

THE WHOLE LAW IN ONE WORD (PART 2)
MATTHEW 22:34-40

Several years ago, the American Evangelical Church sang a simple chorus in our worship services that contained a simple but profound truth. “We Are One in the Bond of Love.”

Oh, how times have changed! And to keep up with the times I have rewritten that chorus to reflect what is currently happening in the American church.

*“We are one if you agree with me.
We are one if you agree with me.
Lest your views align
with the ones that are mine,
You cannot go to church with me.”*

We discovered in the last several months that this “bond of love” was made of a substance that was not nearly as deep and binding as we thought. Whereas we thought it was comprised of our shared union with Christ and devotion to Christ, we discovered that it was actually comprised of shared political persuasions and cultural convictions. Whereas we assumed that this bond was permanent and indissoluble, we discovered that, by pushing certain buttons, it can dissolve overnight. Whereas we thought this bond was elastic and could withstand intense stress and strain, we discovered that it was so fragile that it broke when pressed by even slight provocations.

Which suggests that this bond, this glue, this adhesive that we thought was made of genuine love, was not genuine love after all. It may have looked and felt like love on the surface, but when push came to shove, it proved to be counterfeit.

I say this is because of how genuine love is defined in the Scriptures. *“[Real] love is patient, [real] love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ [Real] love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ [Real] love never fails” (1 Cor. 13:4-8a).*

One of the things that stands out in this definition is that real love is unqualified and unconditional. It is not based on shared convictions or stances. It is not diminished by disagreement or disappointments. It does not fluctuate because of failure. It is impervious to pain and pressure. It holds fast, refuses to let go, and never gives up.

It was this kind of love that Jesus was talking about when He said to His disciples, *“It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another” (John 13:35).* Not, “if you think and act alike.” Not, “if you agree with each other.” Not even, “if you have correct doctrine.” If you LOVE one another.

Love is *the* defining characteristic—the identifying mark of a follower of Jesus. If we do not love, said Paul, it does not matter how gifted or eloquent or knowledgeable we are. We are nothing and our service counts for nothing.

It shouldn’t be any surprise, then, that when Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment in the Old Testament, He replied, **verses 37-40**, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*

Jesus says that the whole law can be summarized by the word LOVE. He says that if you were to distill our moral and ethical duty into its most essential component, it would be

love. Love is the basic motive and ethic of the people of God.

Last week we looked at the first half of this passage, in which Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*” We talked about what this means and why it is so important to God. Today we are going to look at the second half, in which Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Every Jew knew this command and affirmed its importance. It was considered by many Jews to be the second greatest commandment (Luke 10:27). But I’m not sure anyone other than Jesus understood the inextricable relationship between the greatest commandment and this one.

When Jesus said, “The second is like it,” I believe He was saying not only that loving our neighbor as ourselves is equally important, but that we cannot do one without the other. If we wholeheartedly love God, we *will* love what God loves, and God loves human beings—every human being. Therefore, when we truly love God, we *will* love others. Our love for God compels us to love our neighbor. Loving our neighbor is the inevitable result of loving God.

But what is love? It is important that we spend a few moments defining the word that Jesus uses for “love,” especially because in the English language the word “love” can be vague and generic. We use the word “love” to describe our feelings about everything from a spouse to a brand of toilet paper. But in the Greek language there are nearly a dozen words for love, each with a distinct emphasis or nuance.

In verse 38, the word for love is **agapao**, which is a word that describes an act of the will, rather than a feeling. Agapao is a deliberate choice to pursue the good of another, treating him/her with the respect, dignity, and consideration he/she deserves as a person made in God’s image. Agapao is having God’s perspective and attitude about a person and then treating him/her accordingly.

We are going to talk about where this love comes from and what this love looks like in a few moments, but, first, I want to answer the question, Who is one’s neighbor?

There was naturally much discussion and debate among Jewish Bible scholars about the meaning of “neighbor,” and by the first century several interpretations had emerged. The school of Shammai, for example (the conservative seminary of the Pharisees), defined “neighbor” as someone who is camped on your side of the street. They took that to mean not only someone who lives in close proximity to you physically, but someone who is, *metaphorically*, camped on your side of the street. Namely, someone who holds your views, shares your convictions, and agrees with your opinions.

That is what you call an interpretation of convenience. When you come across a command that you don’t like, or that is difficult to obey, or that doesn’t align with your theological biases, or that forces you out of your comfort zone, you adjust it, edit it, or come up with your own definitions to make it mean what you want it to mean.

Of course, when you do that, everything gets distorted. In this case, the Pharisees’ interpretation of “neighbor” was not at all what God intended when He gave the Law. And so instead of being a community that was marked by neighborly love, they became a divided community that was marked by discrimination, prejudice, and spiritual snobbery. “I’ll love this person because he’s got the same views and values as me, but I can treat that person with contempt because he doesn’t agree with me.”

The Pharisees actually took it a step further. They concluded that when God said, “Love your neighbor”, He meant that your neighbors are the *only* ones you have to love, and that not only were you free to *hate* those who were not your neighbors, you had an obligation

to hate them. Jesus addressed this in His Sermon on the Mount when He said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”* Please note, this was “said” by the Jews, not written in the Word of God. Nevertheless, that oral tradition, that skewed interpretation, was perceived as binding by most Jews in the first century.

But when Jesus recites the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, His definition of neighbor is any and every person that we encounter, including our enemies. You may recall that in Luke’s version of this conversation, the lawyer asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus defined “neighbor” when He told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), a story that shocked His audience because they despised Samaritans.

But this tells us something extremely important about this kind of love. It is not discriminatory. It is not conditional. It is not based on what a person says or does, or on the color of their skin, or the tribe to which they belong, or their political or denominational affiliations, or their theological convictions, or their socio-economic class. It is based on what God thinks and feels about that person. It is based on the fact that they have been created by God in His image, and that God dearly loves that person.

So, the commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” means that we love anybody and everybody we encounter. Not merely those who we like, or those who are loveable, or those who are camped on the same side of the street. But those we don’t like, those who rub us the wrong way, those who get under our skin, those who fail us, hurt us, disagree with us, and disappoint us over and over. And that is what makes this love, *agapao*, so unique. It is unconditional and unqualified.

And this love, *agapao*, is the bonding agent that binds us together. This is the love to which Jesus was referring when He said, *“It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love (agapao) one another” (John 13:35).*

But I want to underscore something. The kind of love that Jesus is describing here, which is the love that Paul defined in 1 Corinthians 13, is not a natural love. It does not have its origins in the heart of man, and it cannot be generated through any amount of human effort or resolve. Though we are commanded to express it, it is humanly impossible to possess this love let alone express it without God’s enablement. For this is *divine* love—it is thoroughly *supernatural*. It originates from the heart of God, and it can only be expressed by those to whom He gives it and whom He has given the capacity to express it.

The Apostle John said, *“Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone who loves has been born of God” (1 John 4:7-8).* When we are born of God, He imparts His nature to us, part of which *is* love. Therefore, He gives us the capacity to love with *His* love. But just because we have been born of God and have the capacity to love like God, does not mean that we will always do so. We can easily and inadvertently default to our natural, human love, with all of its conditions and limitations.

If we want to genuinely love people, including those who are hard for us to love, we must be vigilant about asking God to give it to us. We must ask Him and trust Him to fill us with His Holy Spirit so that the Spirit can display His fruit through us, the first and most important of which is love.

It is this kind of love that forms a permanent, indissoluble bond. It is this kind of love that keeps us from fracturing and fragmenting when the going gets tough and we are experiencing stress and strain. It is this kind of love that pleases and blesses our Lord Jesus.

Long before we sang, “We are One in the Bond of Love,” we used to sing another song.

“Blessed be the tie that binds,

*Our hearts in Christian love.
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.*

Jesus prayed for this very thing just a couple of hours before He was crucified. He said, ²⁰ *“I [pray] for those who will believe in me...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us...May they be one even as we are one” (John 17:20-21).* The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above, where Jesus and the Father are one.

I want to go back to what I said at the beginning about why there has been so much tension and division in the American evangelical church in the last eighteen months. I think it is simple—frighteningly simple. The tie that bound us together was made of natural, human love and affection, which is flimsy, which frays easily, and which inevitably unravels. We were loving each other with love that we generated, that originated from our own hearts—a love that is conditional, discriminatory, and limited.

Had we been bound with the tie the songwriter declared to be blessed, we would undoubtedly have come out of this season in very different shape. Because the tie He described is made of an altogether different substance—a substance that is unearthly, unbreakable, indissoluble. That tie is comprised of divine love—agape love—a love that is patient, that is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. It’s a love that never, ever fails.

So, let’s talk for a minute about what agape love would look like if it was expressed in the American church today. It would look like Jesus’ prayer in **John 17:20-23**. ²⁰ *“I do not ask for [my disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:20-23).*

Our *oneness* with each other was and is the longing of Jesus’ heart, and that oneness is made possible because, according to Jesus, we have Christ *in* us, and we are *in* Christ and *in* the Father. We literally share in their relationship, a relationship that is characterized by perfect love, perfect peace, perfect harmony. So, when Jesus prayed in verse 23 that we may become *perfectly* one, He was asking that we may be able to love each other as the Father loves Him, and that our relationships with each other are characterized by peace and harmony. That simply means there are no walls or barriers between us because of an offense that has *not* been forgiven; there is no unresolved conflict, there is no lingering tension, there is no rivalry or jealousy or ill will. There are no cliques or constituencies where there is an “us” versus “them” mentality. There is no gossip or slander.

There is, rather, a commitment to *live* as one, just as Christ has made us one. There is a commitment to pursue reconciliation, even when we have been personally offended or injured and have reasons, from a *human* perspective, to hold a grudge or drift apart or build a wall. There is a commitment to preserve the relationship and restore fellowship with the person who has hurt us.

Is this possible? You’d better believe it! God has made it possible...but only if we possess his love. Only if we go to Him to get it and then let His Spirit express it through us. And you know what the benefit of this kind of love in the body of Christ is? Yes, it pleases the Father. Yes, it brings us joy. But it also reveals to the world that Jesus is the real deal.

The name and reputation of Jesus have taken a beating this last year. The names "Christian" and "Evangelical" have become derogatory terms in our nation in the last eighteen months, and those who say that it is because we have been persecuted for Christ's sake are not fooling anyone but themselves.

May God have mercy on us. May God forgive us for our foolishness. May God help us to learn from our dismal failures. And may God give us His love for one another so that, while there is still time, we can restore Jesus' good name and reputation, and show the world that He is, indeed, the Son of God.

#286 Hymnal

1. Blest be the tie that binds
our hearts in Christian love;
the fellowship of kindred minds
is like to that above.

2. Before our Maker's throne
we pour our ardent prayers;
our fears, our hopes, our aims are one,
our comforts and our cares.

3. We share each other's woes,
each other's burdens bear,
and often for each other flows
the sympathizing tear.

4. When we asunder part,
it gives us keenest pain,
but we shall still be joined in heart,
and hope to meet again.

5. The glorious hope revives
our courage on the way:
in perfect friendship we shall live
in God's eternal day.

The Whole Law in One Word (part 2)
Matthew 22:38-40

Main Idea: The love which is commanded comes from God and is unqualified and unconditional.

Introduction: We are one in the bond of ?

The Question about the Law (34-36)

The Summation of the Law (37-40)

Jesus' recitation of "The Shema" (37)

Jesus' recitation of Lev. 19:18, 34 (38-39)

"Love your neighbor as yourself"

Relationship to "the greatest commandment"

The meaning of "neighbor"

Interpretations of convenience

Anyone and everyone

The meaning of "love" (agapao)

It is volitional

It is supernatural

It is permanent and indissoluble

Application for a fractured and fragmented church

What love looks like in today's climate

Restoring the adhesiveness in the bond of love