

Bible Passage**Matthew 22:37-39**

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Outline**1. The Source of Love****a. Christian Love vs. Worldly Love**

- i. Discuss the contrast between the world's inward-focused, self-gratifying concept of love and the sacrificial, outward-looking love exemplified by Jesus.
- ii. Illustrate how modern society, particularly through technology, can distort our understanding of love.

b. The Samaritan's Example

- i. Analyze the Parable of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate how love acts selflessly and inclusively.
- ii. Emphasize the Samaritan's actions as a model of Christ-like compassion and mercy, transcending societal norms and personal prejudices.

2. Beyond Self-Love**a. Redefining Self-Love in Christ**

- i. Challenge the common narrative of self-love that prioritizes personal desires and fulfillment.
- ii. Present the Christian perspective of self-love: recognizing one's worth and identity in God's eyes, leading to genuine love for others.

b. Mercy Over Self-Interest

- i. Contrast the concepts of charity (often self-serving) and mercy (rooted in God's love).
- ii. Encourage the congregation to practice mercy in their daily lives, reflecting God's love through acts of kindness, forgiveness, and support for those in need.

3. Living the Commandments

a. Faith and Works in Harmony

- i. Discuss how genuine faith in God's mercy naturally compels us to merciful actions.
- ii. Address the danger of a faith that doesn't translate into acts of mercy, questioning its authenticity.

b. B. Worship as a Catalyst for Mercy

- i. Highlight the role of worship and communion with God in strengthening our ability to show mercy.
- ii. Encourage the congregation to carry the spirit of worship beyond church services into everyday life, allowing it to transform their interactions and relationships.

Notes

As we step into 2024, it's a time of reflection and forward-thinking, especially concerning our spiritual and communal responsibilities. This year brings a renewed focus on the Great Commission – the Christian mandate to spread the faith and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, before diving into the acts of commission, it's essential to understand the foundation of this mission: the Great Commandments and the true definition of love as taught by Jesus. Central to this vision is the concept of love – not as the world often perceives it, but as defined by Jesus. Love, in this context, is twofold: loving God and loving others. This simple yet profound understanding transcends mere affection or personal gain. It's about a sacrificial, giving nature that seeks the good of others and honors God.

Our modern, technology-driven society often turns love inward, focusing on self-gratification and personal truth. This inward turn is evident in how we consume media and how algorithms cater to our preferences, creating an echo chamber that reinforces our views. While technology itself isn't inherently bad, its impact on our understanding of love and truth can be problematic. The current cultural interpretation of love often revolves around personal fulfillment and agreement with one's views. This self-centered approach contrasts sharply with the biblical concept of love, which is outward-looking and sacrificial. True love, as exemplified by Jesus, isn't about receiving but

giving – giving of oneself for the benefit of others and in obedience to God.

The mission for 2024, therefore, is to break free from the self-centered spiral and embrace a life of outward love and service. This involves loving others not for their agreement with our personal truths but for their inherent value as God's creation. It's a call to serve, to reach out, and to prioritize the needs and well-being of others over our own desires. This vision of love brings a transformative power that alters the course of our lives. Instead of a life spiraling inward towards self and eventual emptiness, it becomes an outward journey of growth, service, and endless possibilities. This is the essence of eternal life – a life marked not by self-centered goals but by a limitless capacity to love and serve others in God's name. The parable tells of a priest and a Levite who, upon encountering a wounded man on the road, chose to pass by without helping. In contrast, a Samaritan, who was considered an outsider and of lower status, stopped to help the injured man. He tended to his wounds, took him to an inn, and paid for his care, demonstrating profound compassion and mercy.

This narrative leads us to a crucial distinction between charity and mercy. Charity often stems from our resources and can, at times, be self-serving, feeding into our desire to feel good about our actions. Mercy, however, is rooted in a deeper understanding of God's love and grace. It's about recognizing the intrinsic value of every individual as God's creation and extending kindness without expecting anything in return. The parable also addresses the question, "Who is

my neighbor?" It challenges us to expand our view beyond those who share our background, beliefs, or status. Our neighbor is anyone in need, regardless of their identity. The Samaritan's actions exemplify this broader, inclusive understanding of neighborly love and mercy.

The act of mercy is not about the magnitude of what we give but the heart from which we give it. It's a reflection of the infinite mercy God has shown us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we show mercy, we are not just performing a good deed; we are mirroring the love and forgiveness that God extends to us. In light of this understanding, our daily lives should be marked by acts of mercy. Whether it's offering help to a stranger, forgiving someone who has wronged us, or extending kindness in the face of hostility, these acts of mercy are powerful demonstrations of God's love working through us.

The world often encourages us to listen to our "inner truth," advocating for a self-centered approach to life. However, as Christians, we are called to embrace a higher truth – the truth of Christ's love. This love challenges us to put aside our own interests and opinions in favor of humility and consideration for others. Self-love, as commonly perceived, emphasizes prioritizing one's own needs and desires. However, in the context of Christian teachings, true self-love is understanding and accepting God's immense love for us. It's not about inflating our ego but about recognizing our worth in God's eyes, which in turn empowers us to love others more genuinely.

The essence of Christian living is not just about performing charitable acts but about demonstrating genuine mercy. Mercy goes beyond mere acts of kindness; it is a heartfelt response to God's grace. When we understand and embrace the mercy God has shown us, we are moved to extend that same mercy to others, regardless of their circumstances. Our faith is not just a belief system but a call to action. It compels us to show mercy and kindness to those around us. If our faith does not translate into merciful actions, it calls into question the authenticity of our belief in God's mercy. True faith in God's mercy should naturally lead to a life marked by mercy towards others. Worship and communion with God aren't just rituals; they are sources of spiritual strength and perspective. In worship, we are reminded of God's love and mercy towards us, which fuels our ability to show mercy to others. This worshipful attitude should extend beyond church services into our everyday interactions, transforming how we view and treat those around us.