others do anything they want. It's important to recognize that the command to love, especially love for our neighbor, does not mean that we promote an anything-goes permissiveness and tolerance of all things wrong. In fact, sometimes the most loving thing we can do for our neighbor is to point out their error. Jesus loves his critics enough to disagree with them, to look them in the eye and tell them they were deeply confused and dead wrong. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to be tough with others.

To make the two great commands our chief priority does not mean that we tolerate wrong or are overly permissive. It simply means that all other truth and every other command must be filtered through the lens of love for God and neighbor.

I remember when my previous church in Midland was finishing the construction of their family life center, one of the committees was wrestling with the number of rules that would dictate behavior in the gymnasium. Most people agreed that there should be no cussing, no fighting, no rudeness, no food or drinks, and several other prohibitions. But nobody was comfortable with putting those rules on the wall, because it would make the place seem less inviting. Finally, our administrator came up with an idea. He said, "Why don't we just write this on the wall, and let the people act accordingly: Court Rules--Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." And those became the court rules. It's not that the other things weren't important; it's just that they took on a new meaning in the context of love.

In this day and age, it's easy to arrive at a false understanding of the love that Jesus is commanding of us. It's easy to envision love as being a warm fuzzy feeling of affection. Hollywood would have us believe that love is a romantic physical act between two people. Some might assume that love means never having to say you're sorry, or never having to tell someone they're wrong.

But the kind of love that Jesus commands of us is agapé. Agapé is not defined by affection or feelings. Agapé is a heart-felt commitment to the welfare of the object of our love. When a husband and wife exchange their vows to love one another for the rest of their lives, they are not promising to feel good about each other all the time; they are promising to remain committed to one another, to seek the welfare of the other, to build each other up and seek the best for one another. Love is about making a whole-hearted, undivided commitment.

And so before all else, we must obey the command to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. We must obey the command to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to God, to keeping God at the center of our lives, to find meaning in all else only as first we live out our commitment to God.

One of the ways we show our love for God is through our gathering for corporate worship. I know many people are turned off by what they refer to as organized religion. But corporate worship is not the same as organized religion. Organized religion is what takes place in our governing bodies, in the arguing back and forth about important doctrines, in the putting together of our rules and regulations. Corporate worship is not organized religion. Corporate worship is when God's people gather to celebrate the goodness and majesty of God, to enter God's presence with thanksgiving and to come into God's courts with praise, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God, to declare our wholehearted commitment of ourselves to God. John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian branch of Protestantism, said, "Surely the first foundation of righteousness is the worship of God." In other words, the adherence to any of the other commands in the Law is empty if not first informed by the worship of, and love for, and devotion to God.

One of the things that disturbs me about contemporary American society is that God has been crowded out of our lives. We have allowed for other priorities to push God aside. Regular worship is no longer a high priority for some. Children's sports leagues, or the New York Times crossword puzzle, or the best available tee times, or yesterday's football games, or this morning's fishing conditions--you name it, there are so many things that have claimed a higher priority than regular corporate worship. Surely the first foundation of the Christian life is regular active love for, and worship of, God. If we're not worshipping on a regular basis, then our love for God falls short.

And love of God is not complete unless we are also loving our neighbor. John Buchanan notes that "love of God without love of neighbor becomes a kind of selfish spirituality--not relevant to the world, not

very interesting, actually. Leave out the neighbor and religion has a way of becoming self-righteous, exclusive."⁴

You see, part of loving God means that we must also love that which God passionately loves. The very nature of genuine love for God will issue in love for our neighbor, for our neighbor is precious to God.⁵ What kind of love is it that claims to love God, yet ignores the suffering of others? What kind of love is it that claims to love God, yet fails to come to the aid of the needy ones? What kind of love is it that claims to love God, yet will shut the door on people who are different? Loving God means that we will also love those whom God passionately loves.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus had a conversation with a young man about these great commandments. During their discussion, the man asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?," the answer to which was Jesus' telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The fact is, we can spend a lot of time trying to define who is our neighbor, because there are a lot of neighbors that--if we're honest with ourselves--we really don't want to love. But Jesus would remind us that our neighbor is anybody we encounter who has need.

In order to love our neighbor, we must be able to identify people as our neighbor. Look around us and find the people who have need. They are our neighbors. For example, it doesn't really matter what you think of the politics of immigration. The fact of the matter is, we have in our community hundreds of children whose families have crossed the border (both legally and illegally). They don't have much in the way of security and community kindness toward them. "Dr. Barry Brazelton, a Harvard child psychiatrist, worries about the... children who are not going to make it because the clearest word spoken to them since birth is a word of negligence and violence, underfunded schools, poor health care, and hunger, real hunger, in this land of affluence. It is a clear word that says you are not wanted, you're not only not loved, you don't matter much; you are not, in fact, worth anything."⁶

We want to give children a different message, one that tells them they are loved. Two days a week we bring elementary-aged Hispanic children to the church to have a nutritious snack, and to receive some tutoring, and to have a chance to play. For two days a week at Georgetown Presbyterian Church, some of those children get to hear a different word, a word that says they are loved by God and they are loved by God's people.

If we say we love God but don't love our neighbor, our love is incomplete.

This One Thing is the key to understanding all the Law and the Prophets, says Jesus: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And Love your neighbor as yourself.

You have to do both, because in all things the priority is love. Amen.

¹ See Matthew 22:34-36

² Matthew 22:37-38, using "One Thing" as a paraphrase for Jesus saying, "the first and greatest commandment"

³ Matthew 22:39-40

⁴ John Buchanan, "To Make a Life and Not Just a Living", Fourth Presbyterian Church, October 27, 2002, www.fourthchurch.org/sermons.

⁵ For a good discussion of this, see Martha Greene, "Jesus' Final Exam," *The Christian Century*, October 9-22, 2002, p. 18.

⁶ Buchanan sermon (see above)