**April 28, 2024 Matthew 22:35-40, 2 Cor 5:20**

***A Serving Community***

**Scripture:**

*Matthew 22:35-40 NIV (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."*

*2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

**Notes:**

1. **What is the purpose of the church?** 
   1. We are to be ***ambassadors*** of Christ.
      1. *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV*
   2. Ambassadors for Christ, represent his ***desire*** to ***reconcile*** the world to God.
   3. This is the commission Jesus gave his ***disciples***.
   4. The church is meant to be on ***offense***, not ***defense***; to be ***active***: “go out,” not “sit in.”
2. The Greatest ***Commandments*** give us the heart behind all we do in carrying out the Great ***Commission***.
   * 1. *One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:35-40*
   1. ***Love*** God with everything you have.
      1. *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* *Deuteronomy 6*
   2. The Second Commandment is a call to ***evangelism***!
   3. Love ***God***, love ***people***.
      1. *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:40*
   4. The entire Law of Moses and all the writings of the Prophets ***depends*** *on* these two commandments.
      1. *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 1 John 4:20*
3. How can we be a ***neighbor*** who shows love?
   1. “Who are we being a ***neighbor*** to?”
   2. Who are we ***engaging*** in our community showing love and concern as much as we care about our own ***needs***?
4. We are called to ***go*** and ***reconcile*** the world to God.
   1. When we bless our ***community***, we fulfill our call to be ambassadors for Christ,
   2. As ambassadors for Christ, how are we, being a ***neighbor*** to our ***community***?”
   3. What ***needs*** do you personally see around this community and in your world?

**Script:**

Have you ever felt lost or out of place? Jan and I returned from Disney world last Sunday. We had a wonderful time away. I enjoyed the sites, the shows, and even the few rides we shared. Each day we would walk around the parks looking for the employees in bright green shirts, these are the people who take your pictures and upload them so you can download them for a fee. Anyway, each day, Jan would have a list of shows and events, each were occurring in the park that we were visiting, and she would like to have seen these events and shows. So, we would begin searching for the right location, we even had the app with the map and walking directions on it. Yet we almost always, with a couple of exceptions, felt as if we were not in the right place.

Think about a time when you visited a strange or unfamiliar place. Maybe you had unclear directions on how to get there, or were not informed where to go once you did get there and you may have been too embarrassed to ask for directions or you didn’t have anyone to ask. Maybe you just stood there and looked around, trying not to look stupid. Think about the last time you worshiped in an unfamiliar church or tradition. Perhaps you felt lost in the service. Maybe you were surprised when everyone knelt at the same time or stood up at the same time, or recited a liturgy from memory together. We don’t like to be put on the spot. We don’t like to pointed out in a crowd and questioned concerning some matter, but in our passage today, somebody does this to Jesus; not to be informed but to challenge his knowledge.

Being new to an environment can bring much anxiety. You never know what will be required of you or what will happen in that new place. Think about what happens when someone new visits our church. Think about the anxiety that may produce. If we were to go out into our community and take a survey of what our community members thought about what goes on in our church, what do you think they would say? Would they think we are a group of loving people who come together each week to love anyone and everyone? That is what our website states. Yet I recently heard we were judgmental, and quick to condemn. Would they think we are like a social club listening to a boring lecture? There are probably many misconceptions about what we do here each week. We may know what we do and why we do it (or maybe we don’t?) but what do outsiders think?

One idea outsiders tend to have of many churches is that we are nothing more than a self-serving “holy huddle” a bunch of people trying to live ethically and getting together each week for a pep talk, much like when a football team huddles together. More skeptical folks may think we are all brainwashed dummies, or hypocrites with holier-than-thou attitudes. They may think we get together to judge others and discuss how bad the world is. I wonder how many of them think of us as a group of people meeting together to worship God, encourage and instruct one another, and think of ways to be good neighbors to others. Do they think of us more as a serving community, or as a *self*-serving community? And what about our own perceptions? Do we consider ourselves to be a neighbor-loving group or a self-serving holy huddle?

**What is the purpose of the church?** In order to answer questions about the purpose of the church, we need to go back to the original teachings of Jesus and the early church to recalibrate the mission of the church and remind ourselves what believers are supposed to be doing inside *and* outside the church gathering or building. The apostle Paul was one of the great early church leaders, and he said we are to be ambassadors of Christ, ambassadors who represent Jesus to the world. Read with me from Paul’s second letter to the church in Corinth. *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV*

As ambassadors for Christ, we are representing his desire to reconcile the world to God. **This is the commission Jesus gave his disciples before he left them and ascended into heaven.** The Great Commission, as it is traditionally called, was the final instruction of Jesus to his followers as recorded by all three synoptic Gospels (which means Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The followers of Jesus were commissioned to go and make disciples, proclaiming the message of salvation to the whole world beginning in Jerusalem. In other words, to return to our football metaphor, the church is meant to be on offense, not defense. The church is supposed to be active: “go out,” not “sit in.” The Great Commission gives the church clear direction, but a passage that isn’t often considered is what we often call the Greatest Commandments.

**The Greatest Commandments give us the heart behind all we do in carrying out the Great Commission.** They are called the Greatest Commandments because Jesus called them that. If Jesus labeled them that way, then it is logical for us, as his followers, to ensure we understand and follow them carefully. Last week, we began our study of the Luke 10 passage where Jesus discussed the two Greatest Commandments. In that passage, he told the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the importance of the second-greatest commandment. Today, we will look at the other passage that records Jesus talking about the Greatest Commandments, Matthew 22:35–40.

In both passages, Jesus was asked similar trick questions from Pharisees. These Pharisees were identified as experts in the Law of Moses. They wanted to test Jesus to try to catch him in some kind of mistake so they could discredit him as a false prophet. The Pharisees were suspicious of Jesus because he was not one of their group, and they couldn’t understand why he knew so much about God and the Hebrew Scriptures. They were also jealous of his popularity, which shifted the limelight away from them. Matthew recorded this exchange with the Pharisees in chapter 22 of his Gospel:

*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

In this exchange with the Pharisee, Jesus identified the two Great Commandments. The first can be summarized as love God with everything you have. As we learned last week, that command is a quote from Deuteronomy 6:5, “*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* Jesus was the one who prioritized this as the “first and greatest commandment.” He prioritized love for God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Whatever we do in our lives and in our churches, loving God with everything that is in us should be our topmost priority. We should evaluate all our actions and attitudes by this rule of life. It should guide everything we do as a church, both when we gather and when we scatter.

Our worship should be about loving God with everything in us. Our teaching should be about how to love God with everything in us. Our programs and activities should be measured by the Greatest Commandment. Our evangelism should be motivated by our love for God. Since we love him supremely, we want to obey his Great Commission! Most of us can probably understand that the purpose of the church should revolve around loving God supremely. That makes sense. But how about the place of the second Great Commandment? How should it be factored into what we do? How should it be prioritized? The theologian Leon Morris wrote in his commentary on Matthew: “Jesus was asked for but one commandment, but he goes further and adds *‘a second’* that, he says, ‘*is like it*.’ Wholehearted love for God means coming in some measure to see other people as God sees them and all people as the objects of God’s love. Therefore, anyone who truly loves God with all [their] being must and will love others.”

The Second Commandment is a call to evangelism! To love our neighbor means loving them enough to pray for their salvation and do everything possible to see them come to Christ. When introducing the second Great Commandment, Jesus said, “The second is like it” meaning like the first. But in what way is it like the first? Bible scholars have explored the implications of this designation, and they generally agree that Jesus was teaching that these two commandments belong together. The word “second” was meant to separate them in terms of order but not in terms of importance. They are both equally important.

First, we must love God before we can love our neighbor. God is love. God originates love. God produces love. Therefore, it logically follows that we must first love God so we have the ability and the motivation to love people created in God’s image. In this way, they are bound together: Love God, love people. That simplifies the two Greatest Commandments and becomes a guiding principle for the church. Jesus elevated the importance of these two commandments further in verse 40 of Matthew 22: *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* Wow! Did you get that? The entire Law of Moses and all the writings of the Prophets *depend on* these two commandments. It’s like your clothes closet at home. It likely has a pole that runs the entire length of the closet. How many of you have a lot of clothes hanging on that pole? How many of you are sitting next to someone who has a lot of clothes hanging on their closet pole? All the weight of those clothes is hanging on that single pole. If that pole breaks, everything will fall!

Jesus is saying the entire weight of all the Old Testament laws and Prophets is hanging on the same pole. That pole is the two Greatest Commandments that are inextricably bound together and need to be considered together. The importance of the two Greatest Commandments can be seen in the arrangement of the Ten Commandments. The first table hangs on “Love God,” while the second table hangs on “Love people.” Love God *and* love people. When we love God supremely, we will love what he loves, and God loves all people! The apostle John puts it very bluntly. Listen to what 1 John 4:20 says: *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.* Therefore, we as individuals *and* we as the church must take both of the Greatest Commandments seriously if we are going to be faithful ambassadors for Christ. Ironically, it seems easier to love God than to love people. Would you agree? Loving people is messier and more complicated. God always deserves our love, yet people sometimes do not appreciate or deserve our love.

**The question we are asking in this sermon series is, How can we be a neighbor who shows love, as the Second Great Commandment demands?** Jesus answered that question by telling the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. Last week we learned that, after telling that story, Jesus asked the Pharisee an unexpected question. Jesus did not answer the Pharisee’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus instead asked the Pharisee a different question, “Who was a neighbor to the needy man?” That is a critically important distinction that is often overlooked.

The “Who is my neighbor?” question can easily be twisted and rationalized to eliminate undesirable or inconvenient people. You and I can define neighbors as only those living on either side of our home, or maybe directly across the street. We might define only the people in our cul-de-sac or only the people on our street. But the person across the city or in another county? No! They are not our neighbors. Or we might be tempted to consider our neighbors to be only those who look like us, believe like us, act like us. And everyone who doesn’t, isn’t a neighbor.

Jesus knew what he was doing when he asked the right question, “Who was being a neighbor to the needy man?” That is the question we should be asking ourselves. Not “Who is our neighbor?” but “Who are we being a neighbor to?” Who is our church being a neighbor to? We must challenge ourselves in “Blessing our Community” to ask ourselves the right question: Who are we being neighbors to? Who are we engaging in our community to be a neighbor and show love and concern about their needs as much as we care about our own needs? As ambassadors for Christ, we are called to go and reconcile the world to God. That’s our mission. However, as we do our mission, we are to love God and love people. When we bless our community, we are fulfilling our call to be ambassadors for Christ, attempting to reconcile the world to God by showing neighbor love as the second Great Commandment God calls us to do.

We are asking ourselves the right question, “How are we, as ambassadors for Christ, being a neighbor to our community?” Unchurched people outside these walls will not walk through those doors next week just because we open them. Being an ambassador for Christ means getting outside these walls. It requires *engaging* the needs we find in our community, like the Good Samaritan engaged in the needs of the robbery victim.What needs do you personally see around this community and in your world? Who can you be a neighbor to? How are we as a church going to respond to the needs we see in our community?