

First Thing Is First

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of loving God and our neighbors as the foundation of Christian living.

Duration: 43:33

Scripture: Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29-31, John 3:16, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Obedience"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. He quotes from Mark and Matthew, highlighting the commandment to love God completely. The preacher also emphasizes the need to love our neighbors as ourselves, as a way of expressing our love for God. He encourages the congregation to listen to God and respond to His love with devotion and service.

Transcript

Last Lord's Day morning, Christmas Day, we were meditating on that central passage and statement of the Gospel in John 3.16, where we read the delightful words, For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Where do we go from there as we pass over to the beginning of a new year? In the light of God's infinite care and love and mercy toward us, what should be our response to him? I have felt constrained to turn this morning to Matthew chapter 22, a passage that begins with verse 34 and proceeds to verse 40, but we shall read verses 37 and 39 only at this point. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

And the second commandment is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. Now, though we are quoting these words from Matthew, I shall be taking the background which is to be found particularly in the Gospel of Mark, but also in the Gospel of Luke, where you remember our Lord proceeds to speak of the parable of the Good Samaritan in this very context, illustrating the kind of love that God requires of his people as being a love that not only moves upwards toward the throne, toward the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, but outwards towards his creatures and especially towards his people.

In this particular context, our Lord has been asked many questions. If you read the Gospels carefully, you will see that all kinds of people have been asking him one kind of question or another, a Herodian, a Sadducean. And then, according to Mark, at this point, a scribe whom Matthew qualifies and says that he was a Pharisee, he has come along to ask a question of our Lord, really to put him to the test.

They have doubts as to whether or not he is orthodox, whether or not he deserves their confidence and deserves their faith. And so, this man comes and you remember, he posed the question. Master, he said, there are so many commandments.

What do you think? Which is the greatest commandment of all? Now, I suppose we should remember that it was alleged by the Jews that there were 613 commandments mediated through Moses. 613, not only 10, 613. And if this good man was mindful of that fact, well, it's no wonder that he was looking for someone to whom he could pose the question.

Is there one among these many commandments which is more significant than another? And our Lord, the Son of God, using not only His ingenuity, His understanding, but His compassion, comes right to the heart of the issue and the heart of the problem of this dear man who apparently wanted to please God and wanted to know God's will. And He said to him, well, this is the thing to do. This is the response I give you.

The most important one is this. And I'm now quoting from Mark chapter 12. 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 mind and with all your strength. The second is this. Love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no commandment greater than these. Now notice how our Lord graciously answered the question posed to him, albeit in a manner that was clearly unexpected. He brought together and he welded into one cohesive whole the separate commands to listen to the one true God and to love the God to whom we listen and who speaks to those who listen.

And he welds the whole thing into one major commandment, may we say, an omnibus commandment, a manifold commandment. And he says, this is the one thing that you need to know and this is the one thing you need to obey. And I want to look at them briefly.

First of all, the command to listen. The most important one, answered Jesus, is this. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

This corresponds, I take it, to the often repeated words of our Lord in the Gospels, He that has ears to hear, let him hear. For many years I used to think there was no real significance to that statement of his, which is repeated here and there and everywhere. But having read this again, I think I understand what our Lord was saying.

He that has ears to hear, let him hear. The first and the greatest commandment is this. This is the first part of it.

Hear, O Israel, listen. The Lord your God is one and there is no one else to listen to. Listen to him.

And then, as you're listening, this is what he tells you, you must do. Love him with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength. And when you come to the end of that, there is another which is like it, as Matthew says.

Almost a part of it or a continuation or even an expression of it. Love your neighbor as yourself. And if you've got any problem as to who your neighbor is, Luke will give you the answer.

The Bible is very complete. The command to listen. Are you a listener to God? My friends, this is not meant to be a rhetorical question.

It's really meant to be a question that we face up to at the beginning of a new year. Are we listeners? What do we know about the art of listening to the one whom we believe and confess to be the one, true, and only God? How incongruous, incongruous, how out of alignment to believe that there is only one, true God and yet not to listen to Him. How necessary, to put it the other way, how necessary if there is but one and only true God that we should be found really on tiptoe listening to see if God is a word to say.

Now evidently there is a reference here to what the Hebrews called the Shema. We usually refer to it as the Shema. Well, it's the Shema, I suppose.

Some of you will correct me again, but it's more like the second than the first. You know, the Hebrew had these words, the Jews had these words written on the lintels and on the doorposts of their houses, called it the Shema. It's the Hebrew for the word, the verb to hear, Shema, listen.

And it's quoted from the Old Testament and it quoted these words, The Lord our God is one Lord, thou shalt love the Lord thy God, listen. So that whenever the Jew went into the house or went out of the house, he saw this on the side of the doorpost. He reminded himself and he reminded his children, he was constantly reminded of the fact there is only one true God over against all the polytheism and the pantheism and the paganism of the world outside.

There is but one true God, listen to him. I'm quite sure if the ancient Jew needed to be thus summoned to listen to God, you and I in 1984 need to hear the same command. Hear, oh Israel, listen, oh Israel.

And of course the answer is given as we've already indicated in the statement that is added. The Lord your God is one Lord. The very language here would put it something like this.

The God of Israel is the great Jehovah. He is Lord. The God of Israel is Jehovah.

The one who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and introduced himself as I am that I am or I will be what I will be. But he didn't leave it to mere words to convey what he meant. He provided a visual aid so that the message would not be lost.

Do you remember he appeared to Moses in a bush that was burned and burning and continuing to burn but it was not being consumed. Now this doesn't happen every day. You may go into a wilderness or you may go somewhere and you may see a bush burning but as it burns it is being consumed.

That's the normal. If you have coal fires which we don't often have here well you know that when the fire burns the coal is being consumed or if it's wood or whatever, whatever it is. As it burns it consumes itself.

But here is something singular. The fire was burning but the bush was not consumed. All of which indicated that this God of ancient Israel the God of Abram and of Isaac and of Jacob is a God who is not consumed or devoured with the years.

Comparing yourself with what you were a year ago. How do you feel? January 1984. Now some of you young people feel even stronger and better I'm sure.

But what about the most of us? Well I won't ask you to be vocal. But the fact of the matter is this whether we know it or not, whether we realize it or not we are dying and we are decaying and we are in process of

dying. Every one of us.

And this is a day's march toward the journey's end. And each day takes something away from us. And were it not for the mercy of God and the amazing providence whereby we can be resuscitated and renewed from day to day where would we be? But as for our God Himself He is the Lord of the ages.

He is the ancient of days. He was before the beginning. He will be after the ending.

And He does not diminish. And He is one. He is one.

There is no one else like Him. A trinity of persons in one deity He may be. But there is no one beyond the triune Godhead like to this Jehovah God of Israel.

He is alone. Therefore, listen to Him. And that's the first thing.

I am not going to take time to stress this more and more this morning. I think we're getting the message. To whom else can we go? When the disciples were leaving our Lord the larger crowds were going and He turned to the very twelve, the little nucleus that were following Him and were allegedly very loyal to Him.

He said, well now look. They're all going. Do you want to go also? And Peter, bless him, turned to Jesus and said, Lord, to whom else can we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

Bless Him. There was one thing, you see, that Peter knew and that was this. There is no other than the incarnate Jehovah God.

He is one and there is none else who has the word of life and the capacity to maintain eternal life in a transient passing society in the midst of death to possess eternal life. Now let's move from that to the command. It's the command to listen that comes in the first place but then following the command to listen comes this command to love.

Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. I give that fuller version which is found in Mark 12 30. Now this is most generally considered to comprise the first great commandment.

Though we have taken the liberty to speak of the previous command to hear, to stand more or less on its own or at least in relation to it. The commandment to love God. Love the Lord your God.

If it is a challenging question to ask ourselves at a point like this in time am I a listener? Is it not equally challenging to ask am I a lover of God? Do I put up with God or do I love Him? You don't put up with the person you love. You delight in the person you love and that's the difference. Thou shalt love the Lord your God and whatever else may be involved beyond this matter of delighting in God and there is much else that is involved as we shall see in a moment.

There is this. God should become our heart's delight. True love, genuine love necessarily means this.

You find the Old Testament way of putting it is often very graphic. For example when David and you know David was a red-blooded sort of a man and you might expect David to be thinking of all things when he woke up at night. How often does he say that when he's awake upon his bed his mind and his heart is with God.

That's what it is to delight in God. When red blood is dancing in your veins and passions are strong and opportunities are many nevertheless the man's heart goes out after God and settles upon God. Now that's love.

Do you know anything of that? The first and greatest commandment announces the existence of the one true God and then gives primacy of place to the duty of expressing our love toward him. The first law is to love God who has bound himself to us and bound us to himself in covenant ties and done it all out of sheer grace. Such love is an all-inclusive affection and if we really love God you see everything else follows.

That's the point. That's the point. Don't let anybody get mixed up and say well if I love God there's no need to do anything for him.

No, no. The point is if you love God you will do everything for him. Love drives all the wheels of activity.

Let me explain this. Some wheels revolve alone and separately. Some wheels drive other wheels.

Love drives other wheels. Let me put it like this. I've got a bicycle in the garage.

It's not my own. Somebody wistfully thought I might use it occasionally and left it there for me to use. Well I haven't used it very much.

But you know the front wheel of the bicycle has a puncture in it at the moment but it does, it turns. But it doesn't turn anything else. It just turns.

Of course you have to have a front wheel to go on a bike. And it turns but it only turns itself. But not so the rear wheel.

When the rear wheel turns it turns the whole mechanism and it makes it move. And not only that there's a lamp. There's a tail lamp and there's a front lamp and there's a dynamo that's attached to the back wheel and the back wheel when it turns drives the dynamo.

And you see when the back wheel is turning everything else is turning. So there are all sorts of things happening when the rear wheel is turning. Now love is like that.

Love never moves alone, itself, alone. Where love is a hundred thousand other things will spring up just because love drives them. Love motivates them.

Love kindles them. Love inspires them. Love is the driving force.

The apostle Paul puts this in a myriad ways that because he does so perhaps in the way he does we miss the point all too often. But he does so negatively and he does so positively. Let me give you an illustration only.

In 1 Corinthians 13, 1 to 3 he says this. If I haven't got love I haven't got anything. If I speak in the name of men and of angels but have not love I'm only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have a faith that can move mountains but have not love I am nothing. If I give all I possess to feed the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love I gain nothing. It's like a front wheel you see.

There's nothing to drive. And when it moves it moves alone. So unless you've got love there are so many things in your life that are not ticking over.

Only love makes them tick. Put positively Paul puts it like this. Let no debt remain outstanding.

Be careful about paying your debt. Accept this. Accept the continuing debt to love one another.

You can never come to the end of this he says. This is an ongoing debt and however much you pay it you still owe people more. For he who loves his fellow man has now listen here's a mouthful for you has fulfilled the law.

Man alive I thought that there was no conceivable way whereby we humans could fulfill the law of God. Paul says there is one way that leads towards that end and this is it. Love God.

And your love for God will generate within you the quality of life that desires to do anything and everything that God commands. Whether the number of the commandments is 631 or 10 or 12 or 13 or what have you it matters not. Love is the fulfilling of the law.

Love you see drives the whole mechanism of human life. Thou shalt love the Lord your God. Of course you notice that possessive pronoun there.

It's not easy to love a stranger and I think that our Lord is implying here that it is only possible to know God when when we are in covenant relationship with him and acknowledge him as such. It is within that relationship alone that love can come to its own. The fire is only kindled within the bonds of a saving union with him.

But that will be expressed in due course in a remarkable manner. To quote Mark who is the most extensive here With all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength someone will say well what's left for me? Nothing my friend. That's the whole point.

God demands all and there's nothing left for me. With all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your strength he demands the whole of you, the whole of me. Now there is no one infallible way of describing these and of separating them and distinguishing them.

I don't really think. In so far as they can be distinguished I suggest to you and this is only a suggestion that perhaps it should go along the following lines. When it says with all your hearts we must remember that sometimes the word heart stands for the inner being of a person the entire inner being the inner man as Paul speaks of it.

Whilst at other times it has reference to the emotions as such. The heart is the seat of the emotions sometimes in scripture. Now here the term cannot refer to either specifically because such areas are individually referred to a little later on as the mind and the soul.

The word heart therefore probably means here that we should love God with full, with total sincerity. That you should love him from the inside. That your love for him should not be a matter of words only or of your presence in the right place at the right time or of your going through some outward motions that are supposed to express love.

But your love for God should be a matter of something emerging from the depths of your being and moving upwards to him and there is a motion in the emotion with all your soul. I think that this refers to

what I've already indicated. If it can be distinguished here as it has to be with these four references coming together it probably means delight in him.

Love him not just with your mind or even with your emotion but it's a love of delight, the whole being. The notion is that of putting our whole being our feeling and all the warmth of which we are capable into our love so that it is no unfelt affair. But with all your mind as well.

Your mind matters, your mind is important. If you really love someone your mind goes to that person and if you really love God you'll think a lot about him and you'll be considering him and you'll be checking up with him and you'll be making sure that he is pleased whoever else is not pleased. Your mind has recourse to him and with all your strengths.

This term demands intensity at each level of our being. Strength as well as sincerity must be the hallmark of love as it is expressed on the level of our feelings as well as of our thought. Now, notice.

All the heart, all the mind, all the soul, all the strength. This love will determine your priority. This love will devour your energy.

This love will take you out of this world even whilst you're in it. Not making you incapable of serving it but in taking you out from it to commune with the heaven that is over it it will send you back with an energy and a grace and a capacity to bring the grace of God down to the neediest and the feeblest. And then, says our Lord, don't forget it doesn't end there.

There is the command to love our neighbor. The second is this and the second is like it, says Matthew. Love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no commandment greater than these. Jesus treats them as two but they are somehow specially related and make, in one sense, an omnibus commandment. Jesus here links the words of Leviticus 19 with those of Deuteronomy 6, 4, and 5 in order to weld them into one whole.

Now, the commandment here is similar to the previous one in that it also is a commandment to love. It is as if the love that we expressed Godward is then directed by God himself to pass beyond himself. This is a strange thought here.

See, God is never a selfish God. We are. What we are given, we cling to.

We hold on to. The amazing thing about God, we see this at Christmas time. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.

But he put it aside and he made himself of no reputation and he took to himself the form of a servant and the form of a man. He died the death of the cross. He gave up his rights.

He didn't cling to his prerogatives. He could have. We owe all our love to God and it could stop in God and not pass beyond God.

But the remarkable thing is this. You pour the chalice of your love upon God and God says, All right, it's for me and I only deserve it. It is meant for me alone.

But wait a moment. I command you to pass it on to your neighbors, to my creatures, to my children, to everybody else. And by divine command, the love that is exclusively the father's is to be shared with the

father's creatures and the father's children.

I don't know of anything to compare with this. See, he doesn't tell you, Look, everybody else throughout the world deserves that you should love them. That's not where the New Testament stops.

It says God deserves everything. But our God doesn't keep everything to himself that is his due. When you give him everything, then he says, Now, I know it's mine.

Now, nevertheless, let it pass to this and to that and to that and to that, to this country, to that country, to that continent and that continent, to this individual and that individual, this type and that type, to all kinds and conditions of men. Have you got the point, my friend? So that Jesus could say, Inasmuch as you have done it unto the one of the very least of these my brothers, you've done it not only for me, but to me. Get the point? And the man who asked the question was thrilled.

I wish I could have seen his face. He went to trip, it would seem, though there's an air of genuineness about him. But, oh, we won't argue about that.

At the end of it, he was really pleased and he says, Well said, teacher. The man replied, You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but Him. To love Him with all your heart and with all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all the burnt offerings and the sacrifices.

This is something coming from a man like him. Is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. It's the moral, not the ceremonial that's the important thing.

You say, my, this man is a disciple. Well now, you notice the balance of Jesus. Dare I say, this may have been a moment of temptation for Jesus.

Here is a very astute and learned man and he's saying almost exactly what Jesus himself is saying. But he, like Nicodemus, still had to know the new birth. You know what Jesus said to him? My dear young man, he says, Look, or let me quote rather than just give my own words.

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. What? Not far from the kingdom of God? Isn't He inside? No, He's not. Now don't ask me to explain why.

I don't think the passage tells us why. I could give you my ideas but that's not the point this morning. You see, you can go a very long way and still be outside the kingdom of God.

It can be intellectual. It can be a mere intellectual agreement with the truth. Without the heart's faith and the heart's love.

And says Jesus to this man who was delighted with the answer that Jesus had given, You are not far from the kingdom of God. You're moving in the right direction. But let me tell you, let me tell you, you're not there yet.

Keep on seeking. Keep moving towards the kingdom in the spirit and in the attitude you've shown before me now and you'll soon get there. But you're not there yet.

Could there be someone here this morning in that category? You're in an obedient frame of mind. You're searching the scriptures and you give intellectual assent to the things that you deem to be written by God

through His human servants. But your heart hasn't yet come out in faith in Him and love for Him.

Let your heart come out. Confess your faith in Him. You can be very near the kingdom and yet outside of it.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon used to say sometimes to the great crowds that went to hear him preach, I have a feeling, he says, as I listen to you singing that many of you must be living on the doorstep of the kingdom because, he says, you can sing with those inside but your hearts are not inside. Do you know it is possible to sing the songs of Zion whilst living on the doorstep? Outside. So near and yet so far but there's a door through which we must enter and Jesus is that door.

If there is anyone here in that condition this morning I beseech you come to Him this morning where you are. Put your faith in Him. Now in the silence of your soul acknowledge Him and say, My Lord and My God, I trust You.

And when I go out from this congregation from this service this morning I will confess You before men as My Lord, as My Master, as My God. And so we conclude. These two questions.

Listening. Loving. And these two aspects of the love that God commands and requires very seriously.

Love the Lord your God with all and it seems as if there's nothing else left nothing left for me or for my neighbor, doesn't it? But that's not true. You show them your love for God by hearing how He tells you to share that love that you've directed exclusively towards Himself. Sharing it with this one and that one near at hand and in the distant and uttermost places of the earth.

By the services that you can do with your hands use of your mind and of your lips and in a myriad other ways but all to show forth the excellences of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Last Lord's Day morning we gave thanks to God for His unspeakable gift. I wonder whether God has any reason to acknowledge this morning our love for Him.

Could it be that He is saying to us as a congregation what He said, what Jesus said to another church after ascending to be with the Father you have left your first love. Oh God bring us back there to listen and to love. Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father we thank you for this good day. It is good because you have made it. It is good because there are promises that relate to it.

And it is good because you are in it. And we have not only your word and the symbols of the sacrament but we have your presence, your real presence by the Holy Spirit and the word. Oh God take our hearts and our lives afresh to be your own.

As we move to the table ordained by our Lord and being kept by us to His glory and for our profit may the Spirit brood over us. We ask it now in His holy name. Amen.

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