

Sermon 2010 – Loving Your Neighbour

- Passages – Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:29-37

(with reference to the parallel passages in Matthew 22 and Luke 10)

Context

In this section of Mark, we are now centering on the crucial aspect of Jesus' mission here on earth, as he approaches closer and closer to the Cross. This portion of Scripture in Mark 13 follows immediately Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where the bulk of the Jewish religious leadership is. As a result of Jesus' claims on His own identity and authority, it is no surprise that he would encounter increasing opposition from the religious leadership, who sensed that their own authority is being threatened. And so, these individuals bombarded Jesus with question after question about His identity, His claims, His teachings....etc., fully with an intention to trap him. Of course, these attempts were terribly unsuccessful. However, this particular question that was being posed, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" was rather different. For one, after this question, there were no other questions (v.34). Secondly, there was much less of a tone of "trapping" in this question; in v.28, the scribe thought that Jesus had answered well, and in v.32, the scribe was noted to have agreed with Jesus. So why was Mark trying to paint a positive relationship between Jesus and the scribe? Remember, the term "scribe" in Greek (grammateus) takes on a different meaning than how we would conceptualize a "scribe" today. We think of a "scribe" as someone who copies, who writes down what is being said, with little thinking or discernment. However, a "grammateus" is a law-specialist, a scholar of the law; this is no dummy. Mark is clearly trying to remove the apparent conflict between Jesus and the Law. Why is that? For one, perhaps Mark is trying to highlight the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who obviously knew the law (in their heads), but clearly did not understand the spirit of the law as embodied in Christ. Secondly and most importantly, is the fact that there in fact is NO conflict between Jesus and the Law. In fact, we learn in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law. The two commands outlined in this passage are in fact NOT new commands. They are found in nearly exact words in Deut. 6:4 and Lev. 19:18. And, in reviewing the Ten Commandments, one finds these two commands at the heart of the commandments.

So, why am I giving you this whole preamble? The reason is that this question is the most important question of all. We, like the religious leadership, do not like to take Jesus at His word; we do not like to take him at face value and trust Him. So, we, too, bombard him with one question after another, challenging His claims and His teachings....etc. However, at some point in our lives, we all eventually arrive at the same question – "which commandment is the most important of all?" On a deeper level, the question is not merely "which commandment is the greatest?", but rather, "what is the most important thing in life?" It is a question of purpose, in other words, "What are we all here for?" In response, Jesus silences the entire audience once and for all, saying to them – LOVE, this is what you are here for and I am going to tell you what that means. To LOVE is what you have been designed for from the beginning, for now and through all of eternity.

So what kind of love is Jesus referring to? Over these last two days, we have examined what it means to love God. Today, we will be considering what it means to love your neighbour. I will attempt to answer three questions: 1. Are the two commands intrinsically related? 2. Who is your neighbour? 3. What does this love for one's neighbour look like?

Question 1

Growing up, my only understanding of the connection between the two great commandments was this: On one hand, I must love God. Loving God involves obeying His commands (John 14:15), one of which is to love my neighbour, so I do this in obedience. This is absolutely biblical, but it has the potential to cause us to think of the two commandments merely as two separate entities of “stuff” that we do. There is one “pile” of things we do to love God, and there is another “pile” of things we do to love people. But are these two commandments even more profoundly related than this? I believe that they are and that the second commandment necessarily flows from the first. Here are four reasons:

a. A logical observation - I contend that love is a total orientation of life that encompasses all aspects of one's being, but that which is not necessarily dependent on the object of love. Let's use a concrete example to try to understand what I mean - punctuality. If I say John is punctual, John is punctual in all situations. If, however, John is consistently late for church services, I would say that John is “punctual” to despite him being on-time for every other occasion. So it is with love – a person who is loving loves in all relationships, ie. I can't really say that I love God, but not people, or vice versa. Now as an aside, you may be thinking that, “yes, I can love people without loving God”. I would disagree; it is impossible to *truly* love people without first loving God. Let's take the first scenario in which a person does not know God nor His command to love one's neighbour – how does this person love others? Well, he/she must rely on societal norms to determine what love means. We know full well that societal norms change from generation to generation, so these cannot reliably tell us how we are to truly love. The second scenario is probably where most people stand. They know some rule loving one's neighbour as oneself but do not love God. How are these people to derive an understanding of love? Well according to the rule “love your neighbour as yourself”, you must find within yourself and understanding of love and then apply it others. Well, this also is very problematic as our hearts are incredibly deceitful (Jeremiah 17:9). So how can it be depended for the true definition of love? In any case, without getting too off track, my point here is that there is something intrinsic about the concept of love that ties these two commandments together

b. Scripture is even more explicit - to love people is a crucial aspect of loving God. Proverbs 19:17 tells us that when you lend to the poor, you're in fact lending to God. In Matthew 25:40, it is said that “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”. So, when you are loving people, you are in fact demonstrating love towards God.

c. Conversely, to NOT love people is to NOT love God. 1 John 4:20 is very clear in saying that if you do not love your brothers, whom you can see, you cannot love God, who is unseen.

d. Here is the most compelling explanation of all that ties the two commands together. First, let us revisit the first commandment; what does it say? It tells us to love God with ALL of our being. So we submit our intellect, our emotions, our will, our behaviours under His authority, which we learn through His Word. I'm convinced that as we truly do that, we discover who we really are, and knowing who we are greatly impacts how we view others. So who are we? To borrow from Tim Keller, we are JUSTIFIED SINNERS. Luther uses similar terms in Latin to describe who we are; we are *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously righteous/justified/acceptable, and sinful/depraved). This is key to understanding the connection between the 1st and the 2nd commandment. Now, just like in many aspects of our faith, we are asked to tread a tightrope between seemingly opposite

ideas. For example, Joe has a favourite “tension” – God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility; this is but one of many examples. In this particular case, we are asked to tread a tightrope in our understanding of being both righteous/justified and sinful. When you think about it, you realize how often you “fall off” this tightrope onto either side. Let’s say you primarily understand yourself as a sinner (while minimizing your justification), how do you view yourself? Well, you would feel that you have to work your way to pay for your own sins and earn God’s favour. Now, when put together with a whole bunch of other sinners, you will quickly start to compare – oh, I’m not THAT bad of a person, not compared to THAT other person; or, oh, I’m certainly not as “good” as THAT other person, THAT other person will make it to heaven before me. I don’t know about you, but it’s fairly hard to love people when you are only looking at them through a lens of comparison. On the other hand, what if you primarily understand yourself as righteous and acceptable (while minimizing your sinnership), how do you view others? Well, you become care-less. Since God loves everyone anyways and will take care of their sin problems and their needs, I certainly do not need to get involved. Now, having the correct understanding of ourselves as justified sinners should AND must revolutionize how we view and treat others. Knowing that we are at the same time helplessly sinful, yet utterly forgiven and declared righteous/acceptable, we cannot help but LOVE others. For one, I no longer need to compare and think that I’m worse off or better off than someone else. While recognizing that we are all in an equally desperate predicament, we rejoice knowing that Jesus HAS already come to rescue us from my futile self-efforts to make us acceptable before God. The Saviour’s love for me gives me the *reason and boldness* to step out in love. On the other hand, I cannot possibly look on my brother/sister with care-less disregard because I’m humbled knowing that “there but for the grace of God, go I”. So I sympathize with others in their condition and, as a result, reach out in love. Again, how do I come to this understanding of myself? Through completely loving God with my mind, my heart, my soul, my strength (the first commandment); doing so allows me to understand who we *all* truly are, and therefore should compel me to look upon others with love. In summary, the second commandment is the necessary outward manifestation of the first commandment.

Question 2 - Who is your neighbour? (the Parable of the Good Samaritan)

There is a temptation in reading parables to read too much into the details of the parable, while missing the whole point of the parable. Various attempts at interpreting this parable have been made historically. Some have tried to substitute the Samaritan with Jesus, others have tried to substitute the victim with Jesus. While all these interpretations have their merits, the most faithful rendering of this text must take into account of the question that it is trying to answer. Remember that the central question of this parable is “Who is your neighbour?” in answer to the lawyer’s question. The another key point to understand this parable is that it is being told from the vantage point of the one in need. The question is not being asked by anyone, but by the one who is in desperate need – we shall see the significance of this later on. Let’s go through the parable. The victim in this story was beaten, robbed and stripped and clearly in a desperate plight. A priest comes up to the victim – what hope! Here is a man who is God-fearing and surely will come to help; but no, he passes by. The situation is becoming more serious by the minute. Next comes the Levite – another comrade, he will certainly lend a hand. But sadly, he walks by as well. “But a Samaritan”, says Jesus. I am sure that as soon as the lawyer hears these words, certain thoughts are already being conjured up in his mind. You see, the Samaritans are half breeds, descendants from the previously defeated northern Kingdom of Israel who intermarried with the Assyrians. These people were to be avoided by the Jews at all costs. This Samaritan can be up to no good. After all, what else could he possibly want with this man on the road; there is nothing left to take, perhaps an organ? What did the Samaritan do instead!?!? Note all the verbs in this section of

Scripture – he went above and beyond his call of duty to care for this man, what self-sacrifice! Having told the story, Jesus re-asks the question – WHO IS ONE’S NEIGHBOUR? The lawyer is so incredibly shocked at the irony of the story that he couldn’t even bring himself to say “the Samaritan”, so instead he answered, “the one who showed him mercy”. In his heart he is really saying, “so Jesus is suggesting that EVEN THE SAMARITAN IS A NEIGHBOUR!” Yes, indeed, It really matters very little whether one looks differently, talks differently, thinks differently.....whatever. When in need, anyone and everyone is a neighbour. Using the incredible irony of this story, Jesus emphasizes the point that there is in fact no limitation on who qualifies as one’s neighbour. What limitations have you put on the definition of a “neighbour”? Learning this lesson from a position of need should impact us on how we act and think when in a position to help.

Question 3 - What does this love for neighbour look like?

- clue 1 – The term “homois” used in Matthew’s parallel passage – “and the second [commandment] is ‘homois’ it” (“it” referring to the first commandment) is an incredibly instructive little word. ‘Homois’ – like, similar is an adjective of comparison. You certainly get a sense that the one commandment is mirrored in the other, although not the same. This is important – our love for others, while not the SAME as our love for God, is very similar in nature - what does that mean? The answer is in the second clue.

- clue 2 – LOVE – the greek term here is “agapao”. As you know, there are different terms for “love” in Greek which are lost once translated into the singular English word, ‘love’. The “LOVE” which is used in this passage is the same LOVE that is used in the first commandment where we are commanded to LOVE God. It is also the same LOVE that is in John 3:16 which tells us of God’s love for us. It is also the same LOVE that is described in the famous ‘love’ passage in 1 Corinthians 13. All of this informs us of the type of love that we are to demonstrate to others; it is similar to the love we show to God, in that it is unconditional, all-encompassing, self-sacrificing, self-denying/others first.

- clue 3 – In terms of the degree/intensity of this love, we look at the final descriptor, which is the most tangible descriptor of all – we are to love others AS OURSELF. Popular psychology today sees it this way – if you don’t start loving yourself, you won’t be able to love others. So the starting point of loving others is self-love. However, nowhere in Scripture is there any exhortation or command to love ourselves. Rather, it is assumed that we already love ourselves (Ephesians 5:29). In fact, we love ourselves too much. If you were to be honest and think about this for more than 20 seconds, you would realize that even in the most charitable and “selfless” act that you do, it is tainted with self-love. Piper rewords the command to “as you love yourself, so love your neighbour”. I am going to edit Piper slightly and add that “as you love yourself *in the context of loving God and finding out the true meaning of love*, so love your neighbour”. (note how the first commandment is key in loving your neighbour). Or, in an even more concrete fashion, Piper says, “make your *self-seeking* the measure of your *self-giving*”. The standard that you use to love yourself, this is the standard you are to use to love others. The same way that you pursue comfort, well-being, protection.....for yourself, pursue it in the same way (with the same zeal/energy....etc.) for your neighbour. Take two examples. One, a classmate of yours comes to ask you to help him/her understand some lecture materials, on the night before the 100% final exam. What is your attitude in helping him/her? Do you give the bare minimum explanation so that you can get back to your own studies, or do you ask, “how much effort would you yourself put into understanding these same materials?” A second example, a client/patient/boss approaches/calls you on a Friday afternoon and wants to go over something that appears quite urgent to him/her. Do you merely give

some quick words to get him/her off your back, or do you ask yourself, “were you in his/her position, how would you want to be answered?”

Moving forwards

At the end of this passage in Mark, Jesus said to the scribe, “You’re not far from the Kingdom of God” – why? Jesus didn’t have to say this at all; he could have just said, “way to go”, “excellent”, “you’ve spoken wisely”. But this is what he said, “you’re NOT FAR from the Kingdom of God”. What’s the natural reaction? Well, then “how do I get into the Kingdom of God?” The answer is at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan – “Go and do likewise”. And I think that this is Jesus’ indictment to the Pharisees and teachers of the law all along. While they KNOW (up in the brain) God’s laws, these were not transforming them in their hearts and consequently, what they do or how they live. And isn’t that really a charge against many of us as well? We possess much head-knowledge (very good knowledge, that is), but are we transformed from the inside out? Does the knowledge impact what we do? You see, Jesus’ second teaching point in the parable of the Good Samaritan is that we must BE a neighbour to someone. Stop trying to figure out who qualifies as a neighbour and who does not (since everyone is a neighbour anyways). Instead, start BEING a neighbour to someone else.

At this point, if you have really thought carefully about what I have said and all the ramifications of loving your neighbour, you really should be left with one thought: this is quite hard; actually, this is very hard; in fact, it is IMPOSSIBLY hard. I mean, if I am really supposed to love others in such a way, I will be spending all my time and energy loving others and I will have no time or energy left for me! This is really threatening to my own well-being, isn’t it? But does God give us impossible commands? I think not.

As I was preparing for this sermon, God really convicted me about how I act at work, how I act in church, how I was when I was “helping out” in Haiti. In fact, if you ever want to be really convicted about something, try preparing a sermon and or talk of some sort. Anyways, while I was in Haiti, I discovered very quickly that I do not love the people there as much as I would like to think that I do, and I became quite upset at myself for that. My natural reaction was to TRY to love harder, only to discover that the more I tried, the more I failed, and the more I recognized the limits of my love, which only led to escalating frustration. As I thought about this more, I wondered whether this really was the joy-filled Christian life that God promised me. This is not how it’s supposed to be! It really cannot just be about me working my hardest, mustering every last ounce of love that I have in order to give to others. No No No! So, what is the solution? The answer is the gospel! You might be thinking – the gospel??? What does that have to do with any of this? The truth is, the gospel has EVERYTHING to do with loving your neighbour. But you say, “I already know the gospel.” Do you? Do you REALLY KNOW the gospel? Have you fully comprehended and KNOW in your heart the depth, the magnitude, the wretchedness, the disgusting-ness, the heinousness of our sin, and how it is a wreaking stench in God’s nostrils? And knowing this, have you understood the greatness, the majesty, the amazing-ness, the huge-ness, your un-deserving-ness of Jesus’ sacrificial love for you, that He would pursue you to the cross, suffering a tortured death in your place? You see, as sinners, we are scum, worse, we are antagonistic scum. We throw our sins in God’s face in defiance of His goodness. And even with that, God demonstrated His love to us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. You see, knowing Christ’s humongous sacrifice for us should make all the sacrifices we are called to make peanuts. Are you seeing and tasting the goodness of God, and that He has definitively shown you this goodness in Christ? Are you savouring this regularly? Are

you reveling in it? Or has the gospel become old news? Perhaps it's still good news, but it's now merely old news. Perhaps you think that you have moved past that stage of your Christian walk and have moved on to greater pursuits of Christian maturity. NO! The gospel is fresh news every day and it must fulfill us, satisfy us, penetrate every nook and cranny of our daily existence. It must permeate our every thought, every feeling, every decision, every act, of every second of every day. Otherwise, we do not stand a chance to live out the life of love that we are called to live.

In summary, I want to leave you with an analogy that hopefully puts all of this together for you. Think of a sponge. A dry sponge (that's us) is useless; it serves no purpose; it does no good. However, when this sponge is immersed in water (that is when we love God with all of us and allow this love to fully saturate us), water seeps into every tiny little pore of the sponge and the sponge is soaked. When this sponge is removed from the water, it cannot help but drip water and be useful. When we are soaked and immersed in the love of God, it is only then that we become useful and can demonstrate real love to our neighbours. THIS is what we have been designed for, since creation, for today, and throughout all of eternity.