



grow. pray. serve.



Week of May 20, 2024:

“Testify to Love”

– *Matthew 9:35-38 (NIV)*

MONDAY, May 20, 2024 - Matthew 22:36-40

Jesus identified the greatest commandments

Jewish rabbis debated: were all commandments equal or was there a greater one? Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus chose not one but two. The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” But he added Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself,” Jesus said the point of all other truths is to lead us to love God and our neighbor more fully. God wants us to show contagious love to all we know.

- Jesus said every key Bible principle, all the truths we know about what God wants, “depend” on the two commands he quoted. What do you believe made these two commands so foundational in Jesus’ thinking, teaching, and living? Can you recall any time when some belief you held led you to love God or some of your neighbors less, maybe even without realizing it?
- That second command can be challenging. Loving others the way we love ourselves is based on how God loves us—never giving up, no matter what. Our humanity makes it hard for us to love ourselves or others with God’s unwarranted love with no hesitation. But God calls us to move toward that, for our own sake and the sake of others. * What has stopped you or made it hard for you to love yourself or someone else persistently? How might you love more fully?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for loving me unconditionally. Help me to recognize the moments in my life when I can relentlessly love those around me. Amen.

* For practical steps toward loving well, see Mindy Caliguire, *Discovering Soul Care*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007.

TUESDAY, May 21, 2024 - 1 John 4:16-21

Love: from God to us and on to others

Some people think “righteous” people are not kind, that following Jesus makes you critical and unloving. That was not the apostle John’s view! John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, preached a sermon on April 21, 1777 that quoted John and invited all Christ-followers, “Let us provoke all men, not to enmity and contention, but to love and good works; always remembering those deep words... ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!’” *

- Why would John say, “Perfect love drives out fear”? 1 John 4:20 said, “Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” Do you agree that it is often fear that leads us to hate other people? Why would hating others block any genuine love for God? Can you think of practical ways to let God’s perfect love move you in the direction of acting in love toward “others,” even if you think they deserve fear and distrust rather than love?
- “‘God is love’....touches on everything, from the individual-psychological to the radically communal Love and God go together; hate and God do not (4:20); fear and God do not (4:18).” ** Have you ever experienced a situation in which as you learned to love another person your fear of that person decreased and even disappeared? In what ways has following Christ made you and your relationships more loving?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you embodied God’s love for me. Now you call me to embody your love as I deal with other people, even people I may not like, may even fear. Grow your love in my heart. Amen.

* From Wesley’s sermon “On Laying The Foundation Of The New Chapel, Near The City-Road, London” at <http://www.godrules.net/library/wsermons/wsermons132.htm>.

** Jaime Clark-Soles note on 1 John 4:16-20 in *The CEB Women’s Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, p. 1562.

WEDNESDAY, May 22, 2024 - Ezekiel 34:1-8, 11-12; Luke 15:1-7

What brings joy to God's "shepherds" heart

Jesus, God in the flesh, came to this planet on very real rescue mission. Drawing from the image in Ezekiel 34, he told a story about a shepherd who lost one sheep from his flock. That was only 1% of the flock, but the shepherd cared deeply about any lost sheep. He dropped everything, searched until he found that sheep—and felt great joy when he found it. Jesus’ critics thought he should write off the human “lost sheep” (Luke 15:2), but Jesus in fact searched tirelessly for them.

- “[Ezekiel’s] metaphor goes beyond the normal responsibilities of making sure that the sheep are protected and fed. Instead it focuses on the remedial duties, caring for the sick and finding the lost. These equate to the need for kings to bring about justice for alienated and disenfranchised people.” * What are some of the ways you can actively support and work for justice for alienated or disenfranchised people around you?
- Pastor Bruce Larson wrote, “A shepherd once explained to me that sheep nibble their way into lostness. They move from one tuft of green grass to the next, sometimes right through a hole in the fence. When they’re done

nibbling they can't find the hole and they're lost. Some of us know what that is—to nibble ourselves bit by bit into the far country.” ** Have you ever been like the lost sheep, not sure how to get home? What “shepherd(s)” has God used to find you and lead you home?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you that you've never seen me (or anyone) as a “disposable asset,” as someone who doesn't matter. Give me your heart for everyone in your human family. Amen.

* HarperCollins Christian Publishing. NIV, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, eBook: *Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Kindle Locations 190424-190426). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

** Bruce Larson, *The Preacher's Commentary Series*, Volume 26: Luke. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc. 1983, p. 235.

THURSDAY, May 23, 2024 - Romans 13:8-10

How the apostle summed up the Law

Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches (there were no big cathedrals in his day). Some were mainly Jewish; others mostly Gentile. Their standards of “righteousness” varied (cf. Romans 14:1-15:13). It was easy for them to criticize each other. Paul said the purpose of God's law or rules is to help us love. “Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor” was a big challenge to people who disagreed. It was (and is) vital, because “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law.”

- Paul spoke to differences over minor issues (that seemed major to those who felt strongly about them). How do you think some of them might have initially reacted to the idea that “Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law”? Do you know anyone who is genuinely loving, but in some parts of life acts in ways that you think miss the mark? Do you believe Paul was right, or was he too soft on “lawbreakers”?
- How might ugly religious conflicts (e.g. the Salem witch trials, the Inquisition) have been different if Christians had always aimed to fulfill the law by loving? How can you stand for truths that matter to you without acting in unloving ways toward those who disagree? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you grow in the inner qualities (that may not come naturally) that help you live out the law of love.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, “love is what fulfills the Law” sometimes feels too easy to me. Until that is, I try to do it—then I realize how high and hard a standard that is. Teach me how to love the way that you love. Amen.

FRIDAY, May 24, 2024 - Matthew 9:35-38, Luke 19:1-10

Jesus' love, seeking and saving the lost

Jesus was “a man on a mission.” He did many admirable, valuable things during his ministry on earth. He healed the sick, broke down barriers of prejudice and exclusion, taught people how to live better lives, and challenged religious hypocrisy. Yet all that grew from his one central mission. First and foremost, Jesus said, he came to seek and to save the lost.

- Jesus yearned for God to “send out workers into his harvest field.” To what extent do you think “troubled and helpless...sheep without a shepherd”

expresses the spiritual state of your neighbors, co-workers, even some people you know in church? Are you willing to become one of the workers Jesus wished for? What abilities and resources has God given you that you can use to help reach troubled, helpless people with the good news of Jesus?

- Jesus said he “came to seek and save the lost.” Scholar William Barclay wrote, “In the New Testament ‘lost’ does not mean damned or doomed. It just means in the wrong place....A man is lost when he has wandered away from God; and he is found when once again he takes his rightful place as an obedient child in the...family of his Father.” * In what ways has God “found” you, and given you your rightful place in God’s family? When have you been able to help God find someone else?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for coming “to seek and save the lost,” including me. Guide me to the ways I can join you in doing that great, world-changing work. Amen.

* William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke* (Revised Edition). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, page 257.

SATURDAY, May 25, 2024 - Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love: forgiving, humble, unifying

Paul was emphatically practical in his letters to the Christians in Ephesus and Corinth. He would have grown up reciting the *Shema*, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Jesus, Paul’s Lord, said that was the greatest commandment, and added, “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The next logical question for Paul, like Christ’s followers ever since, was, “What does it look like to love my neighbor?” These were his answers. It looks like being humble—not thinking of yourself more highly than others. It looks like being gentle—take a deep breath if you feel angry, speak carefully. It looks like being patient—while waiting, focus on God instead of yourself. Love requires compassion (suffering with others), kindness (honor and consideration) and forgiveness to all God’s children.

- As you read this list of loving actions, how do you feel? Great? Guilty? Condemned? If you’re not perfectly living this list, remember: none of us are. Start with, how can you be more loving this week? Instead of trying to grow in all areas at once, choose one characteristic Paul lists and focus on living into a new way of loving. And loving attitudes and actions are both individual and public, local and general. Think more broadly than just yourself. What can your family, your community, your church, your city, your state, and your nation do to be more loving to people you’ve never met? How can you join in God’s work to extend divine love to all people?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to love all my neighbors, everywhere. Help me start close to home and guide me as I expand my vision to be more and more like your vast, world-changing vision. Amen.



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