

Perfect Love Mathew 22: 34-46

Today's Scripture passage contains more of those great questions from the Bible that help us grow in our faith. Much like the others we have recently looked at, they have far reaching implications. Why do you test the Lord? How did you get in here without a wedding robe? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? On this occasion, the religious leaders of the day had conspired once again to try and trick Jesus into saying something they could use to get Him killed. On the surface, their question seemed innocent and reasonable enough. Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?

Mathew is careful to point out that the person asking the question was a lawyer, sometimes referred to in the Scriptures as a scribe. Scribes were the elite of the day, the religious scholars, whose primary job was interpreting and applying religious law. In our culture they would be more like a prosecutor than a defense attorney, and then as now when a prosecutor asks a question it is best to carefully consider how it should be answered.

It was almost a silly question, much like asking a high school calculus student if they know what $2 + 2$ equals. Jesus didn't need to stop and think about how to answer the question, for the Scriptures are unambiguous when it comes to that topic. The greatest commandment was the one God gave to the Israelites just before they were to cross over into the promised land. It was written down by Moses and today you and I can find it in Deuteronomy 6:5. It is part of the Shema, which in Hebrew means "hear" and Jesus quotes it almost word for word for the scribe. The greatest commandment is this- "you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind".

When God said, "you shall", it meant God's people didn't have a choice in the matter. If they were to be blessed, loving God was not optional. It is the same for us. We must choose and then consciously and purposefully use every part of our human existence, our body, mind, soul and spirit to love God. Love is more than a feeling or an emotion-it is a decision driven by the heart. The heart is not only the organ that keeps us alive physically by circulating blood through our body but metaphorically speaking it is our spiritual compass.

Our heart and our mind work together when it comes to making decisions. Loving God with our whole heart means that our every action, every reaction, will be in response and submission to God. **It means choosing to love God more than anything else in life, including life itself.** To borrow from the Great Thanksgiving loving God with our whole heart means that we offer ourselves to God as a holy and living sacrifice for God to use for His glory. Loving God with our whole heart means that we have decided to love God no matter what life may bring on this earth; no half-hearted love affairs, no “I’ll love you if or I’ll love you when’s allowed”. It is believing that all we experience in our earthly life here and now is preparing us for heavenly life in eternity. It is believing the best is yet to come.

Loving God with our entire soul means that we recognize and believe that our body is more than the physical parts we see in the mirror. Indeed, there is something within us that tells us there is more to life than what we are experiencing here and now. There is something deep within us that seeks to understand why we were created and why we were placed here on this earth. God’s people have a desire to know and be in communion with our creator. We yearn to meet Jesus face to face. Loving God with our whole soul means that our every action, every reaction, will be in response and submission to God, and trusting that the best is yet to come. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.

Jesus made a slight change when He cited that passage from the OT. The writer of Deuteronomy said, “love the Lord with all your strength”, rather than all your mind. Perhaps that was because he was speaking to a scholar, one who used his mind more than his hands to earn a living. When we love the Lord with our entire mind we will be at peace when life becomes difficult, understanding that there will be times when we will not have a complete understanding of God’s will. When those opportunities come in life to question God and His ways we will question, but question in a way that brings God glory through them. **Loving God with our entire mind is seeking God’s will to find peace in difficult situations.**

Love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. That is the first and greatest commandment. Though that would have been sufficient to answer the scribe's question, Jesus goes on and makes His answer complete. "And a second is like it- "you shall love your neighbor as yourself". The first greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, or in other words love God perfectly, and the second greatest commandment is this-you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Once we choose to love God with our whole mind and our whole heart instead of half-hearted human reasoning, once we love God because we want to rather than because we know we should, it will bring us a whole new understanding of life and of love. Life will be more than just loving ourselves and others, it will be loving other people like we want to be loved.

As Methodists, we believe that there will be a day when we will do both of those things perfectly. Whether we choose to call it holiness, Christian perfection or entire sanctification the goal we are striving for is the same- perfect love of God and perfect love for each other. They are not just commandments, but parts of a two-piece puzzle we call life, and our goal is to fit them together. **Perfect love of God leads to perfect love of neighbor.** Our world becomes a different place when those two come together.

To help us do that, we will need to answer for ourselves the question Jesus had for the scribe. It is found in verse 42: What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he? Is the Messiah human or divine- or both? Quoting Psalm 110 Jesus demonstrates that the correct answer is c- both. By design the messiah is both perfectly human and perfectly divine. Perfect love revealed through both. Perfect love of God is not perfect without Jesus.

Perfect love that says I choose to love you even though you probably will not choose to love me in return. Perfect love that said I will put my divinity aside and allow my humanity to experience pain, suffering and death so that I will know exactly what it is like when you encounter them. Perfect love that said I will choose to give up my life for you so that you may live. Perfect love that says I have gone to prepare a place for you in my Father's house, and that said I will never leave or forsake you. It is perfect love that said go and love others like I am loving you.

The world says we can love each other without having to love Jesus first. Perhaps that is partially true, but like other half truths it is something Satan is quite happy to have us believe. Worldly love will always have some ifs and when's attached. People have been trying it the world's way for far too long and clearly it has been without success. The time has come for people to do it God's way. Is there any doubt that when we love God perfectly, we will love other people perfectly? My prayer is that we will continue to strive for perfection, with all our heart, our soul and our strength. Amen