

December 12, 2004 by Steve Brandon



The Great Commandment

Matthew 22:34-40

1. Love God (verse 37)

2. Love Others (verse 39)

As a college student, I was a physics major. For four years, I was trained in how to understand the world, so as to be able to predict how objects would behave in certain circumstances. We often sought to reduce everything down to the simplest equations that we could. For, when we understand things in their simplest form, we are then enabled to understand what takes place in the complex world. The simple helps to understand the complex.

This morning, as we turn again to Matthew's gospel, we will look at how Jesus takes a complicated system of laws and reduces it down to a single simple commandment. We are all familiar with the 10 commandments. For some people within the body of Christ, these 10 commandments are very important. To them, the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 20, is the best summary given in all of the Bible to instruct us as to how we ought to live. And they often will spend much time instructing Christians how to live, based upon these ten commands. They will go to the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:3), and will speak of the importance of having no other source of spiritual strength than the one true God. They will go to the second commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth" (Ex. 20:4) and will speak of the importance of worshiping God and God alone. They will go to the third commandment, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Ex. 20:7) and will speak of the importance of having a mouth that will praise, but never curse the LORD. They will go to the fourth commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8), and will speak of the great importance of devoting one day in seven to the service of the LORD. They will go to the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12) and will speak of the importance of behaving properly toward your parents. They will go to the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13) and will speak of the sanctity of life. They will go to the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14) and will speak of the importance of remaining true to your marriage vows. They will go to the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15) and will speak of the need to respect the property of others. They will go to the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16) and will speak of the importance of always telling the truth. They will go to the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet" (Ex. 20:17) and will speak of how you need to be content with the things that you have.

I agree that these ten commandments are very good commandments. I also agree that they give us great direction as to how to live. Perhaps we also, as a church ought to focus more attention upon these ten commandments, so that you might even know what they are. But, I disagree that they ought to be regarded as the best summary of how we ought to live. I believe that Jesus gives us the best summary as to how we ought to live in our text this morning. I'm talking about Matthew 22:34-40. We are in a section of Scripture where the religious leaders are attempting to trip Jesus up with some loaded theological questions. When the Pharisees asked Jesus about the poll-tax, it was intended to get him in trouble no matter what he answered. Either he would get in trouble with the Jews who hated paying this tax, or with the Herodians, who were governmental representatives. When the Sadducees asked Jesus about the resurrection, it was intended to expose the fallacy of the resurrection. But, rather than tripping Jesus up, Jesus answered the question and turned the tables on them. Our text this morning begins by describing how these Pharisees and Sadducees reacted to Jesus' comments.

Matthew 22:34-40

But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, "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 foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.

Notice, first, that these Sadducees were silenced. They couldn't respond. Jesus had proven that the resurrection was a reality. These Pharisees were probably encouraged about their enemies being put to shame. And yet, I'm sure that it was a bit disheartening. They hated Jesus with a passion and were probably willing to see Jesus go down at the hands of anyone, even the Sadducees. So, they gather together, much like a football team in a huddle, to plan their next strategy. They determined that they would send a representative to Jesus to ask another question, hoping to somehow trap Jesus in His words. This takes place in verse 35, "And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?'" Unlike the first two questions that have been placed before Jesus, this question is very open-ended. The first question regarding taxes had only two answers, "Yes" or "No." The second question about the resurrection had only two possibilities, "Is the resurrection true or false?" But, this question, has many different possible answers. And I believe that this open-endedness of this question is precisely where the test comes in.

For years, the Jews had debated this question. Some of the laws they saw as more important than the others. You can see this in chapter 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provision of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." Some said that tithing was most important. It's how you deal with your finances. You can also see how they prioritized one part of the law above another if you look at how these religious leaders responded to Jesus' healing ministry on

the Sabbath. They hated Jesus doing good on the Sabbath, because many of them had placed Sabbath observance as a very important law, even more than showing compassion. Jesus said, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice" (Matt. 12:7). Perhaps there were others who thought that the gathering of the people three times a year in Jerusalem for the worship of God was the most important. Isaiah tells us that they kept the form of this long after they lost the heart (Isaiah 1:10-15). As the priests earned their livelihood from the sacrifices, they may well have thought that the sacrifices were the most important of all of the commandments.

In this question of the Pharisees, I believe that they were hoping that Jesus would say something that would enrage some of His listeners. Regardless of how Jesus answered, they reasoned, Jesus would certainly offend somebody. Perhaps, they might even get Jesus to say that there is something else, apart from the law, which is the greatest commandment. After all, Jesus had seemingly raised Himself above the law when He taught the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps you remember when Jesus said, "the ancients were told ... , but I say to you ..." The Pharisees would have loved for Jesus to have spoken some new commandment for them that they had never heard before. Surely, that type of response would get Jesus into trouble, as He could easily be accused of neglecting the law. The response of Jesus to these questions was masterful. For the third time, in a few short sentences, Jesus responds to the question, and pierces the heart. His words are so **simple**, and yet so **profound**. Listen to what Jesus said ...

"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 foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:37-40)

These words are so simple that they can be memorized in but a few moments. In fact, I believe that many of you have already memorized these words. I believe that we all could close our Bibles right now and recite these verses from memory. These words are **simple**. And yet, these words are so **profound** that the entire Law and all of the Prophets hang upon these two commands (verse 40). In other words, you can take all of the commands given in the law. You can take every single exhortation given by any of the prophets. And all of them are fundamentally an expression of these two commands: (1) Love God, and (2) Love others. There is not a law given in the Old Testament that doesn't come down to one of these commands. If you get these verses down well, you get the entire Bible down well. For instance, we could take some obscure law given in the Old Testament, like Exodus 21:33-34, which says, ...

"If a man opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall give money to its owner, and the dead animal shall become his" (Exodus 21:33-34).

I believe that this law comes back clearly to how you need to love your neighbor as yourself. Imagine that you had an ox, which fell into your neighbor's pit and died. What would you want? You would want your ox back. But, since it was dead, the next best thing would be another ox! And so, that is what the command in the law tells you to do. The man who owns the pit should purchase the dead ox. He should give money to the one whose ox fell into the pit so that he could go out and purchase another ox.

Consider the prophets. Let's take some obscure verse like Hosea 4:6, ...

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."

What was the problem with Israel? They didn't love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. You take any passage in the Old Testament (and in the New) and show how it is fundamentally an expression of these two commands: (1) Love God, and (2) Love others.

This isn't anything new for Jesus. He had said these things before. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, "However you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

The New Testament writers picked up on this as well. In Romans 13:8-10, Paul named off a few of the Ten Commandments, and then he placed love as the command which fulfills all of the commandments. He said, ...

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled [the] law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul also summarized it in Galatians 5:14 by saying, "the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" And James wrote, "if ... you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well" (James 2:8).

Now, you need to know that when Jesus answered the question this way, it wasn't anything new to the Jews either. First of all, they were Old Testament quotations. The first came from Deuteronomy 6:5. The second came from Leviticus 19:18. And so, the Jews knew these commandments. But, further, they prioritized these commandments.

The first commandment that Jesus gives, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind" was so often repeated by the Jews that it came to have its own name. It's called "the Shema." And even today, Jews all around the world will repeat these words often. Perhaps you have seen the Jewish men pray today. They often wrap around their arms and their foreheads these

black boxes, called phylacteries. They are little boxes that contain verses of Scripture. In those boxes are these words from Deuteronomy 6, ...

"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut. 6:4-9)

These words were very familiar to the Jews. They prioritized them highly.

The second commandment that Jesus gives, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" was also understood to have great priority for the Jews. In fact, there was a Rabbi named Hillel, who lived during the time of Jesus (A. D. 20). He was challenged on one occasion to try to explain the whole law while during the time in which he could stand on one leg. Rabbi Hillel responded, "what is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. This is the whole law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it" (b Shabbath 31a as quoted by D. A. Carson, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8, p. 187). The exact form of the quotation may be a bit different than Jesus put it, by the thrust of it is the same.

So, this answer wasn't new at all. In fact, on another occasion, a man had come to Jesus seeking what he might do to obtain eternal life. When Jesus asked Him what was written in the law, this man said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). He gave the exact answer that Jesus gave. And Jesus said, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live" (Luke 10:28).

Even in Mark's account of this story before us, the one who originally came to test Jesus remarked, "Right, Teacher, You have truly stated that He is One; and there is no one else besides Him; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength and to love one's neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:32-33). The Jews had already synthesized these commandments down to the simplicity of two.

And if rightly understood, these verses will bring amazing simplicity to your lives. For instance, as Yvonne and I have grown in our parenting, we have discovered recently how to press these words home to our children. Perhaps those of you who are parents can picture this in your home. Your children are fighting amongst themselves for some reason. As you parents know, these situations are manifold. They may be fighting over some toy. They may be fighting over time on the computer. They may be fighting over the seat in the car near Stephanie, our one year old. They may be fighting over the comics in the newspaper. Their frequently engage in arguments with each other: "I had it first." "Yeah, but it's mine." "But mom said I could sit here." "You already had your time." "It's not fair!" Sometimes, the disagreements even turn violent. A toy is ripped out of a hand. A child is pushed from a seat. A child is struck. At times, a chase can begin around the house. Cries for help echo throughout the house. Much commotion goes on. An accident takes place. Tears erupt. ... Does this sound familiar?

Regardless of the complexities to the tensions of the problem, Yvonne and I have found that one question solves all difficulties. **We have begun to ask our children one question: "What is the loving thing to do?"** It's amazing! It solves all disputes. Our children have been able to completely identify the loving thing to do. They have been able to articulate it and explain it. Of course, following through is an entirely different matter. But, Yvonne and I are committed to pound this message home to our children, "What is the loving thing to do?" What has helped us in this matter is that it has helped us to address the heart of the issue.

Tedd Tripp has written an excellent book on raising children. It is called, "Shepherding a Child's Heart." I know that many of you are familiar with this book. It's central thesis is that all issues of life flow from the heart. Therefore, when raising children, you need to address the issue of the heart. Sadly, there are many people who simply deal with the externals. Their goal is to raise *obedient* children. They are satisfied if their children grow up obedient. But, often, within an obedient child is a rebellious heart. For this reason, I believe that it is better to go deeper than dealing merely with externals. I believe that your goal in raising children should be to raise *loving* children. A loving child will obey. A loving child will obey for the right reasons and with the right attitude. Such a perspective is entirely consistent with Tedd Tripp's thesis. Such a perspective is entirely Biblical. So, parents, I encourage you to place this question constantly before your children, "What is the loving thing to do?" Better yet, we all ought to be asking ourselves that question, "What is the loving thing to do?"

Love is the great command of all of Scripture. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul said, "Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:14). Paul wrote to Timothy, that "the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Love is called, "the perfect bond of unity" (Col. 3:14). Love is beyond compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness (Col. 2:12-13). Love is better than faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13).

In our text this morning, there are two spheres of our love. One is vertical. It is our love that is directed toward God. The other is horizontal. It is our love directed toward other people. We are to love God. We are to love others. And this is the application that comes screaming out of our passage this morning: (1) Love God, and (2) Love others. For the last half of my message, we are going to focus on the application of this passage to our lives. My points of application this morning will come out of these two points, (1) Love God, and (2) Love others.

It is crucial for you to be following these two commands this morning. Since this is the greatest commandment, do you realize what the great sin is? The greatest sin is breaking the great commandment! Not to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, is the greatest sin. Not to love your neighbor as yourself is the greatest sin. And so, I say this morning, this is important for you. It's not something that you can easily put aside. You can't sweep it under the rug. You can't hide it in the closet. These two commands are worthy of your attention this morning.

Now, the difficulty in these commands is that love is a bit like jazz. The famous trumpet player, Louis Armstrong was once asked about jazz. He said, "Man, if I got to explain it, you ain't got it." (Quoted by John MacArthur in The Body Dynamic, p. 55). And so, in many ways, it makes

my task this morning very difficult. Because, "if I got to explain love, you ain't got it." Love is an affection that boils up within us and will express itself. You can't manufacture love. You can't suppress love. When you love, it will express itself. I can command you until I am blue in the face to love God. But, love isn't primarily about the things that you do. Certainly, love will express itself. But, fundamentally, love is about the things that you feel and think and are in your inner being, which express themselves.

The good news is that if you love God, it will be apparent. It will be obvious to all. I read recently of a man who was asked if he was saved. He said the he might be prejudiced about that question and that the interrogator should go ask his wife, children, and neighbors. He said, "I'll be ready to let their answers stand as my own." (Christian History, Issue 84, Fall 2004, p. 2) It's the same with love. If someone would ask you, "Do you love God? Do you love your neighbors?" It would be well for you to say, "Go ask my family and my neighbors. They will certainly tell you the truth.

1. Love God (verse 37)

a. By obeying Him (1 John 5:3)

Two weeks ago, Steve Belonger preached this sermon to us. His text was 1 John 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome." If you missed that sermon, I would encourage you to get the CD and listen to it (or listen to it online). He nailed it exactly: to love God is to obey God. He did a wonderful job explaining that to us in her sermon. I don't need to repeat any of that for you this morning. There are many verses that link love and obedience. "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me" (John 14:21). (See also 1 John 2:5; 3:18-24; 5:3 2 John 1:6.) It's impossible to love God if you profess a love for God, and then not obey God. And yet, I don't think that this is all there is to loving God. Even John added a bit of a disclaimer when he said that the commandments were not burdensome.

The Pharisees were pretty good at keeping the commandments. In a few weeks we shall see what good it did for them in chapter 23. It brought seven woes of condemnation against them. This happened precisely because their obedience was pretty burdensome (Matt. 23:3-4). Do what they say, but not what they do. they find the commandments to be extremely burdensome. There is a good attitude toward obedience, and there is a wrong attitude toward obedience. In one case, obedience is a duty. In the other case, obedience is a delight. One is what you want to do. One is what you don't want to do.

For example, let me tell you about last night. Yesterday evening, we were preparing for my son's birthday party that will take place this afternoon. He is turning nine years old on Monday. Recently, he has been into outer space. So, we are going to have a "space party." On several instances, we had asked our children to help with various tasks, like cleaning or vacuuming. They weren't very eager to do these things. However, there came a point when we asked them to clear out one of our rooms in the basement to create a safe place to play dodge ball with "planets." When they heard about a chance to help with this, they were thrilled to help, and it was not a burden. It was pure delight for them. With some duties, it was very difficult to motivate them. With other duties, it was like pulling teeth. What is the difference between the two? One task was whole-hearted delight. The other task was half-hearted obligation. You need to know that God hates half-hearted obligation, but He loves whole-hearted delight. Here is another way to love God.

b. By pursuing Him (Matthew 22:37)

I get this from the words of Jesus in verse 37. The word, "pursuing" is the best word that I could come up with to describe this verse. I'm talking about a passionate, heart-felt desire for God. He said that we are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). We could spend some time trying to dissect each of these words. What is the heart? What is the soul? What is the mind? We might think these are distinct categories, as if the heart talks about passions, and the soul talks about emotions, and the mind talks about the intellect. We might attempt to figure out when we are loving God with each of these categories. But, such a study would easily miss the point of Jesus, for there is quite a bit of overlap among these terms. It is impossible to segregate the different parts of our inner man. The point Jesus makes in using these separate terms isn't about analyzing them so that we know and understand what it means to love God with our heart, and love God with our soul, and love God with our mind. Rather, His point is one of a *total commitment* to God. It is a consuming desire for God. It is a whole-hearted passion for God. It is a mind completely consumed by God. His point is one of total, radical pursuit of God. That's the type of obedience that pleases God.

Notice the use of the superlatives in how Jesus said it. He didn't say, "with all your heart, soul, and mind." He said, "with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, and with *all* your mind!" Three times Jesus repeats the all-consuming nature of this love. And I believe that this is His point. It's not a partial love for God that we need. Instead it is a complete love for God. In this light, it is easy to see why Mark records Jesus as adding the phrase, "with all your strength." "You shall love the Lord your God ... with all your heart, and ... with all your soul, and ... with all your mind, and ... with all your strength." This is the point: Your love to God ought to be all consuming! When you awake in the morning, God should fill your heart. When you go about the day, God should be the joy of your soul. When you lie down at night, God should consume the thoughts of your mind.

So, if there are things that pull you away from following the Lord your God with all your being, then get rid of them! Get rid of the television. Get rid of the Internet. Get rid of the video games. Get rid of the newspaper subscription. Get rid of the friendship. Get rid of your hobby. Get rid of our job and find another one. If there is sin that you are holding on to, repent today of it. It is hindering you from loving the Lord God as you ought! Find in Jesus the forgiveness of your sins, that will make you whole.

If there are certain things that are avenues to foster your love for the Lord, then do them. Read your Bible. Memorize some scripture passages. Attend church functions. Many of the activities that we do as a church are intended to build you up and help you in your walk with Christ that you might go forth living completely for Him. In recent months, we have begun our Flocks, our home Bible studies. They are intended to build you up in the faith and to give you opportunities to serve. They have begun very well. You can still join one. There are many opportunities for you to cultivate your love for God. In fact, there are so many opportunities, that you must choose which ones you will do and which ones you have no time for.

Perhaps you need to make a covenant with God like Josiah did. In 2 Chronicles 34:31, we read, "The king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD to walk after the LORD, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant written in this book."

A final note, your pursuit of God should have no limits. There are many things in this life that you shouldn't give all of yourself to. Those who give all of themselves to work become workaholics. Those who give all of themselves to physical fitness become self-absorbed. Those who give all of themselves to their hobbies become obsessed. In all of these cases, they essentially become idolaters, because something is taking the place of God. But, when God is your pursuit, you can't commit idolatry, because the object of your affection is rightly placed! It's upon God. And when God becomes your all, you can't be guilty of idolatry. Don't ever think that you can pursue God too much. Psalm 63:8 in the King James says it nicely, "My soul followeth hard after Thee."

c. By trusting Him (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps you are familiar with Romans 8:23, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This verse is saying that God is sovereignly working in your life for good, if you are numbered among those who love God. And if that's the case, we ought to trust Him in all circumstances. We should trust him even when things appear to be going badly for you. You have the promise of Scripture before you that God is causing it for good.

Your mind right now may be thinking that it isn't for good. But, rest assured, that if you love God, it is working for good. To love the Lord your God is to trust Him. You say, "How can my extreme financial difficulties be good? I mean, look at those folks over there. They can buy whatever they want. They never have a worry in the world. God, why have you given me poverty?" It may just be because the Lord is using this to keep you trusting in Jesus. James 2:5, "Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" 1 Timothy 6:17, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches." I believe that depending upon the Lord is a good thing. Your financial difficulties might be leading you to trust God.

Or, you may ask, "How can my extreme sickness be good? Look at those folks over there. They feel good all of the time. They can go out and do whatever they want, whenever they want. God, why am I sick?" It may just be because the Lord wants for you to trust in Him for strength. Paul had a sickness (or difficulty) of some type. He prayed for three times that it might depart from him. But, God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). I believe that depending upon the Lord for strength is a good thing.

The problems can go on and on and on. They include problems with relationships, family, and past experiences. But, the promise of Scripture is that God is entirely in control of your circumstances. If you love God, He is causing the circumstances to work out for good. You need to trust Him in that.

But Jesus said that there was another part to the great commandment. He said, "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:39). This is the horizontal dimension to the great commandment. We need to understand that the second flows from the first. In 1 John 4:21, we read, "And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also." If you don't love others, you don't love God. The verse immediately preceding this one says, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 5:20).

I don't care what you say. I don't care how much you would profess to love God. If you don't love others, you are a liar, because love for God will flow toward a love for others. As I have been thinking about these two commands, I have learned that your love for God is best demonstrated when you are alone. When nobody is around, what do you do? Do you commit secret sins? When nobody is around, it's you and God. Nobody is influencing you one way or another. It's purely you and God. But your love for others is demonstrated when others are around. That is public and before the eyes of all. If you don't love others in public, then you certainly don't love God in private. Your love for God will flow to your love for others. So love others! This is my second point of application this morning.

2. Love Others (verse 39)

a. By Being Centered on Others (verse 39).

Jesus said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When you truly love other people, it requires you to use your imagination. You need to imagine yourself as another person. Put yourself in their situation. Put yourself in their surroundings. Try to imagine what you would like from yourself for the other person, and then do it. Admittedly, there are times where this is extremely difficult, especially when you are trying to love your spouse. Men, you need to think about yourself as a woman in your wife's situation. Wives, you need to think about yourself as a man in your husband's situation. And then, ask yourself, "What would I want me to do if I were that person?" Children, when you are trying to love your parents, you need to think about yourselves as being an adult with small children. You should think to yourself, "If I were a parent with a small child that looks just like me, what would I want me to do?" Love will do what you believe others would want you to do for them. Love comes when you focus upon the needs and wants of other people.

In the second century, there was a worldly philosopher named Aristides. He was not a believer in Christ, but he observed the curious behavior of those who followed Jesus. He pictures this great-commandment-love in action. He said,

"They abstain from all impurity, in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. As for their servants or handmaids or children, they persuade them to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. They do not worship strange gods; and they walk in all humility and

kindness and falsehood is not found among them and they love one another. When they see the stranger they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother; for they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the Spirit and in God. And there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with the necessary food. They observe scrupulously the commandment of their Messiah; they live honestly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and all hours on account of the goodness of God toward them, they praise and laud Him and over their food and their drink, they render Him thanks. ... Such is the law of the Christians and such is their conduct." Aristides, "The Apology of Aristides," Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 1, p. 346).

Isn't this a great picture of Christian love? I rejoice that in many ways, this describes the people of Rock Valley Bible Church. And you need to be commended. I simply urge you "to excel still more" (1 Thess. 4:10).

But, lest you think that Christian love is only to be administered within the church, you need to be reminded that our love ought to be evident far and wide. Galatians 6:10, "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." Certainly, we ought to focus our love upon one another. And the world will see this and know that we are His disciples (John 13:34, 35). But, our love ought to reach out to others, outside of our walls. The "neighbors" to whom we need to extend our love aren't simply church people.

Turn in your Bibles to Luke 10. Look particularly at verses 25-29.

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and Your neighbor as yourself." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

This teaching is identical to what we have in our passage this morning. But, we get an additional insight into who exactly we are to extend our love to. Look at verse 29.

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

I'm sure this man regretted what he just asked Jesus. He would have loved to interpret this passage his own way. He would have loved to think in his mind that his "neighbor" is the one he knows and loves. Jesus responds with the famous story.

Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on [them;] and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

Who's your neighbor? Anyone in need. If you open your eyes, there are opportunities that abound. Will you love? You need to imagine yourself as a co-worker. Perhaps you need to imagine yourself as an orphan in an Nepaleze orphanage: "What would I want me to do if I were an orphan?"

Several of us men have been reading a book entitled, "Five Pioneer Missionaries." It tells the story of five missionaries who brought the gospel to nations who had no Christian witness. It was a very difficult experience for all of them. We are currently reading about Henry Martyn, who went to India to spread the gospel. On his way over there, he is on a long journey aboard ship. He ministered the gospel to those aboard the ship, many of whom hated his message. And yet, he had a glowing love for other people that was unmistakable. It is a good example for us. His biographer writes, ...

"Much as they disliked his message, however, they could not deny the sincere love of the man for his 'parish.' It was love for the blaspheming sailors that kept him busy trying to awaken their consciences. Such love is not easily recognized by men of the world, but they could not disregard his unselfish care for the sick and dying, who were always to be found in plenty on the troop-ships of those days. ... Imagine it: the sweat and the dirt, the foul smell and the unbearable heat of the lower decks, and the Cambridge don in his meticulously neat black clothes moving from hammock to hammock, from sick boy to dying man, with food and medicine, and always with the Word of God. The men had never seen anything like it; nor had the officers, and they wrote him off as a *mad enthusiast*" (pp. 260-261).

My friends, Henry Martyn wasn't a mad enthusiast. He was a Christian, obeying the great commandment. We ought to do likewise. In one small way, we are trying to mobilize you all for one such opportunity. I'm talking about our annual cookie exchange. The idea is pretty simple. You cook a big batch of cookies this week. You package them up into little bags. Next Sunday, you lay out your little bags on the table over here. When everyone has placed their cookies on the table, each of you take one bag each. Then, you make a nice arrangement of assorted

cookies that you can give away. Hopefully, you will extend your love to some people who are without Christ. In the Brandon household, we like to take this sort of thing around to our neighbors, with a nice Christmas card that clearly describes the glories of the incarnation. We have seen the Lord use this as an opportunity to open up spiritual conversations with our neighbors that we haven't been able to do in any other way.

b. By Sacrificing (John 15:13).

Turn with me in your Bibles to John 15. In this passage, Jesus puts forth how to measure your love for one another. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, than he lay down his life for His friends." This is how Jesus has demonstrated His great love for us. Jesus laid down His life for us. Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He didn't seek great things for Himself. Rather, he took the apron of the slave and washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:5-11). Though Jesus was God, He "did not regard equality of God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). When Jesus was upon the cross, it was an act of love, for He sacrificed His own life for us. He gave Himself for us (Eph. 5:25). This is the example of love that Jesus set for us.

Stories abound with examples of those who sacrifice greatly for others. Into my mind comes the images of the firemen marching into the burning World Trade Centers, sacrificing their lives. Into my mind comes Timothy McCarthy, the secret service agent who took a bullet in the abdomen in the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan's life in 1980. Into my mind comes the current war in Iraq. I read this week about several United States soldiers who have performed heroic deeds to protect their fellow soldiers. On April 4, 2004, near the Baghdad airport, Army Sergeant First Class Paul Smith stayed at his machine gun post protecting medics as they evacuated the wounded and defending the American position that controlled access to the main road to the city against the assault of over 100 Iraqis. He died at his post. On April 14, 2004, Corporal Jason Dunham and other Marines were in a firefight with the enemy in Karbala. An Iraqi dropped a live grenade among the Marines. Corporal Dunham took off his helmet, covered the grenade and then covered the helmet with his body. He died in Bethesda Naval Hospital eight days later. On November 15, 2004, Sergeant Rafael Peralta was fighting in northern Falluja. In the fierce battle for the Iraqi town of Fallouja, Peralta, with gunshot wounds to his head and body, he reached out and grabbed a grenade hurled by an insurgent, cradling it to his body to save others from the blast. One of his superior said, "He saved half my fire team."

We ought to marvel at such sacrifices. But, the amazing thing about the sacrifice of Jesus is this. Jesus didn't lay down His life for His friends. He laid down his life for His enemies. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). It is "while we were enemies, [that] we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10). His example has become our example. Jesus came and sacrificed of Himself and served us thereby demonstrating His own love for us.

To demonstrate your love for others, you need to sacrifice for them. Oh, perhaps it might not mean your life. But, it might mean that you sacrifice time with your family to help someone in need. It might mean that you sacrifice financially to help those that you love. It may mean that you give to them not once, not twice, but ten times. It may mean that you give much of your financial resources to others. It might mean that you need to do what you really don't like to do, like wash the dishes, or do the laundry, or change the diaper, or clean the mess.

But, this isn't all there is to love. It isn't only sacrifice. Admittedly, it's important. But, just like obedience to God isn't the only thing to loving God. So also, sacrifice for others isn't the only thing to loving them. To show this to you, I want for you to turn to 1 Corinthians 13. We all know this as the "Love Chapter." It is often read at weddings, and rightly so, as love is in the air. But, there are some verses here that are often read without really reflecting upon them. I have really been thinking about them, as they reveal a bit of the true character of love. I want for you to look at verse 3, "If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3). This is great sacrifice, is it not? This is a sacrifice of all of one's possessions. It means giving it all away for the sake of the poor. This is a sacrifice of one's life. It means cradling the hand-grenade to protect others. And yet, we read that you can do these things **without love**.

It's amazing when you think about it. Somehow, there are other motives going on with the tremendous sacrifice, which is not being generated from a sincere love for others. Perhaps it is worldly acclaim, that you might get your name written upon some plaque someplace. Perhaps it is immortality that is being sought, a hope that later generations will tell of your great sacrifice. Perhaps it is the praise of men that you are seeking. What is the effect of these great sacrifices? Paul says, "It profits me nothing." So, as you sacrifice for others, be sure that you do so with a genuine love for others. (See 1 Cor. 13:4-7 for a good description of the attitudes that come along with a genuine love for others).

May Rock Valley Bible Church be a place where we (1) love God and (2) love others.

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