

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Matthew 22:34-46

*You shall love.*

Let's walk backwards today. Let's start with the second command, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" And, there you have it. That's what happens when you walk backwards: you get tripped up.

"*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" It doesn't say you should love your neighbor, or please love your neighbor, or love your neighbor if you wanna, but "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"

"*You shall love your neighbor.*" This isn't puppy love. This isn't reciprocal love, that is, love given in return for love received. This is commanded love. "*You shall love.*" There's no peppy pop song in the background, not puppies or lollipops. Jesus could care less about your feelings. "*You shall love,*" and that's just the way it is.

"*You shall love your neighbor.*" There are three Greek words for love. There's brotherly love, there's sexual love, and then there's this kind of love, the hardest kind, unconditional love. This is the love it hurts to give at times. Brotherly love and sexual love are reactions to the love shown by another, but this love is not a reaction. It just loves. It is rooted in nothing more than a determination to love. This is the love that loves not only friends, but enemies, not only kings, but beggars, not only gentlemen, but husbands. "*You shall love your neighbor*" for no other reason than that "you shall love your neighbor," and, once again, that's that.

"*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Who knew things could get even harder. Not only are you to love your neighbor, but you are to love your neighbor as yourself. But how? How can we miserable sinners who all too often don't know how to truly love ourselves—what is sin, after all, but hatred for one's own self and eternal well-being—how are we to love our neighbor as ourselves?

This must be a love that asks questions. What would I want? Let me want that for my neighbor. What would be most beneficial for me? Let me pray that for my neighbor. How do I feel when my reputation is harmed? Let me protect my neighbor from such harm. What happens to me when I give into such temptations? Let me warn my neighbor in such temptations. And so on and so forth the questions go. You get the point. This love is more than the bare minimum. This love lays all the cards on the table.

"*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" This is a painful love, because the entire universe is thrown out of whack, because suddenly I'm not the center of it; my neighbor is. His physical well-being, his spiritual health, his life and joy becomes most important in my life. This is the love Paul speaks about when He compares the love of Christ for the Church to the love of a husband for a wife and writes, "*In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body.*" The highest love we can show one another, whether husband to wife, wife to husband,

or Christian to neighbor is a love that fails to distinguish between him or her and me, a love that sees us all as one in Christ and His love.

So how have you done? Have you loved? Have you unconditionally loved? Have you loved yourself as you ought, avoiding all the lies of the devil and desires of the flesh that so entangle? Have you loved your neighbor as you in Christ should love yourself? I don't have to see your test to grade it. We all get the same score, and there's not a vowel in the house. *"You shall love your neighbor."* *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* And you haven't.

And every sin is a sin against the first commandment. Every sin against ourselves or another is a sin against God. Every failure to love our neighbor is a failure to love our God who tells us to love our neighbor. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* You shall, but you haven't. Same love, same test, same grade. And there's just not enough dunce caps to go around.

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* In other words, with all you are, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, you are to be the Lord's, and live as the Lord's, and live for the Lord. What good is a car that loves you with everything but its wheels? What good is a plane that loves you with everything but its wings? God wants all of it and instead has been given so little.

"But it's impossible," maybe you're ready to throw up your arms and complain. But it is possible. It's right in front of us in our text. It is possible, and He threw out His arms, cried out to His Father, and died to prove it. If I told each of you that you could be saved only if you were falsely convicted, whipped, beaten, stripped, crowned with thorns, spat upon and mocked like the world's sorriest fool, saddled with a cross, marched through hostile crowds to the top of a craggy hill, nailed to that wood, and slowly suffocated as your body sagged in the blistering heat of the Middle Eastern sun, some of you might second guess if you really wanted to be saved so much. But Christ did what many of us might well have bristled at the very thought of suffering, even though we deserved it, and He did it, not for Himself, but for you, because He could no longer tell the difference between Him and you, because that is what this kind of love does, it makes one Body out of Christ and His neighbors, one Body on a tree and one Body in the Church.

*"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,"* and He who gave them hung on that torturous timber to prove this love not only a possible love, but His very love for you.

David's Lord, true God from God and Light from Light, Christ came down from heaven above to earth to join your team to take your place, to be your substitute so that you might share His victory through faith. True God, He became true Man, He became one of us that His death might be our death and His life our life. The Almighty took on our weakness, put on our frailty, in order to by His divine strength pay what we alone owed: a world of guilt, a world that, fortunately for us, fit squarely on His sunken shoulders.

This love had no puppies about it. Christ never looked down from the tree of the cross and whispered, "I love you, pooky." No, He prayed, *"Father, forgive them."* This love was more

than a feeling. This love was a determination, and that determined love is the love that cannot help but breed love. "*You shall love.*" There's no choice in the matter, because you've been loved by Love Himself, and when He is set before your eyes it becomes hard to tell the difference between you and your neighbor, because in Him there is one Body, because in Him what matters most is what brings glory to God and God to my neighbor.

We walked backwards, but we got there. Today you've found true love. I'd say not to let go of it, but the truth is that it is determined never to let go of you, hard as that may be. Amen.