

**“The Greatest”**  
**Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

You’ve probably heard the expression, which has been around for a while, about how human beings are “wired” for one thing or another. The phrase is borrowed from the world of electronics. It’s used to describe those aspects of human behavior that are instinctive, not learned, part of our DNA. Some things we are said to be wired for are:

- Connection; we are social creatures and we need to belong to a group, to other human beings.
- Avoiding loss; most of us tend to avoid risks that could lead to harm.
- Gossip; this seems common to every human culture—we love to talk about one another.<sup>1</sup>
- Seeking God; humans seek transcendence—we are wired to seek meaning and look for it in that which is beyond us, what most religions call God.

Another thing we seem to be “wired” for is to look for the best of something or someone. We like to look for the greatest in every field of human endeavor. Whether it is the greatest author, movie, pizza, athlete, whatever; we look up to the best and seek out the greatest among. Think of the number of people who were named (or who claimed) to be great: Great kings such as Alexander, Catherine, Frederick, and in the Bible, Herod the Great, who was alive when Jesus was born, and who started building the temple in Jerusalem but did not live to see it completed. In architecture, there’s: The Great pyramids, the Great Wall of China, cities that are said to be great like London or New York. In sports we find: Muhamad Ali, who named himself “The Greatest,” and was widely recognized as the best boxer in the world.

We human beings look to those who accomplish magnificent things, and we admire many of them. We may also look to greatness as a way to simplify our lives; as in, what is the greatest (or best) way to make a living? (My answer to that would be: whatever earns you enough to live on and makes you happy). It is in this spirit of greatness, seeking the best, that we approach this morning’s lesson from the Gospel of Matthew:

- Jesus is in Jerusalem in the days leading up to the Passover.
- He’s been fielding questions from the religious experts of the day about a number of things:
  - o Should we pay taxes? Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.
  - o What is the kingdom of heaven like? A wedding banquet where everyone is invited, but only the faithful are welcome to stay.
  - o In the Resurrection, who will be married to whom? There is no marriage in the Resurrection...everyone will be like the angels in heaven.
- Now, the Pharisees, who believed in following the Law of Moses as closely as they could, came to Jesus with a question about the Law: “Teacher,” asked one of the lawyers, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”
- The Jewish faith at the time had 613 recognizable laws that regulated every aspect of their life with God and with others in the community. The question was asked to see if Jesus would single out any one particular law from the many.
- In a way, the lawyer was asking which law is the best, the “silver bullet” among all the laws. If we have trouble observing all 613 laws, which one should we focus on the most? Which one law is the greatest?

I’m not sure exactly what the lawyer and the Pharisees gathered around him were expecting Jesus to say. But his response should not have been a surprise:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

This is the summary of God’s law of love. Loving God is our first and foremost obligation in our covenant relationship with God. It was first and foremost for the Jewish faith as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Nigel Nicholson, “How Hardwired Is Human Behavior?” Harvard Business Review, July-August 1998, article online, <https://hbr.org/1998/07/how-hardwired-is-human-behavior>, accessed 21 October 2020.

The command to love God comes from a reading in Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus knew this was the centerpiece of life for the Jewish people: to love the One God who created all that is, and to live in the light of God’s steadfast love.

But Jesus added a second commandment, one that is like the first, but admittedly not quite its equal. This commandment comes from the Book of Leviticus. It comes at the end of a list of admonishments for ways not to treat other people:

- You shall not render an unjust judgment.
- You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.
- You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin.

“But you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19: 18).

The greatest commandment, and the one like it, describe how we are to live. First, we seek to live in right relationship with God. That is the starting point. All that we think, say and do should be done out of love for God. Second, we seek to live in right relationship with others, with our neighbors. Both commandments are vital in living God’s law of love. They are vital because:

- We cannot love God unless we love what God loves.
- God loves people—all people, for all human beings are made in the image of God.
- We cannot love God and oppress, exploit, denigrate, or discriminate against a neighbor because God loves our neighbors, too.
- To love God means to love in the same way God loves: without boundaries, without qualification (remember, we are to show love, even to our enemies), and without concern for what other people will say.

To love God, we must love what God loves, and God loves all that God created, including our neighbors. Now, the Bible spends some time sorting out who are our neighbors. Jesus attempted to answer this in the parable of the Good Samaritan: the neighbor is the one who showed love to another.

To live by the law of God’s love is a call to holy living. We see this in the reading from Leviticus, which begins its discourse on treating others fairly with the words: “you shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). We may react poorly, or at least, wrongly, when we hear that call to be holy. “What do you mean, preacher? God’s the only one who is holy. No human being can be like that.” In one sense, that is true. There is no one who is holy like God. But the concept of being holy doesn’t mean we have to be perfect in everything we do in our efforts to honor God. Being holy means we are set apart, separated from the rest, called to do the loving things God desires us to do. Think again about those actions toward others outlined in Leviticus: don’t be unjust, don’t slander, don’t hate your neighbor.

- Being holy, being set apart, means to avoid these behaviors and to show love instead.
- Being holy, being set apart, means seeking unity rather than division. God’s love unites, its aim is to bring all people together.
- Being holy, being set apart, means we do not follow the culture around us; a culture that goes to great lengths to demonize people we don’t agree with, and we see a great deal of that in our social, economic and especially in our politics.
- Being holy and set apart means that as followers of Jesus Christ, we do not knock people down, we lift them all up to the status of neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

The greatest commandment has two parts: to love God and to love our neighbor. We need them both if we are to live and to practice God’s law of love in the world. Doing both suggests the Christian faith is a both/and faith.

- We do not just love God.
- We love God and our neighbor.

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<sup>2</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, “Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 and Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Commentary 1:Connecting the Reading with Scripture,” in Joel B. Green, et. al., Editors, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 408.

John Wesley, the principal founder of the Methodist movement, recognized this as he developed his idea that Christians are to live a way he called “holiness of heart and life.” [Quotation follows from *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, uses male gender language, he/him, but should be understood as applying to everybody]. According to Wesley, for followers of Jesus Christ:

- “God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying, ‘Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth whom I desire beside thee.’”
- “And loving God, he ‘loves his neighbor as himself;’ he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to ‘do good to them that hate’ him, yet he [prays for them], though they spurn his love...”<sup>3</sup>

We love, both God and neighbor. We practice this love by worshipping God, learning of God’s love through prayer, Bible study, and reflection. And we show love toward neighbor by being helpers, feeding the hungry, giving to the poor, and seeking justice for those who cannot attain it by themselves.

Ultimately, we Methodists are a people of both faith and works.

- Faith in Jesus Christ, who saved us for God’s eternal purposes when he died on the Cross.
- Works that take part in God’s redeeming work in the world by helping to heal the brokenness of individuals and societies. This is not works righteousness, as some will claim, but a loving response to God for what God has done for us.

The greatest commandment comes from the greatest teacher the world has ever known, Jesus Christ. The greatest commandment, and the one like it, were given to us to remind us we must love what God loves, and God loves all that God has created.

The greatness of Jesus was never measured in the same way as that of earthly kings. You’ve never heard Jesus referred to as: “Jesus, the Great.” His greatness came to us when he humbled himself, becoming one of us...living a life of subsistence work among poverty... bringing good news for the poor and downtrodden—this world situation will not stand! Injustice, poverty, hunger, oppression will not be part of God’s coming kingdom... being obedient to his heavenly Father, even unto death on a Cross...and, to He was raised again to new life that God shares with us by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

The greatness of Jesus comes in the shape of a Cross. And we are called to follow him, to take up our own crosses, and to do what Jesus did...to love what God loves. Let us remember to love God with our whole selves; and, to love our neighbors, near and far, with the same love Jesus has for us. “Do this and you will live” (Mark 10:28). Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 18, 19. [Reprinted from the complete original text as authorized by the Wesleyan Conference Office in London, England, in 1872.