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Love, Love, Love
 Mark 12:28-34, 1 John 4:7-21

Some things just have to come first, don't they?

You shouldn't put the cart before the horse,
 and you can't begin to really live until you are able to give and receive
 love. Love is something that must come first in life.

We believe that God is first in life,
 and God is love, so love comes first.

It needs to go into the jar before everything else,
 or it can get left out of our hearts.

Love is the foundation of all life's relationships.

Love is our connection to God.

Without love life is truly meaningless.

Without love even the greatest acts of service ultimately mean nothing,
 because love must come first.

Love is the foundation.

You don't start building a house without a foundation,
 and you don't start really living without having love.

Jesus said that love is what life is all about.

When one of the scribes asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Essentially he was asking what is the most important thing we can do in life? And Jesus answered, "The first is, "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 mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Now the leaders arguing around Jesus asked this to trip him up—

they could attack him if he said that one of their 613 laws was more
 important than the rest.

But what he did is boil down all the laws to just two commandments. The
 first from Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema.

And the second comes from Leviticus 19:18.

Out of 613 commandments Jesus made it very simple.

Love God.

Love your neighbor.

You know if you look at the 10 commandments,

you can divide them up into these two ways of loving.

The first four are about loving God.

The next six are about loving your neighbor.

Love God. Love your neighbor.

Pastor Edward Markquart of Seattle uses a great image for these two commandments—
they are like the two hinges of a door.

In fact, doors don't work at all without hinges,
and you need two of them for a door to work properly.

Basically loving God and our neighbor ***makes everything else in life work.***

Without it we're just a door;
with it we are a door that works.

The top hinge in our lives can be compared to loving God,
and the bottom one to loving our neighbor—
we need both of them for life to work well.

We need both of them for our faith to work the way it's
supposed to.

We can't rely on just loving God...being religious, going through the motions of faith
without putting our love into action by loving our neighbors.

And we can't truly love our neighbors without loving God,
because loving neighbors is loving God.

Loving God is loving our neighbor.

And we love because it's what our life hinges upon.

We also love because God first loved us.

We love because God gave us the greatest gift of love in Jesus Christ

1 John 4 says, 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

We love because God first loved us.

And we love because God IS LOVE.

The very definition of our God is a loving relationship—
Because our God is a relationship, the Trinity of
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—
all working together in love.

And if God is love, everything that comes from God is infused with that love—
including you, and I—we have the ability to give and receive love
—an ability that comes from above.

We love because God IS love.

So HOW are we to love? Where do we start?

First we start with a simple truth—love is more than a feeling.

Love is a choice. Love is an action.

It is something we do, in addition to being something we say.

Not to downplay the power of saying “I love you”.

I know the pain people experience when they haven’t heard these words,
when they aren’t able to utter them,
when they’ve been waiting so long just to have someone say it and
mean it.

Words have enormous power.

To say and hear “I love you” is a powerful experience.

But sometimes we think that saying I love you is enough,

without backing it up with our actions.

And as we all know, actions often speak louder than words,
and reveal more about the heart than anything we say.

We want people who don’t just talk the talk,
but who also walk the walk of love.

HOW do we love?

We love with our life—what we say AND what we do.

Several years ago a man named ***Gary Chapman***

wrote a remarkable book about the different ways we give and receive love.

He observed 5 main ways that people express love—

through words of affirmation,

touch,

gifts,

service,

and time.

He calls these the five love languages.

Everyone has a couple of these love languages that they prefer.

For example, no surprise here—one of mine is words of affirmation.

I love words, and one way I like to express and receive love is through
words.

A thoughtful letter or phone call means the world to me,
and I receive joy when I do this for others.

Think about it for a minute.

What’s your love language?

How do you like to give and receive love?

Is it through words? touch? Gifts? Service? Time?

This can be the first step in following Jesus greatest commandment—

When we know how we love,
we can see how to love God,
and Love our neighbor as ourselves.

But perhaps even before we acknowledge our own love language,
we have to look at God's.

We love because God first loved us—
so we need to know that God loves us.

We need to hear and believe and experience that love—
before we can love in return.

God has all five love languages.

God gives and receives love all five ways.

Think about it—***how do we know that God loves us?***

We know it through ***words***—words of the Bible, of other believers

We know it through the compassionate ***touch*** of someone—
shaking a hand, touching a shoulder, offering a hug.

We know it through ***gifts*** that we receive—
all the blessings God brings us.

We know it through ***service***—
the ways that God helps us along the way

And we know it through ***time***—
for when we spend time alone with God we experience God's love,
the more time, the more love we experience.

How do we love God and our neighbor?

It starts by knowing we are loved.

We love because God first loved us.

And how do we follow this call to love?

We do it through words, touch, gifts, service, and time.

In Charles Colson's book Loving God,

there's a great story about a woman named Myrtie Howell.

She was a ninety one year old woman, no longer able to get out of her room
in a nursing home. But she sure loved God and her neighbor.

You might wonder how she could love anyone from the confines of her room, how she
could share words, gifts, or service.

But Mertie felt a calling to write to prisoners—words of encouragement and hope.
She started by simply writing a kind letter to a local prison, for whatever inmate they
wanted to share it with. The chaplain contacted her with the names of men who would
appreciate her correspondence. She heard about Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship
ministry and wrote asking for more names and addresses, that she might send words of
hope and encouragement.

She wrote to literally hundreds of prisoners, and received as many replies. While some people might be afraid to write to a prisoner, for fear that they would get out and hunt you down, Myrtie was not afraid, and not hesitant to share her faith and her love. Her letters were simply signed, Grandmother Howell.

Myrtie explains her simple strategy of love *‘when I get a letter, I read it and when I answer it, I pray—Lord you know what you want me to say. Now say it through me’ and you’d be surprised sometimes at the letters God writes!*

One prisoner wrote back, “Dear Grandmother, I was very happy to get your letter. The guys kidded with me when they said I had a letter. I didn’t believe them, but it was true. I don’t have anyone to care about me but the Lord and you. I’m in the hole now, that’s why I can write letters....why am I so afraid, grandmother? Why doesn’t God answer my prayers about this? I am really glad to know that there is someone out there who cares...I will remember you in my prayers every night starting now and for the rest of my life..please write back soon, (Charles Colson, Loving God, pg. 273-4).

After Jesus shared the Greatest Commandment in the book of Luke,
someone in the crowd asked him ‘Who is my neighbor?’

And much like us, they were thinking of my neighbor as family,
friends, next door neighbors.

But Jesus changed the definition of neighbor.

He told the story of the Good Samaritan, a man who stopped to help
someone his people would normally ignore on the basis of race alone.

The Good Samaritan was the only one to stop and help a man beaten
and robbed on the side of the road—

not even a priest would stop for him.

But the Samaritan helped him up,

took him to an inn, and provided for his care.

Who is my neighbor?

Not just family, friends, the people next door...

our neighbors are also those we might count as enemies,
as different from us,

as people you simply don’t associate with—the drug-addicted,
homeless, prostitutes, prisoners, the sick—

the long term enemies you could never imagine loving.

How do we love God and neighbor?

Not easily. It takes ***time***....

we have to make time to stop and be with God, to listen and learn, to confess, to
offer thanks, to ask for help.

Loving God and neighbor takes ***courage***.

As someone said at our retreat yesterday, it means ‘stepping up to the plate’
spiritually and accepting that God has a purpose for you—
something to do through you.

God wants you to love God, and your neighbor, no matter what it takes.

And the great thing about real love is that it casts

out fear—

when we step out to love,

we can overcome our fear.

God has made that promise.

Loving God and neighbor takes ***faith***.

Loving our neighbor, especially those we don't want to count as our neighbor, takes a leap of faith.

Myrtie had to believe that writing to prisoners was more important than the risk of one of them tracking her down or harming her.

When I took a homeless woman and her daughter into my home to feed them I had to believe that God would take care of me,

when I've given rides to strangers I have prayed for

God's protection, and I believe that it's worth the risk.

It takes a leap of faith.

You know what I'm saying..

What looks crazy to the world might just be what

God wants us to do.

Loving God and our neighbor takes ***time, courage, and faith***.

But it leads to a life of joy.

Myrtie said of her experience, *"The Lord has just blessed me wonderfully..I've had the greatest time of my life since I've been writing to prisoners...You know the Lord don't need no quitters. Once in a while Satan tells me I'm getting too old,, that I don't remember things good....had to agree with him there, but I sure didn't listen to him. I keep remembering what the good Lord has told me, and I can't quit"*.

She spends her days writing to prisoners, reading the Bible, watching some religious programs on T.V., and being wheeled down to the dining room three times a day.

She is loving God, and her neighbor each and every day,
and she is full of joy.

How are you loving God?

How are you loving your neighbor?

How does it bring you joy?

I think about the joy I've seen in Bob since he's been tutoring kids at Mills.

I think about the joy Floyd and Dorothy share in Meals on Wheels.

I think about the joy of our choir as they sing

Of the kids when they can contribute and serve

Loving brings joy. No doubt about it.

How are we loving God and our neighbors?

The two greatest commandments are really one,
 because once you start loving God, you end up loving your neighbor,
 by speaking your love to other people,
 by touching another person,
 by giving gifts to others,
 by spending time with others,
 by serving in so many different ways.

In fact if you love God you have to love your neighbor,

because in the words of John,

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Some things just have to come first.

love is one of those things.

Hear the good news of the gospel:

we love because God first loved us.

God sent his only Son out of love for us,

and through that gift we have received all we need to love God
 and our neighbor as ourselves.

May we receive from our loving God the time, courage, and faith it takes to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.