

Formed by Jesus: The Love Command

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 22:34-40

This morning we start a new sermon series called “Formed by Jesus.” Throughout the season of Epiphany, over the next 4 weeks, we will be studying Bible passages in which Jesus forms us. These will all be texts where Jesus describes the shape of the Christian life. As we open ourselves up to these words, the Lord, by his Spirit, will lay his hands on us and begin to mold our life into the shape he intends for us. So this whole Epiphany season in our worship, we will place our lives in Jesus hands and ask him to form us. This morning we start with the basics. This morning we go back to the fundamentals, the absolute foundation and root of Jesus’ formation project with us. If you want your life to have a Jesus shape, this is where you start. How do I know that this is the starting point? Jesus says so himself. Read Matthew 22:34-40

If you are a longtime church person, these words are very familiar to you, nevertheless, I hope that this morning you can try to hear them as if for the first time, because Jesus says something remarkable here. Jesus’ words would also have been familiar to the Pharisees who are trying to test him. “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” they ask. Jesus answers them by quoting two Bible passages they would have known by heart. Jesus chooses two laws that these law experts could have quoted in their sleep.

The first commandment, the one Jesus calls the greatest, is a law that Jews recited every day. It’s from the Shema. The Shema was recited by Israelites at the beginning of their prayers and it functioned almost like a pledge of allegiance, grounding the Jews in their ultimate commitments. It came from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and it said, “Hear O Israel (in Hebrew: ‘Shema Israel’) the Lord our God the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.” Every Jew knew these words by heart, not just the Pharisees. The second commandment also comes from the law, from Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” Jesus takes the second half of that verse, combines it with the second half of the Shema and uses them to answer the Pharisees.

While those words would have been very familiar to the Pharisees, what wasn’t so familiar, what wasn’t so conventional, was the level of importance Jesus gives to these two laws. Jesus doesn’t just say that these are the most important laws, he says that all the law and the prophets hang on these commandments. Hang on them. The word picture is two firm pegs anchored in a wall and hanging from these pegs are the law and the prophets. These pegs are keeping the law and the prophets in their proper place. Without these two pegs the law and the prophets come crashing to the ground. Without these two pegs, the ten commandments will lose their place, and come crashing to the ground. Without the love command the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah come crashing to the ground. Without the love command, all the 613 laws and regulations found in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Numbers, lose their place and come crashing to the ground. All the words of faith and all the works of faith. All the books. All the careful theology. All the grand institutions of faith, all the buildings and the art and the music compiled over the centuries, with these two pegs they hang in their proper place. Without these two pegs they become something else entirely. “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” That’s Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, right? Paul got that from Jesus. When it comes to Christian formation, it’s almost impossible to overstate how much Jesus wants our lives to be formed by his love.

When Jesus makes love of God and love of neighbor so central in our lives, it seems to me that this is both good news and bad news. Jesus’ love command is good news in this sense: sometimes the Christian morality can seem very complicated. Really smart people have written really long books with lots of footnotes on Christian ethics. You can get a PhD in the Christian Moral Philosophy. All that study is good, and we are thankful for those who do it. But here Jesus sums up the call of the Christian life in 24 words. When you’re holding a thick complicated book of ethics in your hands you can feel as though you’re never going to be able to get your head around it, but when Jesus gives the love command, you say, “Love!? I can love. I know how to do that!” You don’t need a degree to love. Love is so simple even a child could do it.

Not only can they love, it's a child's first instinct. "In his book *The Life We're Looking For*", Andy Crouch summarizes the latest research on newborn behavior. "After an ordinary infant delivery, after the first few startled cries, newborn infants typically spend an hour or so in the stage doctors call 'quiet alert.' Though they can only focus their vision 8 to 12 inches away, their eyes are wide open. They are searching, with an instinct far deeper than intention. They are looking for a face, and when they find them, especially a face that gazes back at them, they fix their eyes on it, having found what they were most earnestly looking for." That quest for a face continues throughout infancy. When babies find lots of faces who smile at them and make goo goo faces at them, they thrive. Conversely, research has shown that when they can't find a face, or when the faces they find are cold and impassive, they crumble to tears. God has made us so that our first instinct is love. We are created for connection; for love.

Not only is love so simple that a newborn infant can do it, it's also strong stuff. When a nursing baby looks up into his mother's face and the mother looks back and the two of them just sit there for five minutes looking at each other, something strong and good is created. When I think of how even simple love can be strong, I think of Mark Bruinsma. Mark was a down syndrome adult who was a member of Rochester, NY CRC, which was my wife's church growing up. When I first started dating my wife, Mark was one of the key people who made me feel welcome at church. Why? Because even though he had down syndrome, Mark was a beacon of light in the narthex. If he saw a new person at coffee time he would come up to that person without any hesitation, look right at them with a big smile and say, "Who are you?" He would then proceed to pepper you with cheerful questions: "Where did you come from? Why are you here? Are you dating her? Are you going to get married? Are you going to come back?" And then, when the conversation was over he'd smile and put his arm around you and say, "I like you!" It was pretty hard to resist. It was simple and powerful.

His simple way of expressing his love for God was also powerful. Once every year, the morning service would end with Mark leading the congregation in singing his favorite hymn "How Great Thou Art." He would get up at the front of church, the organ would start, and Mark would smile and wave his arms and sing that hymn at the top of his lungs, and we would all join in. Everyone was blessed. Just recently I was reading the testimony of a Christian Reformed minister named John VanSloten. I couldn't find the place where I read it, but as I recall his story: John had been a successful and driven businessman whose life was turned upside down by the birth of a down syndrome son. But then he testified how on a trip to Rochester, New York he saw a down syndrome man lead the church in worship and how that experience became life changing for him. It pushed him out of sadness and into hope, and ultimately into ministry. I realized that John's life had been changed by Mark leading 'How Great Thou Art!' Not many people can say that God used their expression of love for God to change someone's life and lead them into ministry. Mark Bruinsma can say that. Anyone can do this. Love is simple and love is strong. The good news here is that anyone can love. Anyone can do this powerful thing.

Which brings us to the bad news of Jesus love command. The bad news of Jesus' love command is nobody can do this. The good news is: anyone can do this; the bad news is: nobody can do this. Love is a thing so simple that a child can do it; love is a work so complicated that we can spend our whole life learning this craft and still feel like we're absolute beginners.

I feel this most clearly at the funerals of the people I love most. When I say good-bye to these people, I realize how much God has used their simple acts of love to shore up my life. I am the person I am because these people have loved me in simple, kitchen table ways in the simple kitchen table places of my life. I have a deep and thankful sense of how God has used their love for his purposes. But I also have a sense that I should have loved them better. There were things I should have said, and I never said them. There were things I could have done, and I never did them. I missed chances to love because I was ... watching television? Reading the sports page? Looking at funny videos on the internet? Our love is a clunky instrument. We try to love each other well, and some of it connects, but some of it just crashes into the other person.

Just about every person in this room right now knows the pain of a broken relationship. Maybe you have a sibling you rarely see. Maybe your relationship with your parents is not great. Maybe you've gone through a divorce. And in every one of those cases it wasn't because you didn't try. You tried to love those people and they tried to love you, but somehow it all went wrong; you just crashed into each other.

Some of that failure is on us. Our fear, our anger, our selfishness and pride make us hard when love needs vulnerability. Christ's love comes by blood and sacrifice, but our sin makes us hard and closed and stubborn. But some of that is just the complexity of love. Love is both simple and infinitely complicated. Yes, a child can love, but maturing in love requires mastery of a thousand of nuances and distinctions. Jesus said that all the law and the prophets hang on the love command, so without love the laws all come crashing to the ground. That's true; love is foundational. But it's also true that the law and the prophets give love it's direction, it's story, it's definition. It's because of the law and the prophets that we know just doing whatever makes another person happy is not love. It's because of the law and the prophets that we know love includes things like confrontation and correction. It's because of the law and the prophets and the rest of the Bible that we know love is cross shaped and sacrificial. Without the law and the prophets, love can lose its purpose, it's story, it's definition. Loving someone is hard, and none of us get it right.

It's because we fail at love that the first commandment is so important. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. What is God doing when he gives us this command? He's not doing what King Lear did at the beginning of Shakespeare's play. At the beginning of that classic play, King Lear summons his three daughters into his court and says that he will give the biggest and best portion of his kingdom to the daughter who can show that they love him the most. "OK girls, tell me how much you love me!" It's vanity on Lear's part. He's asking so he can feel good about himself. Some people accuse God of the same vanity when he asks us to love him with our whole heart. But that's not why God commands us to love him. The command to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind is for our benefit, not his. When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we are in a place where we will flourish. When we love God with all our heart, soul mind and strength, we will thrive.

Our hearts will inevitably attach to something in this world. When, instead of attaching to God, we love money, or success, or stuff or personal reputation, we will flounder. If your money has your love, you will be afraid of losing it. If your reputation has your love, you will always be a prisoner to other people's opinion. If job success has your love, you will be deathly afraid of failure. We have an old word for this kind of misdirected love, it's called idolatry. God hates idolatry partly because it robs him of his glory, but he also hates it because he knows what it will do to his children! It will mess us up!

On the other hand, when you turn your face towards God and love him wholeheartedly, you will find that his face and his love are already turned towards you. God calls you to love him wholeheartedly, but when you start to do that, you find that he already loves you wholeheartedly. God's not sitting there passively, waiting for you to prove how much you love him before he reciprocates; his love is already pouring out towards you, with purpose, with intensity. Before you did anything, while you were still sinners, he sent his Son to die for you. When we finally fix your heart on that love of his, we find that it's enough to overcome all our stupid self-destructive failures, it's enough to ultimately someday restore every busted relationship where our love failed, it's enough to hold us steady no matter what life throws at us. Is God pleased when you love him with heart soul and mind? Yes, but when you obey his command the chief beneficiary is you. His love is our salvation.

Being a human is hard, people. I think most us have figured that out by now. May we all live our lives where they were meant to be lived: In the center of God's love. ©Rev. Peter Jonker