

Gospel Gleanings, “...especially the parchments”

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How Should I Love God?

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40)

Not only does Jesus transform our thinking about how we should love God in this passage, but He also transforms our thinking regarding how we are to love our neighbor. In another lesson Jesus helps us understand who our neighbor is (Luke 10:29 and context). It is not our favorite friend or the person who lives next door to us. It is anyone in our world whom we discover in need. If they have a need, we have a job as their neighbor.

If we translate the first four of the Ten Commandments as containing a basic moral code that is to govern our conduct toward God (and its corollary in our passage of loving God with all our being), Jesus' second summary commandment applies the remaining six commandments to the governing of our moral conduct toward our fellow-man. We are to honor our parents. Neither parent nor child should define honor as worship. Occasionally you will observe either parents or children who worship each other and claim that they are merely honoring the commandment. Your parents or children are human. They make mistakes. They are not sinless saints. Honor them, but don't worship them. You respect human life so that you do not murder another. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus applied the principle of this Commandment to conduct that involves far more than murder. Unjustified anger constitutes murder in the heart, so we should curb even that conduct. Jesus further applied the same principle to marriage. As uncontrolled anger constitutes murder in the heart, unrestricted lust constitutes adultery in the heart. What is the implication? Jesus applied all of the Ten Commandments to our immaterial, mental processes, not just external conduct. In all areas involving our interaction with others we are to respect their person and property. In the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount (Although this message in one degree of detail or another appears in other places in the gospels, I suggest that you refer to Matthew chapters 5-7 for this study.) Jesus also added another one of those telescopic principles to reinforce what we have already examined. We call it the "Golden Rule." Simply stated, you treat other people as you would like for them to treat you. This simple principle of conduct would transform most of our lives unbelievably. It drives our thinking from the external moral posture to the internal ethical. More often than I prefer to number I have encountered professing Christians who seem to be incurable gossips. They will shamelessly pry into your private life for personal details that invariably pop up in their conversation with other people when you are not around. Would you like to put them to the test of the Golden Rule? Try prying into their private lives. Try getting them to talk about their finances, their children, or other private matters. They will often react with a kind of "holy indignation" at your questions. Their finances are no one's business. Their children are sinless, so don't suggest anything less. If these folks made any progress at all with "Sermon on the Mount" ethics, they'd reform their lives and become far greater benefactors to those around them. This simple principle of applying the ethics of the Ten Commandments to our immaterial, thinking processes is indeed life-changing.

Now we come to the proverbial \$64,000 question. How do you love your neighbor as yourself? Many folks attempt to build the rationale of this principle on man's fundamental fallenness. We are all fallen creatures who are inclined to worship self. No one ever needed to learn to "love himself;" we are all experts at that process. I rather question that Jesus would build a summary principle that encodes six of the Ten Commandments on man's fallen nature. In fact I consider this interpretation irretrievably flawed. Did Jesus build the first principle, to love God with all our being, on our fallenness?

Occasionally those who acknowledge man's inherent, total depravity, will take this principle too far. I ask you to ponder a rather simple, but pertinent question. We can all agree that man in his unregenerate or unsaved state is depraved, totally so. Is it proper and Biblical to assert that the regenerate child of God remains in a state of *total* depravity? I answer an unqualified no. Read Paul's references to Old Testament descriptions of man's sinfulness in Romans 3. If the regenerate child of God retained all of these traits, preaching the gospel to them, teaching them to live moral and spiritual lives of faith would be utterly futile. While we retain some elements of our sinfulness after regeneration, we should never think of ourselves as depraved and fallen, but as redeemed. When Paul initiated a two chapter parenthesis to his theological teaching (Romans 6 and 7), he began his teaching with a question, "Shall we continue in sin?" He rejected the idea and promptly urged us to "count," regard or formally classify ourselves as dead to sin and alive to God. No where in the New Testament are regenerate elect commanded to regard themselves as depraved and hopelessly fallen under sin.

If Jesus intended that we "love" God in a social or moral sense with all our being, we may safely conclude that He

intended a parallel instruction toward our love of our fellow-man. We are to love other men and women in a social or moral sense. God directs us to apply the moral and ethical principles of the last six Commandments both to our personal conduct (loving self in a social or moral sense) as well as to our relationship with others. We will neither murder them nor subject them to our irrational anger. We will not subject them to our lustful thoughts or actions. We will not covet for self things that belong to them. As we sincerely and robustly seek to apply both the literal moral and the applied ethical principles of the Ten Commandments to our own personal lives, we shall equally apply them to our relationships with others. Many of us grew up in homes where this principle was reinforced by our parents. The parent who urges his/her child to live when not at home so that he/she may look in the mirror at home without shame is imparting this principle to their child. Self-respect in the sense of living above board with moral integrity exemplifies this principle. Our generation has corrupted “self-respect” into something of a self-worship principle that has little to do with the “self-respect” that my parents taught me as a child. In their vocabulary “self-respect” had nothing to do with me viewing myself egotistically. It had everything to do with me living above board with moral integrity whether at home or away from home, in the presence of my parents or in their absence.

The contemporary rejection of Biblical self-love seems to ignore the basic definition above of love in a social and moral sense. We truly need to learn to love our self in a social and moral sense. I have seldom met anyone who excessively viewed self with moral integrity. We all have significant grounds for improvement in terms of our love of self when we define love according to its first century use of moral love. In this sense loving self consistently maintains personal moral integrity and honors such integrity, whether in self or in others, because it is right and God-honoring.

Not long ago I heard a preacher in the pulpit describe himself as socially abrasive and unacceptable. He devoted a sermon to demonstrating one abrasive example after another in his preaching illustrations and in his pulpit attitude. Rather than attracting listeners to his message and conclusions, he seemed intent on turning people off to them. One must ask the obvious question. Why preach if you work at turning people off to your message? I had the thought during this sermon that this man needs to learn to “love” himself in a “social” sense.

Whether we fail to love ourselves in a social or in a moral sense, we should grow in our realization that failure to love self in this sense certainly predicts failure to love others “as self.”

Someone has defined one’s reputation as referring to what other people think of you and character as what you are “in the dark” when no one is watching. Jesus’ teaching that we love our neighbor as our self brings these two principles into close harmony. They become one and the same. Our reputation becomes our character, and our character pervades our reputation. As we could all improve in our love of God with all our being, we could equally improve our love of our “neighbor” as ourselves.

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