

# THE GREATEST LOVE

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**MATTHEW 22:34-46**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**OCTOBER 26, 2014/19<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

One commentator on this week's lectionary texts said that he felt sorry for the other texts that had to "compete" with this one from Matthew for preacher's attention. ☺

What text would have a chance when placed aside these famous words from Jesus—these words that sum up *all of the law and prophets*, these words that Jesus describe as the *greatest* commandment, the sum total of what we owe God and others?

And love is such an *attractive* topic to talk about for the preacher. In a world where there is so much division and hostility along so many different lines and categories, in a world where hate seems to dominate the headlines, as we have seen in our nation's capital this week, in a world where Christians squabble about this, that and the other thing, who wouldn't seize upon the opportunity to preach upon love?!

Well, like many other preachers today, I gratefully seized upon the opportunity. And, like many other preachers today I imagine, I discovered, again, that love is a topic of such depth.

Let's remind ourselves of our context.

We are in the midst of an ongoing dialogue/confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel (Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians). In Matthew's gospel, this series of confrontations and tests comes after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (which we celebrate on Palm Sunday), after Jesus' cleansing of the temple (his prophetic judgment against the corruption of Israel's leaders who had turned God's house into a religious marketplace rather than a house of prayer) and before, obviously, his arrest and crucifixion.

So these are pretty tense times. This is where the narrative of Matthew's gospel begins to come to a head.

By this point in the narrative, where we've seen all these interrogations of Jesus, all these attempts to trip him up and trick him, all these misguided efforts to get Jesus to publicly indict himself and get in trouble, we can be forgiven for wanting to say to the Pharisees and religious leaders: *You know what, you should probably just give up and stop asking Jesus questions... This isn't going to end well for you.*

We can also, perhaps, be forgiven for feeling somewhat like little kids standing behind the big brother or the smart kid at the front of the class who has all the answers. We smirk and we snicker at these Pharisees who thought that being a good religious person, a good Jew, a faithful and obedient follower of God, that it involved all these arcane rules and distinctions...

Those Pharisees, they're so preoccupied with drawing the boundaries around "the people of God" and policing the borders and defining rules and enforcing the following of the rules. This is the air that they breathed, we think!

And here's Jesus, putting them in their place, here's Jesus cutting through all of that with the simple command to love God and love your neighbour.

And we think, "Ah, those silly Pharisees who thought it was all about rules. How wonderful that Jesus shows them that it's really all about love!"

And we can feel pretty proud of our exalted understanding... for a second. But I think that if we do this, we make an error.

Our default assumption is to contrast "rules" and "love" and to think that the Pharisees busied themselves with all of these useless things, and really all they needed to do was to be loving people

That *sounds* good. Until we actually stop and think about what this means.

"Love," for us, can sometimes become a kind of generic term where we think, *Oh, thank God that it's not about all those rules. All I have to do is love! What a relief!*

We can at times imagine that "love" is a kind of vague, emotional sentiment towards God and others, where if we feel generally well-disposed toward God, and if we feel generally well-disposed to our fellow human beings, and we think nice thoughts about them, and we give a bit of our time and our money to both God and our neighbours, then we're following Jesus' commands, we're on the right track.

But let's pause and just look, for a second, at what Jesus is actually asking us to do here.

Because I think that if we do this, we will soon discover that Jesus is not letting us off the hook here. He's not saying, *Don't worry about any of those dusty old rules any more, just try to be a nice person.*

This isn't at all what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is, as always, pushing the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Israel, and *all of us who hear his words*, far beyond a lifeless, obligatory checklist of religious "do's" and "don't's." He is in fact pushing them (and us!) into the deepest parts of who they are and what they believe about God, and challenging them to stop "playing religion" and to give *all of themselves* to God and to each other.

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Let's look at the words Jesus uses when he describes what our love for God ought to look like.

Love the Lord your God with all your...

**Heart** (καρδία; kardiá)

- Denotes the center of all *spiritual* life and all *physical* life
- Associated with "vigour"
- Refers to the fountain of all desires, appetites, purposes, and endeavours—all of your deepest desires, longings, hungers and hopes
- *LOVE GOD WITH THIS PART OF YOURSELF*

**Soul** (ψυχή; psuche)

- Breath of life
- Vital force which animates the body
- Seat of feelings, desires, affections, aversions
- One's essence (the "you" that makes you "you")
- *LOVE GOD WITH THIS PART OF YOURSELF*

**Mind** (διανοία; dianoia)

- Faculty of understanding
- Way of thinking
- *LOVE GOD WITH THIS PART OF YOURSELF*

Now, there's obviously some overlap in the how these words were used and what they meant, particularly between the Greek words for "heart" and "soul."

But the big picture here is obvious enough.

*Love God with all of who you are. Love God with the deepest and best parts of who you are. Hold nothing back.*

This is far more challenging than following rules. Rules are pretty easy, actually, when compared with this kind of an all-of-life-encompassing love.

Do we love God like this?

Do we stretch our minds toward understanding who God is and what God has done?

Do we bring all of who we are—emotions, desires, affections, aversions, our energy and ambitions, our purposes and endeavours—before God and say, *All of this belongs to you. You are the source of everything good that I want, everything that I can possibly hope for, the source of who I am and what I am destined to be?*

Loving God turns out to be about more—*much* more—that being generally well-disposed and thinking nice thoughts!

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And the second is like it: *Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Here, again, it is easy to slide into easy sentimentality and think that Jesus is asking us to simply be more or less decent people.

But love of neighbour is costly. We need only read the Parable of the Good Samaritan for one example of what Jesus has in mind here. Love of neighbour, in this famous story, involved binding up the wounds of and caring for an enemy.

I think of the news reports we saw this week from Cold Lake, AB. In response to the shootings on Parliament Hill earlier this week, some people defaced a mosque in this town, spraying it full of graffiti that said "Go Home!"

Not long after, citizens of the town began showing up with cleaning supplies and began to scrub off these messages of ignorance and rejection.<sup>1</sup>

Some of these people may have been Muslims. Most, I suspect, were not. It was a wonderful example of what it looks like to love your neighbour.

I'm sure we could think of examples closer to home, in our own lives. Who is it that God may have placed in your life, in your path? Who is in need of these kinds of self-denying, other-focused acts of concrete love?

Maybe it's someone in your school or workplace. Maybe it's someone in your own family!

**It could be anyone, really, because there is nobody who falls outside this command. Jesus doesn't really give us a "people I don't have to love" category.**

Again, we see that the command to love pushes us farther and deeper than the mere observance of rules and regulations.

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It will not do to imagine that love is nice and safe and comfortable or that it gives us a kind of "get out of jail free" card where we don't have to think about all those messy doctrines and all the things that are really hard to wrap our minds around when it comes to faith, all the metaphysical beliefs that we struggle to understand, all the hard questions about theology and the many things that Christians find to fight about.

The command to love does cut through a lot of the theological mumbo jumbo. It does refocus and sharpen our central calling as human beings. But it's a very specific kind of love that we are called to, and a very specific God.

**It is a love and a God that we see most clearly, of course, a few days *after* this conversation with the Pharisees with Jesus hanging on a Roman cross, freely giving himself away for love's sake.**

As always, Jesus not only *tells* us what to do, but he *shows* us how to do it, *demonstrates* what it looks like.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/go-home-sprayed-on-exterior-of-mosque-in-cold-lake-alta-1.2811968?cmp=fbtl&utm\\_content=bufferd28aa&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/go-home-sprayed-on-exterior-of-mosque-in-cold-lake-alta-1.2811968?cmp=fbtl&utm_content=bufferd28aa&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

*This* is what it looks like to truly love God and neighbour.

We are not all called to die on Roman crosses for the sins of the world, of course. That was a one-time job!

But we *are* called to have the same mind as was in Christ Jesus, as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2:5.

**We are called to lives of humble, sacrificial, obedient love. This is who we are because this is the one who as called us and the one to whom we belong.**

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I want to close with a final word on this command to love.

On the one hand, this all sounds so good. On the other hand, we know that it isn't easy.

Perhaps we've tried and failed and tried again to love like this.

One of the readings in my prayer-book this morning was from 1 Peter 4. I paused on a familiar passage:

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.*

If your week has been anything like mine, you have quite likely sinned and been sinned against. Not a multitude of sins, perhaps, nor even terribly grievous ones, but enough to cause a bit of irritation, regret, pain, confusion to accumulate.

This is how our days go.

And if you're anything like me, your default response might be to brood a little, to marinate in perceived grievances, to self-flagellate over mistakes and missteps, and to generally give the strong impression that human weakness, frailty, cowardice and stupidity win the day. Again.

And then we hear these words from Scripture: *Love covers a multitude of sins.*

It's interesting to reflect upon what it might mean for sins to be "covered." It doesn't mean "atoned for"—we have other words and metaphors for that. Not "forgotten" or "judged" or "paid for" or any of these well-rehearsed biblical terms. Those are all

important aspects of how God deals with human sin, but I don't think they communicate what Peter has in mind here. I think he might have had something else in view.

*Love covers a multitude of sins.*

In pondering this one sentence, particularly in the context of Jesus' words about the centrality of love, a few images have come to mind.

I think of love as a tent or a canopy that stretches out over all our brokenness, gently shielding and protecting we who don't often understand why we do the things that we do from the harsh effects of our mistakes on others and ourselves.

Or a veil that blocks our sin from full view, keeping it at least partially hidden, forcing it into the background with simple acts of love.

Or an umbrella, held up in the face of the storm.

Or... pick your metaphor.

Love covers up the mess that we leave in our wake.

And, again, we're talking about squishy, mushy, emotion-drenched love here, either. We are here in the realm of costly love. Love that lays aside its rights, love that pours goodness and kindness into difficult situations, love that chooses to see the best in others, even when they are at their most unlovely, love that keeps no record of wrongs, always perseveres, rejoices in truth. Love that forgives even (or especially) when forgiveness isn't deserved.

*This*, I think, is the love that covers a multitude of sins, preserving and protecting what is good, hiding what is ugly from view, repairing the damage that we do to ourselves and to others.

*This*, I think, is the kind of love Jesus is pushing the Pharisees toward, pushing *us* toward.

Maybe what Peter is reminding us of in this passage is that the best way to hide our sin is to stubbornly persist in loving God and loving each other.

**Maybe the best way to cover up our sins and our shortcomings, our inability to consistently love as we ought to is simply to keep trying, to keep leaning in love's**

**direction. To keep going back to God, heart, soul, and mind and saying, “I want to love you and others as I ought to! Form the character of Christ in me!”**

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So.

Keep leaning in love’s direction.

Love God. With *all* of who you are.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

On these two wonderfully simple, complex, difficult, life-giving, freedom-giving commands hang all the law and all the prophets...

All the human attempts to please God with religion find their place right here.

May God help us to be people who love.

Amen.

