

Just Do Something!

Love It Well

June 15, 2014

PRELUDE – The Saving One

Worship Songs – Love the Lord / Beautiful Things

Video – Yo Daddy

Drama – Mysterious Ways

Feature – With Every Act of Love

Good morning, everyone.

In the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning in verse 34 we read that ...

When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees with his reply, they met together to question him again.

As a threat to both the liberal and conservative wings of the first-century religious establishment of Israel (the Sadducees were the liberals and the Pharisees were the conservatives), this kind of thing was always happening to Jesus. Both parties were constantly attempting to prove (unsuccessfully, I might add) to the people following Him that Jesus was at best, deluded and misguided; at worst, a deceiver and a fraud.

On this particular occasion, Matthew tells us that ...

One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?”

Matthew 22:34-40 (NLT)

Now, to us – especially those who have been in church for a long time and are familiar with the scripture and the story of Jesus – the answer is simple. We already know it.

But in that day and time, when the Hebrew people were expecting God’s Kingdom to break into history at any moment and establish Israel as the preeminent nation in the world, there was a belief that, before God would act, the people first had to become righteous and holy enough. So, naturally, there was a lot of debate about what exactly that looked like ... which meant trying to categorize and prioritize all of the elements of the Law of Moses given in the Old Testament.

That wasn’t an easy task because the Law dealt with everything from how to cut your food to what clothing should be worn to a funeral. In fact, there were 613 separate commandments in the Law of Moses: 365 were negative imperatives (“thou shalt not”) and 268 were positive (“thou shalt”).

So, the question before Jesus really was a test and a tension-filled moment in His ministry.

Matthew tells us that ...

Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

But instead of stopping here – instead of providing the “single most important commandment” as requested ...

... Jesus went on to say ...

A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Now, the fact that Jesus gave two commandments in response to the question would have raised some eyebrows. But what would have been even more surprising to those who heard him say these things, was the fact that he was *equating* the two commandments ... a stunning connection which evidently impacted his followers in the strongest of ways.

Years later, one of Jesus’ best friends, the Apostle John would go around preaching ...

If someone says, “I love God,” but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see? And he has given us this command: “Those who love God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters.” 1 John 4:19-21
(NLT)

But then, as if Jesus’ answer to the question posed by the unnamed Pharisee wasn’t radical enough, he added this:

“The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”
Matthew 22:34-40 (NLT)

Jesus went far beyond prioritizing specific elements of the Mosaic Law. He declared the fundamental motivation behind it, the reason God had led Moses to give Israel 613 commandments in the first place: *God wanted his people to be characterized by love.* And those commandments, in the place and time of Israel, described what it would look like in their everyday lives to be people of love.

And I think by now (from the drama and the song and this little snippet from the life of Jesus), you’ve probably figured out that this is the third of those three things God wants us to do for the world right now, no matter who we are, what we do for a living, where we live, to whom we’re married or not married, etc, etc, etc.

You may remember in the first week, we learned that the first of those things was that God wants us to *leave the world better.* That’s because, as human beings created in the image of God, we’re called and designed and intended to be co-creators with God in a multitude of ways. We’re to take the raw material of this world which God has declared to be “good” and work with it to make it even better. We’re to help the earth and everything in it (including other people!) to flourish and reach its full potential.

Then, last week we learned that the second thing God wants us to be doing in this world is to *light it up.* But we also saw that this could only be carried out by a certain kind of person – a person who has believed in and received Christ as their savior; in other words, a Christian. *Christians* have been given the additional task of lighting up the world with good deeds and good words prompted by the good news of what God has done in Christ so *that* others can have the chance to enjoy the goodness of Christ as well. As I said last week, that means that we’re not just lighting a generic candle in some kind of generic darkness. You and I – if we’re Christians – are to be witnesses to the love of God and

power of God that was displayed in *Jesus of Nazareth*.

And, today, as I said, we're going to talk about the third thing God wants us to be doing in this world, which is to *love it well*.

So, we have three things to do for the world and the people in it: *leave it better, light it up and love it well*.

A Threefold Commitment

By the way, if you've ever done any kind of in-depth theological study, you might have heard those three tasks described as the Great Cultural Mandate, the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

I once heard Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church in CA and author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*, say that "a great commitment to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment will produce a great church." And I would have to agree with that.

But I would take it a step further.

I would say that "a great commitment to the Great Commission, the Great Commandment *and* the Great Cultural Mandate will produce a great Christian."

And I would say that because, you cannot be who you are meant to be (and I'm speaking specifically to those who are Christians) without *all three* of those dimensions active in your life. In other words, you will not be and do all that God intends for you to be and do if you are only committed to one or two of those three tasks.

For example, you might be a person who is committed to the Great Commission (you're constantly sharing your faith with others; you're lighting up the world) but if you're not also involved in carrying out the Great Cultural Mandate, you're not completely fulfilling the purpose for which God gave you life. And your life will have a certain kind of emptiness to it.

Or, if it's the other way around – if you're a person who is actively pursuing the Cultural Mandate (bringing creativity and organization as a mom or a carpenter or a teacher or an administrative assistant or a small-business owner or a gardener or a writer <or whatever>; you're leaving the world around you in a better place than you found it even in small ways), but not committed as a Christian to the Great Commission, you are not completely fulfilling God's purpose. And your life (again, if you're a believer) will have a certain kind of emptiness to it.

And if you are a person who happens to be committed to the Cultural Mandate and Great Commission without also being committed to the Great Commandment – to love God and to love others in the same way you love yourself – well, you'll have the same problem. You'll not fulfill your potential. You will not accomplish the full purpose for which God has given you life on this earth.

Without Love

Unfortunately, this particular case is the most prevalent condition among many Christians in this culture. We're committed to hard work (the Cultural Mandate) or we're committed to sharing the gospel (the Great Commission). But

all too often we don't do those things with love. We don't love very well.

For example (and I've told this story several times, because it was one of the most formative events in my entire life and it does me good to remember it from time to time), many years ago when I was on staff at Park Hill Baptist over in Parkville, I was totally convinced that I knew everything that church should be doing to be more effective. I was 30 years old, and at 30 you think you know everything but you really don't know much of anything. At least, I didn't.

And I can remember being very frustrated back then because the people who were part of that congregation didn't like my ideas. So, I started praying "God, please move me somewhere else. Give me another church to go serve in. I'll do anything. I'll be a janitor in a church that wants to reach people in the community. I don't care...I'll do anything." And I sent out at least 50 resumes to openings in churches all over the country and all I got was rejection letters. Finally, one day, I got a letter back that said "looking at what you sent me, you probably ought to think about planting a church yourself."

So, even though Jetta and I had no idea *where* we were going to plant a church, we went to church planters boot camp where they teach you everything you need to know about starting a church from scratch. Part of the program was meeting in a small group with other people who were planning to start a church and one day the guy who was leading the group asked, "So, how did you get to this point in your life where you feel like you want to plant a church?"

When it was my turn to answer, I repeated the litany I had been telling myself for many months, "I'm just so frustrated. I want to do God's will and reach the people in my community who don't go to church, but the people in my church back home don't give a rip about people outside the church. They're hard-hearted and they don't care about anybody other than themselves and their own comfort. I tried to convince them but they refuse to get it. Wah-wah-wah-wah-wah."

And when I was done whining and complaining, the guy who was leading looked at me and said very calmly, "I have a question for you. What if God's will for you is that you never leave that place? What if He wants you to spend the rest of your life loving *those* people ... just as they are?"

It was like somebody hit me (and Jetta) over the head with a spiritual two-by-four. Immediately, we both just burst out crying; sobbing uncontrollably in front of everyone. It was so embarrassing.

So, we left and we spent the rest of the day in our room; we didn't come out for any of the sessions or any of the meals. We were in mourning – we were grieved – because we were overwhelmed by the ugly truth that we were so committed to saving the world (or, at least, this little community called the Northland), but we didn't love the people God had already given us!

It was incredibly humbling. And it was one of the best things that ever happened to me because God used that experience to show me: *without love, it doesn't matter how committed you are.* You're nothing but a bunch of hot air ...

... which is what the Apostle Paul once wrote to the first-century Christ-followers in the pagan city of Corinth.

If there was ever a group of people who were committed and enthusiastic about doing God's will in both the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission, it was these folks! They were extremely gifted and talented and productive not just in the ministry of the church but also in the community. And almost all of them were recent converts to Christ, so

they were excited about sharing their faith.

But they didn't get along with each other. They took advantage of each other in that congregation. They held grudges. They split into factions. Some of the people in that congregation started parading themselves around feeling superior to everyone else because their gifts and talents seemed to be more useful. In short, that whole church was a mess.

So, when Paul heard about what was going on in that congregation, he wrote them a letter (the letter which we call First Corinthians), addressing one-by-one many of the issues they had: how to deal with this, how to handle that. Then, suddenly, near the end of the letter, he takes a completely different approach. He writes, "Now, let me show you a more excellent way."

And what follows is 1st Corinthians chapter 13 – which I'm sure you are aware is the famous "love chapter" that we often hear at weddings. But Paul didn't write this part of his letter to wax poetic about the glories of love to couples entering into marriage. He wrote it to the Christians at Corinth as way of illustrating the truth we're talking about this morning.

And here's what he said:

If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would be of no value whatsoever.
1 Corinthians 13:3 (NLT)

It doesn't matter how committed you are, Paul says.

And it doesn't matter how spiritually gifted you are.

If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn't love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal.
1 Corinthians 13:1 (NLT)

It also doesn't matter how spiritually knowledgeable you are.

If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would I be?
1 Corinthians 13:2 (NLT)

And it doesn't matter how strong your faith is:

And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anybody. 1 Corinthians 13:2 (NLT)

"Without love," Paul is saying, "without a great commitment to the great commandment, everything else we might do is of very little value."

Love Defined

And at this point, I think it might be worth it for us to call a little time-out here and consider: *as you do in this world the things that God has told you to do to "leave it better" in some way and the things that God has told you to do to "light it up" in some*

way, do you love people well? Actually, a better question would be – and this is really hard – would the people for whom you are leaving it better or for whom you are lighting it up, would they say that you love them well?

For example, if you're a nurse, or a software engineer, or a dad, or you flip burgers at Culvers – would people say that you do those things with a heart full of love towards the people who are on the receiving end of what you do or the people with whom you do those things?

Or, let's take the people who are on the receiving end of your attempts to share your faith ... would they say that your motive towards them is love? Or, as it far too often was in my case, would they say your motive is simply to be "right" about God or you're just trying to prove a point about church or doctrine or whatever? Would the people who volunteer with you here at NHCC or some other organization that's committed to carrying out the Great Commission say that you have a heart of love towards them?

Of course, those questions raise another question: *what exactly is love* – or more accurately, what exactly is Paul talking about – what exactly is Jesus talking about – when they use this word?

Let's take Jesus first. The word "love" (as found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, with which Jesus answered the lawyer) is the Hebrew word "hesed" which one scholar says denotes a "deliberate choice of affection and kindness" in which acts toward others usually have the nature of being "unfailing" or "steadfast."

In other words, Jesus was talking about a type of affection and kindness towards people that doesn't change with circumstances – including their bad behavior – which is the way most of us love ourselves, isn't it? Most of us continue to show affection and kindness towards ourselves even when we mess up.

As for Paul, he uses the Greek word "agape" to describe love. According to another scholar, agape love is "the spirit which says that no matter what any person does to me, I will never seek to harm him or her. I will never set out for revenge. I will always seek nothing but his highest good. That is to say, agape is unconquerable benevolence. It is invincible good will. It is not simply a wave of emotion. It is a deliberate conviction of the mind issuing a deliberate policy of the life." I love that. A deliberate conviction of the mind, "I've made up my mind. This is what I'm going to do." And it comes out in a deliberate policy, a deliberate way in which I treat people and live my life.

Now, I realize that both of those definitions are a little on the academic side and while some of you really like that kind of thing, for others, your eyes start to glaze over. So, let's follow along with what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 and let him give us some practical applications to guide us in our understanding.

He writes ...

Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NIV)

Ok, let's take this phrase by phrase and break it down. It's really not that complex.

The first phrase ... *“love is patient”* ... some of the older translations say “love suffers long” although it’s not so much that you have to literally suffer, although love does do that if necessary, as much as it means that ...

1. Love gives others abundant time to get it right.

Instead of expecting our kids or our spouse or parents to be perfect and to measure up to our standards overnight, love understands that it might take time. It doesn’t demand perfection.

Next: *“love is kind”*... and kindness is one of those words we use so often that we don’t comprehend it fully anymore, so let’s put it like this:

2. Love does something nice simply because it pleases someone.

Kindness is doing something that makes someone else happy just because it makes them happy. It might not be that big of a deal to you, but to them it matters. And we saw a good illustration of that in the drama. The first lady had no idea what the pineapple was for, but it meant so much to the lady from Hawaii.

And kindness can be really, really simple. In fact, I made a major discovery about this several years ago ... which means that it took me about 50 years to catch on to this. In about 30-60 seconds you can change someone else’s whole day for the better. You know how?

- You can make the bed, if they like you to make the bed. (It takes about 60 seconds – I’ve timed it.)
- You can take the trash out of the kitchen and put it in the garage. (about 35 seconds)
- You can empty the dishwasher. (90 seconds, at least in my house)
- You can take the clothes upstairs and put them in the closet. (60 seconds)
- You put the clothes from the washer into the dryer in less than 30 seconds – did you know that?
- You can make the coffee in about 50 seconds. At least that’s how it works at my house.

30 to 60 seconds at a time to do something nice just because it makes my wife happy. That’s how simple loving-kindness can be.

Next, Paul writes: *“Love does not envy”* (or *“it is not jealous”*) ... and this can have all kinds of applications but the one that strikes me most is ...

3. Love celebrates the victories of others.

It’s truly happy when others succeed or get recognized or chosen, and here’s the important part, even when I don’t. It celebrates their victories even when I am losing or not winning.

Next: *“it does not boast, it is not proud”* ... and this isn’t so much being proud of our own accomplishments like doing well at school or winning a game or feeling good about doing a good job. It’s about how we wear that in front of others.

4. Love downplays its own accomplishments.

Love doesn't like to be the center of attention. It doesn't constantly say to our kids, parents, friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, spouses, enemies ... "look how much I have done to love you." It doesn't constantly remind others "look how much better I'm doing at loving you!"

It just does it, regardless of whether or not it gets noticed, because love knows that it is its own reward, and that Jesus said that the good we do in secret will be openly rewarded by our Father in Heaven.

Next: "*It is not rude*" ... wow - where do we start, there's a whole sermon we could do on that one, given that our culture these days is almost driven by rudeness. "It is not rude" means that ...

5. Love honors others through courtesy.

Love shows respect for people - like the folks who are driving too slow or don't ring up our groceries fast enough or the co-workers who don't do their jobs as well as we do - simply because they are people. It talks nice to them. It smiles at them. It doesn't curse them. In fact, courtesy means *never* cursing another person or even cursing *around* another person.

And you can think of a hundred other ways to show courtesy if you take the time.

Next: "*it is not self-seeking*" (or, "*it does not insist on its own way*").

A good way to think of it is this:

6. Love gives up the right to be <whatever> for the sake of others.

Whatever = right, first, best, most, whatever. Love says, "You know, I don't need to have that - if it would better for you to have that. I don't need to be right, you can be right. You can even be wrong - I'll live with you and love you, even if you're wrong."

Next: "*it is not easily angered*" ... which is pretty straightforward, too:

7. Love is even-tempered with others.

When there's a fire, love brings water - not gasoline. Want to be really practical about loving people? Sometimes all you need to do is shut up, because you can say some really bad things when you're irritated.

Next: "*it keeps no record of wrongs*"/"*not resentful*" ...

8. Love keeps "cleaning the filters" in order to "believe the best."

Here's what I mean by that: when people have wronged you in your life - and sometimes it's intentional and sometimes it's not intentional - or if somebody has a bad habit and it keeps rubbing you the wrong way, you can build a filter about that person, so everything they do from that point on comes at you through that filter (i.e. this person is lazy, this person is crude, this person is whatever).

So every time they're around you, you're looking at them through that filter and you're believing less than the best about that person. You're not believing that person can change; you're not believing they are valuable to God, but love says "you know, I'm going to clean that filter from time to time. I'm going to try to take you for what you are right now, this day." So, that's what I think it means - keep no record of wrongs.

The last phrase is a little more challenging to understand. It says "*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*"

I did some study on this and found that most commentators think Paul means something like this:

9. Love treats the revelation of another person's sin with gentleness and is glad when they are restored.

A lot of times in this culture, when somebody sins, what happens? They're all over the news or the internet, "he did this; she did that." And love does the opposite. Love says, "we don't really need to dig into all that." And when that person is restored, there's a gladness.

There is a great example of this in the Bible. Remember when Mary is found to be with child, and of course she is not married, and Joseph finds out that his beloved betrothed bride is already pregnant. What does he do? - it says "because he was a good man, and he heard she was with child, he decided to put her away quietly," instead of making a big deal out of it and embarrassing her.

And this is the idea here, that when we find out about someone else's shortcoming or shame, we do not rejoice in that. Instead, it breaks our heart and we treat them gently, and we hope and pray for their restoration.

So, in very practical terms ...

- Love gives others abundant time to get it right.
- It does things simply because those things please others.
- It celebrates the victories of others instead of feeling slighted and it downplays its own accomplishments.
- It honors others through courtesy
- Gives up the right to be right, first, best, most, whatever for the sake of others.
- It's even-tempered.
- Keeps "cleaning the filters" in order to "believe the best" about others,
- And it treats the revelation of another's sin with gentleness and rejoices when they are restored.

And most importantly, it *keeps* doing these things.

Paul writes:

Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.
1 Corinthians 13:7-8 (NIV)

Conclusion

So, back to those questions I asked a few minutes ago. *As you do in this world the things that you have been called to do by God to “leave it better” and the things that you do to “light it up” do you always love people well? Would they say you always love them well?*

As the song before the message said, “God put a million doors in the world for his love to walk through ... one of those doors is you.” How are you doing with that?

I don’t know about you but I would have to say, “I try.” Well, more accurately, *sometimes I try*. Sometimes, I don’t. Sometimes, I’m just hard-hearted and selfish. Sometimes, I’m jaded and I don’t think the people around me deserve to be loved well.

You ever think like that? I’m sure you do.

See, the Great Commandment could also be called the Great Conviction because it reveals to us just how far we have fallen from the glorious purpose for which God intended us. We don’t love like we ought to. We don’t love others nearly as well as we love ourselves ... which is yet even more evidence that we really do need a savior; that we really do need the Gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ, and beyond that, that we really need to live out of the truth of the gospel on a daily basis, that we have an ongoing experience of God’s grace, mercy and love in our own lives.

As I have said many times over the years and will probably say many more ...

Forgiven people are the ones who can forgive
Blessed people are the ones who can bless
Loved people are the ones who can love

This is where it all begins. You can only give love and forgiveness and grace and blessing to others in the proportion that you have received and are currently receiving love, grace and blessing from God. You can only give away what you have already received.

And so I want to pray for you as we close this morning.
<Prayer>

A great commitment to the Great Commission, the Great Commandment *and* the Great Cultural Mandate will produce a great Christian.”

Feature - Remind Me Who I Am CLOSING COMMENTS

Endnotes