

Introduction

Dionne Warwick is probably the second most iconic soul artist of all time. She recorded numerous hit songs. From 1962 to 1998, 56 of them made the Hot 100. "Walk on By" is thought to be her most popular song. Another of her hits was "I Say a Little Prayer for You." Thinking about the message of Matthew 22:34-40, I was reminded of another of her songs, "What the World Needs Now." The chorus declares that "what the world needs now is love sweet love; it's the only thing that there's just too little of."

There can be no argument with the fact that the world needs love. Most would surely agree that love is always one of the greatest needs there is. Love is such a popular topic in songs and poems. It is also a central matter in the pages of the Bible. However, what the world has in mind in terms of love stands in significant contrast with what the Scripture has in mind. Perhaps another one of Warwick's song illustrates that—the one entitled "You Won't Get to Heaven If You Break My Heart." This distinction becomes clear as we consider what Jesus says is the greatest of all the commandments.

[Read Text and Pray]

Today in these verses from Matthew 22, we arrive at the third test to which Jesus's enemies put him in the form of a challenging question. They believed that by his answer he would indict himself. Once again we see that they failed. But Jesus did so much more in these situations than merely to weasel his way out of a tricky setup. He gave solid answers to serious truth matters. First, there was the matter of taxation and then the resurrection. Now the Pharisees have a question about the commandments. The rabbis had enumerated all the laws of the Old Testament; they determined that there were 613. They also distinguished between the lighter commands and the weightier commands, the lesser and the greater. Regularly they considered and debated among themselves which was the greatest of the commands. It is not that they were altogether agreed, but no doubt the Pharisees had confidence in themselves that Jesus would be stumped or they would be able to contradict whatever answer he would give. However, he was not stumped and they could not object to what he said. Again though, his answer was better than a slick maneuver. It is truth. There IS a greatest commandment. And there is a second greatest too.

And as he says, on these two depend all the Law and the Prophets. In other words everything in the Bible, every command there is, falls underneath these two primary commands to love God and to love your neighbor. You can sum up God's law for his human creatures in these two commandments. All commands relate to loving God because he is the giver of them all. And of these, many relate to God by regulating the love of human beings for one another. So we can assert that the main point of this text is that God's law is summed up in two commands: love God entirely and love your neighbor as yourself. Now with that being said, there are a number of important questions that need to be answered for us to have a really good grasp of what is called for by the greatest command and its close second. I want to consider five of them this morning.

I. What is Love?

A. Love God and love your neighbor. With these as the greatest commandments, it is imperative that we know what love is. Ask the world and you get a variety of answers but most reduce love to a feeling or an emotion. Many understand love as a heightened degree of "like." Liking something

depends on it bringing you some sort of pleasure. I like fried chicken. I don't like bologna. One gives my taste buds a thrill and the other prompts a gag reflex. For the world, love is what I feel for that which excites me and makes me feel good. Love is "like" with the volume turned up.

B. But the scriptures tell us to love not the world and that includes many times its definitions of key biblical words. If we want to understand what God means by love, we need to look to His word. And here we find that love begins with God. The scriptures tell us that "God is love." They also assert that "WE love because HE first loved us." So what is the love of God?

Well, I will tell you one thing it is not. It is not a feeling or an emotion. Now I am not saying it is not accompanied by feelings and emotions or that they may trail behind, but God's love is not in its essence an emotion or a feeling. It is NOT an exponential sense of LIKE. What it is in its essence is a determined and indomitable will to do good to another. It is seen in the Old Testament in God's covenant faithfulness. He gives his word and keeps it for the well-being of his people. He pursues his people even when they rebel to keep his promises and love them as his own.

A living, breathing illustration of God's love occurs through the Old Testament prophet Hosea. He married a woman named Gomer, and Gomer was to Hosea what God's people were to him—unfaithful, committing adultery against him to the extent of becoming the slave of another. Gomer left Hosea and was involved with many other men and ultimately became a sex slave. But the Lord instructed Hosea to go and LOVE the adulterous woman, and so he went and paid the price and bought her from slavery and brought her home. Likewise, the Lord had said of adulterous Israel, she is not my wife and I am not her husband. But through the prophet he declared that in steadfast loyal love he would woo her back and betroth her forever. So we find that the love of God is a steadfast determination to do his people good—even to buy them back from slavery to sin.

The New Testament reiterates God's love in this way. The classic verse that expresses the love of God is John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Then **1 John** 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us." Romans 5:8 says that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God's love is a faithful, determined, and unconditional affection that he sets upon his people by which he determines to do them good even at great cost to himself.

The cross of Christ is the paramount demonstration of God's love. He will not be deterred from his determination to make known the riches of his glory unto his people even at the cost of his own Son's life. It is God's good purpose in Christ to bestow upon his people the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness. And because of the great love with which he loves us, he has suffered great cost to himself. He was willing to pay a price so great no one else could pay—laying our sins on his Son so the guilt might be borne away. It is the steadfastness of God's love that prompts Paul to assert in Romans 8 that nothing "shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." He declares, "For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." If he was willing to sacrifice his own Son to die for us, there is no threat to a love so great. This is the love of God. It is loyal. It is determined. It is the equivalent of a vow that he will not break.

This love is the kind of love that marriage is supposed to be about. A couple stands before witnesses and we do not ask them how they feel about each other. If they are declaring marital love for one another, it is not about how ravenously infatuated they are. Infatuation comes and goes like the

wind. Marital love is expressed as a covenant by which both man and wife unconditionally BIND themselves to seek the benefit of each other. They commit themselves to one another in LOYAL love. Such love is striving after the essence of the love that God has for his people.

B. With God's understanding of the nature of love, we are able to see what it is he requires from you and me. It is the determined act to delight oneself in him. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. These aspects of the human being overlap with one another. Commentators agree that the stress is on the complete totality of the human being so as to say that there must not be one rogue dimension of who we are that does not love God. We are to delight ourselves in God with every fiber of our being, with every ounce of strength, and with every aspect of who we are and what we do and think. And the love with which we are to love him to this extent is a love that will not let go, will not turn back, will not hesitate at any cost. It is a love that knows no obstacle, no threat, no hesitation. This is not a feeling, friends. It is a determined loyal love that will never encounter a cost too great. But it is a responsive love. We love him BECAUSE he FIRST loved us.

C. Further, God requires that we love our neighbor. He does not specify the full extent that he does in regard to himself. We are to love our neighbor, not with our whole self as we are to love God. Love for our neighbor must flow out from our love for God. After all he is the one who made us. But he also made every one of our fellow human beings, and we are called to kindness, unconditionally seeking their well-being as God has loved us and sought ours.

We are NOT commanded to love ourselves! We ARE NOT COMMANDED TO LOVE OURSELVES! We are commanded to love our neighbors as we already love ourselves. We do not have to try to love ourselves. We naturally do. We naturally seek our own interests. We naturally seek our own good. We are naturally kind and understanding to ourselves. I know psychologists would stand and argue with me here. But this world is warped. It has replaced God at the center of the universe with self and applauds the worship of self. When by nature I seek my comfort and the satisfaction of my desires, I demonstrate that I love myself.

The Lord is saying, "you see how you love yourself and seek your own well-being? Love others that way too. Do not be deterred." In the sermon on the mount, Jesus commanded that we love even our enemies. Paul says to bless those who persecute you. If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. God's command here is not to possess a certain feeling but to act in unconditional kindness. That is what it means to love your neighbor. It is God who shows us what love is.

II. What is the Worst Aspect of Sin?

The question the Pharisee lawyer put to Jesus supposed that there was a distinction among the commandments of the Lord as to their weight. Jesus's answer affirms this idea. But his affirmation points to the very worst aspect of every sin. Every sin committed, every commandment broken, breaks one or both of these two greatest commandments. If you take the name of God in vain, you have failed to love God. If you break the command not to steal, you have failed to love your neighbor and failed to love God. The point is, you see, that the Pharisees and many who think strictly in terms of commandments focus purely on the sinful act itself, the doing of the sinful action—the stealing, killing, and adulterating. But Jesus's answer here reveals that the greatest sinful aspect of any given sin is that it is a violation of God within the heart and a refusal to love him. It is in the keeping of God's commands that we evidence we do love him. It is in the breaking of his commands that we are not merely failing to abide by God's holy standard and thus making a

mistake. No, sin in whatever form it is committed is an act of hostility toward God. It is an act of hate toward Him. This constitutes the what is so bad about sin. Fight hard against sin, but do not fight simply not to break a command. Fight hard against sin because to not do so is to not love God. Do you love God?

III. What Are My Chances?

The Pharisees looked at God's law and thought of it as a ladder into heaven. Many today do the same. You surely have known people who think they are going to heaven because they try to keep the commandments. The rich young synagogue ruler epitomized this blind mentality. He said he had kept all of the commandments since he was a child. He saw no guilt in himself and thus saw no reason why he could not do something himself to obtain eternal life. However, Jesus exposed his covetous heart and the ruler went away grieved. He loved his worldly possessions and would rather part with eternal life than part with them. But at the root of his heart, he did not love God. What are his chances before the judgment of God?

More to the point, what are yours? How many of us have kept the greatest commandment or the second greatest one without violation . . . even for a single moment? Is God going to bring people into heaven for trying really hard to sometimes love him and to love their neighbor? We need to be reminded of the purpose of the law, the purpose of the commandments. Surely they guide us in what is right, but what do we see when we consider them? What do we see when we consider that God requires that we love him with same determination and loyalty with which he loves? Do any of us love God with ALL our heart, soul, mind, and strength? That is, who of us loves God perfectly? None of us ever have loved God that way. The only human ever to do so was the God/Man Jesus. And where does that leave us?

Paul says in Romans 3, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin." These greatest commandments render every one of us speechless before God, without excuse, guilty and without a defense. What are our chances before God the righteous and just judge? One hundred percent! There is a one hundred percent chance of condemnation!

But there is good news for speechless sinners and haters of God! Apart from God's law a righteousness has been secured by which guilty, speechless sinners can be considered acceptable in his sight. It is the righteousness of Jesus who perfectly kept the law, who loved and loves God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength and who loves his neighbor as himself. If you will become identified with him, through faith, his righteousness will be counted as yours! You will be reconciled with God and you will be saved! But you must repent of your sins and your hatred of God, and you must trust in Jesus Christ and his work of satisfying God's demands by his life, death, and resurrection. If you will do that, he will save you, right here and right now.

IV. What is a Christian's Target?

Those who have come to faith in Christ, who have been redeemed, who have turned from sin, denied themselves, and who are following Christ, we have a target. We have been saved for glory. We have been saved to become spitting images of Jesus. We have been saved to strive after Christlikeness. We have been saved to strive after fulfilling these two greatest commands. Until glory, we will never love neither God nor our neighbor perfectly, but we are called to pursue that goal. We are called to love God and grow in that love and love our neighbor and grow in that love

as well. As we look to Christ, we are being changed into his image one degree of glory at a time. We will be loving more and more, but we must strive for it.

How can we grow in this love? Striving to keep Christ's commandments is one thing. Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." To keep his commandments and love him, you must abide in Christ. You must remain in fellowship with him. You must live in his power and strength. Mainly it means doing what he says to do while trusting him to supply the strength. Recently I heard an illustration of what it means to live in the power of Christ that I think makes it understandable. See, living in Christ's power is like being on a tandem bicycle. You are in the front position with the handlebars in your grip. Christ sits behind supplying the power. As long as you are steering according to his word and his direction, he is supplying the power. But when you turn against his command, he stops, you are the only one propelling yourself now. You abide in Christ when his words abide in and control you. But apart from him you can do nothing. In the power that Christ supplies, then, Love God. Keep his commandments. Let his word dwell in you richly. Live determined to follow his will no matter what obstacle you may encounter. This will also mean loving your neighbor unconditionally with kindness for the glory of God.

V. What is the Link Between Loving God and Loving Others?

We certainly need to understand this link! To love God is the greatest commandment. The second is to love one's neighbor. The order is important. This link involves two truths we must not overlook.

A. First, the link between these two commandments tells us that we cannot truly love our neighbor if we do not first love God. Love of neighbor is grounded in the love of God. If God is not my first love then the way I view loving my neighbor will be corrupt, it will be unholy, it will be sinful. If I do not love God then everything I do is out of the flesh and for the flesh, that is, for my own personal satisfaction. When this is true, I do not love my neighbor, I use my neighbor. What about those folks about whom it is said, "they will give you the shirt off of their backs"? I am not suggesting that kindness is completely absent when people do not love God, but I am saying that there will be reasons why they do it and that those reasons are ultimately selfish. The world loves those who are of the world. But to truly love your neighbor, you must first love God. The truly loving things you will do with the right motive and the right purpose are the things that you will do for others because you are remaining in the vine. Loving your neighbor without loving God will be a work of the flesh and will ultimately lead to destruction.

B. There is a second principle this link brings to our attention. Firstly, you cannot love your neighbor rightly if you do not love God. Secondly, if you do not love your neighbor, you do not love God. If you say you love God but you do not love your neighbor, what you say is a lie; it is false. The scripture boldly and straightforwardly bears this out. In 1 John 4, the Apostle writes, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). He continues, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20-21).

The link here is a critical for our understanding and assurance. Do not fool yourself. You cannot really love others if you do not first love God and you cannot truly be loving God if you do not love others. If you will not love others, you do not love God. Do not be deceived.

Conclusion

The exhortation from this message today is to know God. Seek to know and understand his perfect love better and better. Praise him for it and understand that love is what he wants to be realized in you—first a love for him and second a love for others. But also reckon with the fact that you do not love God or others perfectly. Confess your sin and he will forgive you and empower you to love better than you do. And do not be deceived, you cannot love others without first loving God, and if you do not love others, it cannot be truly said that you love God at all.

Prayer

Benediction

Beloved, in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that he loved us and sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, [we ought to love God and] we also ought to love one another. So as followers of Christ Jesus, let us love God with all of who we are and let us love our neighbor as ourselves. A-men.