

The Greatest Commandment

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Sermon prepared for **23 October 2005**,
third sermon.

Reading: **Matthew 22: 34-46**
(14 minutes)

Theme: *"The inseparability of loving God and loving others"*

INTRODUCTION

Aren't we at an interesting time in the life of St Martins? Earlier this year, many of us worked through the Purpose Driven Life, which helped us to consider what God's purpose is for humanity. We've recently gone through a series of Network courses, where most of us have had time to learn about spiritual gifts and to think about how we believe God is calling us to serve him. We've just been through the Living Waters Mission, where we've learned more about the working of the Holy Spirit and have had the opportunity to deepen our relationship with God. Today we've handed out the Dedicated Giving and Time & Talents forms. In four weeks we will be called on to dedicate our finances and time and spiritual gifts to God's service for the next year. And the week after that we'll elect the new council. So a lot of changes have been taking place in our community.

For me personally, this is an interesting time. I have recently started my formal studies in theology, which confronts me with the little voice in the back of my head that says that I should leave social work and go into fulltime ministry. And then yesterday I celebrated the 21st anniversary of my salvation, so I've kind of come of age spiritually.

Don't you find, when you get to these sort of 'watershed' times in your life, that you need to take stock and think about where you've come from and where you are going. Like we do at New Year – we review the year past and think about the year ahead. As we enter the month leading up to DG Sunday, I feel that each of us needs to spend time reflecting on our relationship with God and our service to him, to each other and to society.

THE PASSAGE

Our Gospel reading is one of the most well-known passages of the Bible, probably second only to John 3:16. In it, Jesus sums up the law and the prophets in two statements, which are so closely integrated as to be almost one, like two sides of a coin. If you were here last time I preached, you may remember that this incident, like the parable of the two sons, takes place during the last week of Christ's life and is in partial response to the various challenges that Jesus receives from the Jewish teachers and leaders. So, this is core teaching about our Christian walk.

The Rabbis or teachers at that time often engaged in debates about the various Jewish laws, weighing up which were most important, looking for underlying principles that distilled all the specific requirements. And so Jesus is asked, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" And his response is that the law can be summed up as loving God and loving others. If you've done Network, you should remember that this is a recurrent theme in scripture – our vertical and horizontal relationships.

So let's look at what Jesus says about these two relationships, and start to reflect on how we are doing in living out these commands.

OUR LOVE FOR GOD

Regarding our vertical relationship with God, Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". Jesus is saying that we must love God with our entire being, with everything that we are.

This answer is taken from Deuteronomy 6:5. In Mark's rendition of this story, Jesus also quotes Deuteronomy 6:4, which is "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 strength". So, our love for God is a response to who God is. As we read in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us".

So, how are you doing in relation to this command? Do you love God with your entire self, with every fibre of your being? Do you dedicate daily time to God – just quiet time to spend with Him, talking to him and listening to him? Do you dedicate daily time to read, study and meditate on the Bible? Do you trust God to help you live your life, or do you do it largely on your own? Do you make a conscious decision each day to sacrifice yourself to him? Do you allow God to change you on the inside? Do you rejoice, because of what God has done for you and allow his peace to wash over you every day?

If you are anything like me, you will probably have answered 'no' to many or most of these questions. Loving God with our whole heart is not easy – we love him, yes, but not with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength. And this, of course, raises an important question at this time of our life at St Martins: "What do you want to do in the next 12 months, to live out this command to love God?" (Pause for reflection)

LOVE FOR OTHERS

Regarding our horizontal relationship with others, Jesus says, "Love your neighbour as yourself". This is the foundation of the golden rule – to do to others the same as you would want done to you.

This answer is taken from Leviticus 19:18. Now in Leviticus, the word 'neighbour' referred to all Israelites as well as non-Jews who were living with them (19:34). By Jesus time, however, the definition of 'neighbour' had been restricted, and referred only to Jews or people who converted to Judaism. But in the parallel version of this story in Luke 10, Jesus explains who our neighbour is through the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here He broadens the definition of neighbour to include anyone with whom we have dealings at all.

So, how are you doing in relation to this command? Do you love other people like you love yourself? Do you serve other Christians in the body of Christ? Do you contribute financially to God's work at St Martins? Do you reach out to those in need, or do you rather avoid them? Do you practice neighbourliness – avoiding racism, sexism and ageism? Do you stand against injustice and oppression? Do you live ethically and responsibly, obeying the laws of South Africa? Do you share the gospel message, the good news of Jesus Christ, with people you know? Do you contribute to the spiritual growth of others? Have you committed to one or two ministries at St Martins?

Once again, many of us will have answered 'no' to many or most of these questions. It is not easy to love others the way God wants us to – we care for some people, but to love the unlovely is really hard. Again, this raises an important question at this time of our life at St Martins: "What do you want to do in the next 12 months, to live out this command to love others?" (Pause for reflection)

INTEGRATING OUR LOVE

So, Jesus is saying that we must love God with our complete being, and that we must love everyone else as much as we love ourselves. Yet, Jesus says more than just this in this passage. He is not only saying love God and love others. He is also saying something about how these two things actually fit together as one; like two sides of a coin, you cannot have one without the other.

For example, do you notice that Jesus has said that the second commandment – to love our neighbour – is like the first commandment – to love God? What do you think this means? How is the second like the first? Well, the second commandment flows *out* of the first commandment. In this way, it is an *expression* of the first commandment. So, in effect, we demonstrate our love for God by loving others. As we read in 1 John 4:20, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." So, John and Jesus are saying that our love for God is inseparable from our love for others. And so we actually can test our love for God, by our love for others.

He then concludes by saying that "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments". By this Jesus means that love is the foundation of the law – effectively, every act of obedience is an expression of our love for God or others. It is love that makes the OT law coherent. Everything that we do as Christians, under the new covenant, must also be grounded in love for God and others.

In this regard, it is interesting that in Luke's version of this story (10:25), Jesus provides the answer of loving God and loving others in response to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And his conclusion is, "Do this and live." And in Mark's version (12:34), Jesus says to the person who understood these commands, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." So clearly, these commandments are central to what it means to be saved and are thus core teachings for Christians. We express our salvation and actually give *evidence* of our salvation by loving God with everything we have and by loving others as we love ourselves. Does this make sense? Jesus is not saying that loving God and others saves us. Rather, he is saying that *when* we are saved, we *will* love God and others. Indeed, there is such a strong link between salvation and love, that our love God and others becomes a *test* of our salvation.

And so these three things – the way the second command is like the first, the way love is the foundation of all other commands and laws, and the way our salvation is expressed and proved through our love – all of these things suggest that our lives as Christians must be characterised by love – love for God, love for our families, love for other Christians and love for people who are different from us. Jesus is saying that it is not good enough to love him on Sunday – we must love him all the time. It is not good enough to love people who are close to you but not love those who are different from you – we must love everyone as if they are our neighbours. It is not good enough to love God but be unloving towards others – our love for others is an expression of our love for God.

Like a coin, love for God and love for others are closely integrated. What will happen if you try to separate the two sides of a coin? Will it still be a coin? No! So in the same way, if we try to separate these two commands, we lose them both.

So, here is what I think Jesus would want us at St Martins to do in response to this passage. He wants us to go away, with a somewhat heavy heart, feeling pensive, perhaps even downcast, and to do some soul-searching. Jesus wants us to look unflinchingly at this and to recognise how we fail him. And then, he wants us to renew our commitment to him, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And this time of year, with everything we've been through together, and with DG Sunday coming up in three weeks, is the perfect time to do this.

Amen.

ⁱ Gosh, this sermon was conflicted. I first prepared this sermon. Then, in response to some things that happened at church, I prepared another one, which I really believed (still do) that God wanted me to preach – speaking into those happenings ('Grappling with the Spirit'). But the sermon was refused by my supervisor. It crushed me – the sense of being silenced and my sense of God's speaking being disregarded.

So I returned to this sermon. On the day I was still feeling wounded and upset. I got very stressed between the services – was playing piano for the second service and organising the data projector and meeting to discuss the family service the next week. So I was not in a good space personally. Threw myself on the Lord for strength to get through the two sermons.

Got fine feedback and I think the message was relevant for us at this time.

I had memorised the text, so was able to preach largely without notes – I can't remember now (January 2006) whether I had the notes with me, but I do remember preaching largely from memory.