

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO IN A PANDEMIC

An exposition of Matthew 22:34-40
at West Hills San Jose on May 31, 2020

PASTORAL PRAYER: Holy holy holy, is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of your glory. You are the beginning and the end, the firstborn of all creation, in you all things live and move and have their being. Lord Jesus you are Him who is and who was and who is to come, the ruler of kings on earth, who has freed us from our sins by your blood. Hallowed be your name.

Lord we come bearing the sins of the earth. We lay down at your feet all of our fears, frustrations, impatience, exhaustion, exasperation, sadness and anxiety about sheltering in place. Lord all of us are feeling the pain of being forced apart, all of us are feeling the weight of being told to stay in our house, Many of us are feeling lonely, or isolated, or increasingly frustrated, and I pray for us Lord that we would not sin in our impatience. I pray that we would not grow bitter or ungrateful for the many blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. I pray that our hearts and our minds would make their ways up to heaven, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. I pray that we would take our yoke upon ourselves, for your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

Lord I pray for our country, for our leaders at the Federal and state and county levels, would you grant them wisdom, justice and righteousness Lord in the reopening of our country. Would you move in their hearts and lead us to the place where churches can reopen. I also pray for church leaders in the bay area, would you grant us wisdom and discernment in how to reopen safely and carefully in a way that protects our more vulnerable neighbors.

Father, our hearts are burdened by the death of George Floyd, the violence of recent protests, and the ongoing reality of police brutality. Lord we pray that you would deliver the earth from the power of sin. I pray that you would protect our congregation and our city from believing the lie that vengeance is ours we should repay, that repaying evil with evil is a productive way forward or that anger and rage at sinners, or the wrath of man will produce the righteousness of God. I pray that we would put our faith in Christ, and not allow ourselves to be overcome by evil, but that we would overcome evil with good. That we would be led to embrace the Christ-honoring avenues for effecting change and pursue those as each feels led. I also would ask Lord, that you help us to be self-aware. Self-aware of our hearts Lord. That we would not be found guilty of wanting to kneel on the neck of those kneel on necks. Help us to take the plank out of our own eye, as we seek to help others take the splinter out of their own. But even more than that I ask that you would lead us to pray...that the prince of peace would take up residence in every heart, and that His kingdom would come upon the earth. Now I pray for our time together in the Word. Would you open the eyes of our hearts to hear the Lord Jesus this morning. And I ask this in his precious name, amen.

PROBLEM: HAPPY PENTECOST. The Spirit has reversed the curse of Babel, such that I can hear someone singing with Joy to Christ in another language and I can understand them, even without understanding their words. The Spirit is giving us the power to hear and understand one another in light of what God has done in Christ...such that He creates the church, which creates the context for the most incredible thing of all. God sent Christ into the World and the Father and

Son sent the Spirit into the world to manifest something in us, to create a kingdom where something reigns. The most important thing. And we are going to talk about it this morning.

As things begin moving back towards normal, we are probably going to be asked to do some uncomfortable things. We are probably going to have to spend an inordinate amount of money bringing our facility into compliance with the county health order. We are probably going to be asked to wear masks...we won't be able to hug each other, and we are going to be asked to come together for worship, while staying 6 feet apart.

And as we are asked to do that...some of you are going to think to yourself...I'm really glad we are doing all of this. Otherwise I wouldn't feel safe to meet. Others of you will think to yourself...this is such a waste of time and money and energy. Why are we jumping through all these hoops over a virus that has proven to not even be that dangerous. And the rest of you will probably exist somewhere in the middle of those two views. And so I need to talk to you all about this this morning, as one of your elders, and as someone whose primary concern for each and everyone one of you, is your eternal soul. And as I thought about this message all week, I just bathed my mind with the Word of God and asked the Lord to show me what His will is for our church. And the more I read and prayed and read and prayed...the more clear and consistent and precise God's will became to my mind and heart. So this morning, I want to talk to you about the most important thing a church needs to do when recovering from a pandemic, are you read?

MAIN POINT: The most important thing to do is love, so take up your cross and love each other.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: So we are taking a break from our sermon series in Exodus today to talk about the heart of God for our church and how Pentecost plays into all of that. Please open your bibles to Matthew 22. Today's message comes from something Jesus taught many times and said in multiple ways during His ministry and so in some ways, the context of our passage isn't as important as it's content. What we are about to read was the consistent teaching of Christ across the gospels, and was internalized and restated by the apostles over the course of the remaining century. So let's now humble our minds and open our hearts for the reading of God's Word:

READING: Matthew 22:34–40 [34] But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. [35] And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. [36] “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” [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. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (ESV)

PRAYER: Lord please speak to us, speak to our hearts through the Holy Spirit, that we might be changed. Amen.

ROAD MAP: 1.) What the most important things is, 2.) Why this is the most important thing, 3.) How this fleshes out as we reopen the church.

WHAT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS

1. So looking down at our text, Christ is asked the question that I was asking all week. Lord what is most important? What is your greatest concern for your people? How should we order our priorities as we think about coming together as a community again. Teacher... which is the greatest commandment in the law?
 1. The ESV says which is the “great” commandment but it means, which is the greatest commandment. And without blinking, without beating around the bush or laying out any qualifications he said easy: “You shall love YAHWEH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”
 2. Question: how many things are you commanded to love with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind? One. You were created to primarily glorify and enjoy ONE THING in the universe, God Himself.
 3. If you are listening to this and you are not familiar with what the bible teaches about this...this point can be easily misunderstood. You can read this and go...what’s the deal with God commanding people to love Him? That’s a weird thing to command. And you would be right if God was a human like me. That would be a weird thing for a person to command another person to do.
 4. But that is a radical misunderstanding of what is going on here. What is actually going on is that God designed our hearts and minds and souls to be most full, most satisfied most content when we are loving Him. The happiest a human being can be, is when they are filled with love for God, that is how we were constructed to function. So when God tells us to do that...God is saying that for you. And you know what...even if you aren’t a Christian, there is a part of you that’s deep down, that you probably never show to anyone else, can see that this is true.
 5. Why is it that when something really good happens, you find yourself wanting to thank someone or something. Or attribute it to some or something? You want to thank God but you have been talking yourself out of it for a long time. God’s Word says...why would you keep talking yourself out of it. I designed you to respond this way. I built your heart in such a way that when something good happens, it is supposed to lead you beyond that thing into relationship with your maker...such that the good thing becomes a springboard to exceeding joy in relationship, in fellowship with your maker.
2. Coming back to our text, the most important thing in fact for us to do, the greatest commandment is that we love God. But not only that we love Him, but that we love Him with all of ourselves. With all our heart, with all our soul and all our mind. Of course the human person isn’t divisible into parts...the heart and soul and mind aren’t discreet parts of a human being. Instead this is descriptive of the human beings in total. There is no secular/sacred divide in the Christian life. There was never meant to be a divide between my public life and my private religious life. The people who argue that have never thought seriously about the greatest commandment.

1. If we are going to love God with all of ourselves than we begin by thinking through how to express our love for God in all that we do. How could we not? If our primary love and allegiance is to God, than that love and allegiance is going to be the primary thing that informs how we respond to the rest of the world.
3. And the very first way our love for God touches life on earth...is how we treat other people. The greatest commandment in verse 37 is to love God with all our being, but the second is just like it, verse 38 you are to love your neighbor as yourself.
 1. That is a truly remarkable thing to say. Love your neighbor as if you were him or her. Think about how you worry about your own personal affairs and embrace that same radical concern for your neighbor. That two letter word "AS" as yourself...is one of the biggest and most pregnant words in your bible.
 2. In it, we are taught to wonder, if I were them, how would I want to be served and blessed or treated? If I were in their shoes, what would be the most loving thing that someone could do for me? And that is how I should treat them. I should love them as if they were me. And the next question that I hope your heart is asking is "How on earth...can a human being do that?"
 3. I struggle with trying to do that for my wife and all four of my children, let alone my brothers, my mother, my in-laws, my staff, my elders, the members of this church, the network of local pastors I am in relationship with, all the friends I grew up with that I'm still in contact with, my extended family on both sides, others I am in regular contact with who don't fit into any of those categories...what would it possibly look like to love all of those neighbors I listed above, along with my actual physical neighbors in my city?
 4. How could anyone, how could even a hyper-extreme extrovert hope to literally fulfill this commandment to love all your neighbors as if they were your very self? And I think the answer is...by obeying commandment number 1.
 5. If you set your heart, your mind and your soul to love God...the first thing you begin to embrace is that you are not Him. He is eternal, He is all powerful, He never slumbers nor sleeps, He knows everything, sees everything, understands everything....and you don't. And as you love Him, and pray to Him, and interact with him about all the things that you don't know, or see or understand you begin to grow in your appreciation of that difference between the two of you.
 6. And as you grow in your appreciation of that difference, you begin to become realistic about how much your love can and can't change the lives of the people around you. You begin to recognize that you are a creature of the Creator. Not the creator Himself, and that brings a tremendous amount of freedom. And that freedom releases you to radical love.
 7. It is a freedom that accepts that I can't change you, but I can love you. I can't save you but I can help you. I can't deliver you from the power of your sins, but I can keep pointing you over and over and over to where deliverance is found. And even more than that...I can pray for you. I can draw near to the God I love with your concerns on my heart, and lay them before the throne of Grace and ask the all-powerful God to help.
 8. In other words, loving your neighbor as yourself doesn't mean never sleeping again and laboring for the rest of your life in endless toil for all the concerns of all the people you

know. I think it is adopting a posture of willingness to help, willingness to engage, of seeking to bless, seeking to serve, seeking to understand, desiring to listen, insofar as you are able for the welfare of your neighbors body and soul.

9. And a natural follow up question is: how far is far enough? How much neighborly concern is a God pleasing neighborly concern? Where is the line between a Godward desire to love my neighbor as myself, and an idolatrous desire to save as if I am God? I think the answer is: that is discerned by prayer, in communion with God and with being honest with yourself.
4. Sometimes the answer is die to yourself and engage. Sometimes the answer is you need to pull back and focus on your more immediate relationships because they are in trouble. Sometimes the answer is you need to rest. Sometimes the answer is you need to take up your cross and serve. All of these things are biblical values and all these things have a place and a time. My exhortation to you would be to bring these questions to God in prayer, and trust Him to lead you in paths of righteousness by His Word.
5. But this is what the most important thing is. Love. Letting our love for God fill our hearts and out of that fullness turning and loving each other as ourselves. So now that we have seen what the most important thing is, let's turn our attention to why this is the most important thing...

WHY THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT

1. Look back down at Mt 22:40 Jesus our Lord says ON THESE two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. That word depends means to hang, to rest upon. To be held up by. And it's important to see what Jesus says there...it's not the law and the prophets that hold up love...it's love that holds up the law and the prophets.
2. If God did not desire that we love Him and love each other...there would no law and no prophets. The Law and the prophets were given by God in order to begin manifesting the reality of love in the midst of the earth. God desires that the earth would be a world of love, as it is in heaven. Love is the fountain from which the law and the prophets flow. But not only that, in Romans 13 Paul tells us that love is the fulfillment of the law...it's not only the origin of the law and the prophets but also their fulfillment, the manifestation of what they command.
 1. Love is the fountain, the wellspring at the highpoint of the earth...love is the river and the stream flowing down into the plane and love is the ocean into which the Christian life is ultimately leading. Love is not God, but God is love and love for God and others is the driving motivation of redemption. Love is the reason this church exists...and love is what will keep us and lead us to the throne of God.
 2. In 1 John 4, the apostle John tells us that this is how we know we love God, that we love one another. You can't do the 1st commandment without doing the second commandment. And if you are doing the 1st commandment YOU WILL do the second commandment. It is one of John's sign post, marking the way, telling you that you are saved.
 3. So love is not only the most important command, but it is also one of the central benchmarks of being able to tell whether or not you are a Christian.

3. But here is where God really impressed upon my soul how important this was as it relates to reopening the church and the various preferences and opinions we all have about levels of necessary precaution. In Revelation 2, God addresses the church of Ephesus and He says something that sent a tingle down my spine.
 1. “Revelation 2:1–7 [1] “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.
 2. [2] “‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. [4] **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.** [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. [6] Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. [7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’ (ESV)
4. Jesus Christ speaks to a church that is doctrinally sound, they are discerning, they are enduring persecution and they are working hard to minister to one another. Jesus only has one bone to pick with them. They have abandoned the love they had at first. They are doing the right things, but they are not doing it with a heart of love. And then verse 5...repent...If not I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from it’s place, unless you repent.
 1. Listen to me...Jesus says, if you don’t love each other you cease to be a church. I will come and take your lamp stand. That means you will no longer be part of the light that is coming into the world.
 2. You know that tells me...it tells me that loving each other as we prepare to reopen is not a joke. It’s not something we should play around with. It’s not something that we should explore as a possible option. This IS what we are called to do, not matter what that might mean. Not simply to tolerate one another, not simply put on an obedient face and do what the elders ask...but to actually serve, out of love, for God and one another.
5. Our King has spoken, and we may not close our ears. The most important thing for us in the reopening process is not our political opinions, it’s not our sensibilities concerning what is or isn’t science, it’s not about anything else in all creation, except our desire to please God, by seeking to love Him and love our neighbor as ourself. Every other competing priority must fall by the wayside. God has said, love is what is most important. This is the plumb line, this is the dividing line between living as a true church, or a false church, as faithful or unfaithful servants of Jesus Christ. None of the issues are the issue. The issue is love. Will we love at great sacrifice to ourselves?
6. So what is the the most important thing? That we love God and love each other. Why is this the most important thing? Because this is the purpose of the Christian life, the purpose of the law and the prophets and the telos of the Church. To manifest love in the midst of the earth, to shine as lights in darkness for the glory of God. This is the end for which God created the

heavens and the earth...that the love of God might be all in all, and that all things would united in Christ in the fullness of time for His glory. Let's now talk about

HOW THIS FLESHES OUT AS WE REOPEN THE CHURCH

1. It's funny, as we have been living in quarantine, the question of how do I love has been harder to answer. How do I love you when I'm not allowed to touch you or be near you, or give you things? But as we come closer to reopening, the ways we are going to be called to love each other are going to become extremely concrete and clear.
2. In the next few weeks we are probably going to be given a county health order that will tell us that in order for us to meet as a church, we are all going to have to wear masks, they are probably going to tell us we shouldn't sing, and there will be a whole host of other practical implications for each of us as worshippers, that will be uncomfortable and inconvenient.
3. And the reason we are going to be issued these guidelines is not for the sake of you who have a strong immune systems. It's going to be for the sake of those who have a weak immune system. Which is a few of us.
4. And what we **ARE NOT** going to say is "why don't the weak just stay home so the rest of us can worship without masks." That's saying why can't my neighbor just love me? But Christ has told us the most important commandment is that you and I love our neighbor as ourselves. So let's now do a thought experiment together.
 1. Imagine you were immune compromised. And you were actually deeply concerned that if you contracted the coronavirus you could die. And your church family at West Hills San Jose was given clearance to start meeting again, and you knew some people really didn't want to wear masks and lay down their other preferences. What would you do?
 2. I think if that were me...I would say I'm just going to stay home...I don't want to be a burden on everyone, it's probably safer for me to just not go. And maybe that is right for those of you who are immune compromised.
 3. But then I wondered what it would feel like if my church family said...actually, you are really important to us. We don't want you to have to stay home. We are going to go way out of our way to make this meeting as safe as possible so that you can come if you would like to. We don't want you to have to stay home, we want you to be here when you are ready.
 4. That feels like loving my neighbor as myself. Brothers and sisters this isn't some isolated teaching in some debatable passage of Scripture. **ON THIS HANGS THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS. ON THIS HANGS WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE A CHRISTIAN CHURCH.**
5. I went through the Scriptures this week and just looked at all the places where God talks about love and weakness...and as I did that, this whole issue in my mind went from being a good idea to a deep, and profound conviction. Every single place that scripture talks about the weakness of others, the burden is laid upon the strong to surrender their rights. Everywhere. At least from what I was able to see over the past week. And it's not just that we are told to do this...Christ has done, and is doing this for us.
6. Heb 4:15 Christ sympathizes with us in our weakness, and thus we are called to sympathize with the weak.

7. Paul says in 1 for 9:22 to the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in it's blessings. Of course the context there is evangelism, but it's the underlying gospel conviction that is relevant. Paul says, I will sacrifice anything, I will become like the weak person for the sake of the gospel. Will we become like the weak person, for the sake of the gospel?
8. 1 Cor 8:10 we are taught not to let our rights (literally says that), not become a stumbling block for the weak. Paul says some of you are correctly informed that eating meat sacrificed to an idol is not a big deal...and some of you are misinformed that it is a big deal. You well informed people ought to surrender your right to eat for the sake of your brother.
 1. It's funny I remember having a hard time thinking of a good real world application for that text as we were teaching through 1 Corinthians and now here we are and it is as relevant as anything has ever been.
9. Romans chapter 14 is also extremely relevant to this conversation. I could go on, the point is we probably all have lots of opinions about the particulars of what is right and what is best, but I know this...unless we start from a desire to love God and love each other as ourselves...we are going to end up in the wrong place.
10. So because that is the conviction of the elders, here is what is going to happen over the course of the coming month. We as elders and leaders are going to submit to our governing authorities as the Word of God commanded us. And we are going to call upon you, the whole church, to comply with the counties public health order whether you think it's a good idea or not. And I am going to call you in Christ's name...to do this...not for yourself but because you love God and your love of God means being willing to lay down your life for your friends.
 1. So let me communicate to you the philosophy of us as elders as it relates to reopening this campus. **We are committed to submitting to our governing authority according to the Word of God. And we are committee to trying to be safe and careful so that church is safe not only for those of us who have a strong immune system but for those of us who have a weak immune system.**
 1. And we are going to do this with the desire to obey Christ to love our neighbor as ourselves.
 2. Additionally, as we prepare to reopen I want you to think about this. When we come together again, each family is going to need to assume responsibility for helping their own children socially distance. That is probably going to be hard for those of us with young ones. Especially because we won't be able to restart children's ministry immediately.
 1. When we come together, things will be different for a little while. I assume not forever. But for a little while. And that means keeping our kids under control. Now when you hear that, I don't want all the moms to take a collective deep sigh and say whelp looks like we aren't going back to church. I want to put this on dads.
 2. Father's, you need to take responsibility to manage our own households. You need to lead. You used to come to church and just talk with your friends while your wife watched your kids. Now your help is going to be needed. You need to lead your home

in this area. Are there going to be slip ups as we come back together. Almost certainly. But I'm calling on every family to do their very best, before God, to help this place remain safe for those with compromised immunity.

3. Finally, if you are one of the families that DOES have an immune compromised member, please reach out to me with any thoughts you have about potential risks that we may be able to mitigate. We are exploring lot's of options like maybe setting up an area on the lawn with some shade and some speakers where you can be here and hear the sermon, while not coming inside.
4. If you have concerns or IDEAS for that matter, please let me know.
11. To the rest of us, Paul says in Acts 20:35 I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, how He himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.
12. You worship a servant King...whose life and death were poured out before the Father...to serve you in your weakness. To save you in your helplessness. Will you forfeit hugs? Will you forfeit singing? Will you lay down your right to live with an uncovered face, for the joy set before you? Our God is a merciful, and gracious, and servant hearted Lord, and we are called to follow Him in His footsteps.
13. I want to close by reading Isaiah 53, with a reflection on what the King of this Kingdom wants for my heart and my actions and my life.

[1] Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? [2] For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. [3] He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [4] Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. [5] But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [7] He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. [8] By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? [9] And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. [10] Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. [11] Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. [12] Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The most important thing to do is love, so take up your cross and love each other