

Loving People (Imago Dei)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 September 2020

Preacher: Richard Kelley

[0 : 00] So we are called as followers of Jesus to love others. Now there are countless sermons about loving others, and yet we choose to return to this topic frequently.

Perhaps it is because loving others is one of the clearest commandments we are given by Jesus. Perhaps we need so many sermons about loving others because it is the thing that we clearly mess up the most.

Because when we hear, love thy neighbor, our response, unfortunately, is to try to limit who that applies to. We are often very much like the guy on the left of Jesus here.

I'll give you a minute to read. So a few weeks ago, when I spoke about communion, I told you all that Jesus said take and eat, not take and eat if.

Today can be summarized similarly. Jesus said love thy neighbor as yourself. Jesus never said love thy neighbor as yourself except. This commandment to love thy neighbor is an answer given by Jesus when he is asked to explain the most important commandment of all.

[1 : 23] We see in Mark chapter 12, verse 28 through 31. Now one of the scribes had come up and heard their debate. Noticing how well Jesus had answered them, he asked him, which commandment is most important of all?

Jesus replied, this is the most important. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these. We are fundamentally called as followers of Jesus to live this out.

It is each individual member of the church that is meant to reflect God's love to this world. In fact, as many of you may be aware, the word for church in Greek, which is ekklesia, literally means assembly.

It doesn't mean building. Because the church, including the table church, is defined by the collective body of people who seek to live out the way Jesus laid out for us.

[2 : 39] It is defined by how we encapsulate the image of God and reflect that for others. Last week, Pastor Anthony talked about loving God and what that looks like.

He reminded us that God loves us in spite of ourselves, which is agape love, because of our value, which is eros love, and as a partner in God's creation, and as a friend, which is philos love.

See, loving God is the first part of our vision statement as the table, as we imperfectly seek to create a space where people can be authentic and thoughtful followers of Jesus.

So as we return to our values, the basics of who we are as the table church, I get to focus on how we, as a community, love people. And I want to begin in Mark.

Mark 10, 42 through 45, to be specific, where we see Jesus fundamentally and radically challenge how we, as followers of him, are meant to relate to one another.

[3 : 43] Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentile lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

We are called not to lord power over others, but to give it away. We are called not to be served by others, but instead to serve others.

Now for some listening, showing love to others might be part of your spiritual gifting. It might come naturally to you. Maybe you are someone who enjoys caring for people and supporting others.

That you naturally go out of your way to treat others lovingly. Often, however, when we evaluate how well we love others, we are thinking about how we show love to those we enjoy showing love to.

[4 : 53] Now many of you know my husband Richard. Most of you are probably a bigger fan of him than you are of me. If I'm honest with you, I feel the same. But the point is that for many of us, including me, it's easy to love Richard.

I want to go out of my way for him. I want to do things that bring him joy. I enjoy spending time with him. But when we talk about loving others, and particularly when Jesus talks about our call to love others, these are not the people that he has in mind.

Matthew captures Jesus' call for us in his Sermon on the Mount. Specifically in Matthew 5, 43 through 48, Jesus tells us, you have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?

[6 : 09] Do not even pagans do that. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Now there's two important words that I want to highlight in this passage before we dive in.

The first is love. As Pastor Anthony discussed last week, our English translations lose something important from the Greek. This is that in Greek, the language in which these letters and gospels were originally written in, there are actually three expressions of love, agape, eros, and philos. In this passage, Jesus is using the word agape love, which is love unconditional, or as Pastor Anthony framed it, love in spite of.

Therefore, we have to understand that when Jesus speaks of our call to love others, that is an unconditional call. The second is this.

Especially for the table audience, I feel like when we hear be perfect, that might raise our anxiety a little bit because I know a lot of people are trying. But I want to unpack this word a little bit because the word here for perfect is telios.

[7 : 18] And it does not imply perfection in sinlessness, like the existence of perfection, but instead growth into maturity of godliness. This is an action word, not an inaction word.

And this is important because love is not what we refrain from doing, but instead what we live out to others. Now, two things are very clear in how Jesus calls us to love.

The first is that it is radically different from what we are taught about love. You know I often think about romantic comedies when I think about our role models we have for love.

And it's terrible. See, romantic comedies all have the same story. Boy falls in love with girl, sometimes the reverse. After an inordinate number of obstacles, sometimes external, but usually self-created, they finally get together and fall in love.

One thing goes wrong, and after all that work, they just give up on each other. And then they find each other in an airport or coffee shop or interrupt someone's important work event or other life occasion, and they live happily ever after, seemingly without consequence, even when they've missed weeks of work.

[8 : 34] Now, I realize that this is the second sermon in a row that I've been unkind to romantic comedies, and I'm hoping to remain friends with Emily. So I want to start with a caveat. As much as I think romantic comedies are terrible examples of love, I watch them all the time, and once COVID is over, I'm always up for romantic comedy movie night.

So please understand, I say this from a place of love for romantic comedies. But the point is, is that the challenge with romantic comedies is that it teaches us that love is something given only when we feel like it, only when we believe the other person is worthy.

This is condition. I only love you if I feel like it, or if it's working out well for me. See, love in romantic comedies is apparently fickle enough to change at least three times in an hour and a half.

Imagine if this is how Jesus loved us, how he taught us to love. See, there are not enough airports in the world for the number of times that Jesus would have left me. And there are not enough coffee shops for the times that I would have turned from him.

Instead, Jesus teaches us to love everyone always, without condition. Jesus teaches us to recognize the inherent worth in every person, the value that God has given to each of us when God said, I made them in my image.

[9 : 57] Jesus's love is one that knows no bounds and one that requires us to do something that society just doesn't seem to value. Be selfless and others focused. So again, Jesus's love he calls us to is radically different from what we are taught about love.

The second thing we know about the type of love Jesus calls us to is that it is an action, demonstrated through how we relate to others and interact with the world around us.

If we return to Jesus's sermon on the mount, we see three callings for love that push us beyond our comfort. And I'll provide an illustration for each. So first, we are called to love those who are different than us.

Jesus says, if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Now we see Jesus demonstrating loving those who are different in action in Mark 2, when Jesus sits down to eat with Matthew, who is a tax collector, and has gathered his group of friends.

Now, for a bit of context, tax collectors were not very liked among people. In fact, in Mark 2, 16, we're told that when the scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus eat with the tax collectors and the sinners, they said unto his disciples, how is it that he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?

[11 : 24] We also see Jesus loving others who are different in action when Jesus takes time with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Again, for a bit of context, in the Bible, when a Jewish person and a Samaritan person interact, it's an important thing because Jewish people and Samaritans were not supposed to interact.

They were not meant to mix. Yet Jesus takes time not just to interact with the Samaritan woman, but to see and know her at the well. In fact, Jesus' choice in disciples is a beautiful model for us to follow, an example of what it looks like to love those who are different than us.

Among his 12, Jesus had fishermen, tradesmen, religious zealots, and tax collectors. He brought a group of people together that wouldn't have a reason to be in the same room.

Now, when we talk about people who are different than us, that can mean a lot of things. And frankly, it can be overwhelming. We can think of differences along identities, differences among politics or ideologies, differences in life circumstances or experience.

Particularly in the time of COVID, we have to ask, what does it look like to love our neighbors when we're not supposed to be physically interacting? Now, I've often equated loving people who are different with treating people with dignity.

[12 : 53] But what does that look like when the world has moved online, yet so many are still struggling on the streets in D.C.? What does that look like when people are in pain because of the violence surrounding us, but we can't be physically present for each other in those moments?

For me, it has looked like a lot more phone calls or Zoom calls just to listen. It's looked like attempting to extend more grace to people, to invest intentions in their frustrations or briskness. It means simple things like wearing a mask, but not getting angry when someone else is not doing the same. It's seeking to be kind in my interactions. And if I'm honest, I'm not sure I've adapted well enough during COVID to truly say I'm loving my neighbors well, because I know that Jesus calls us to so much more.

Sitting at Matthew's dinner table, Jesus broke numerous societal taboos, but his presence there showed us that he looked beyond culture to people's hearts.

Whereas the Pharisees wrote people off simply because of their profession or their past, Jesus looked past all that and saw their worth, the worth that had always been there.

[14 : 13] Now, the idea of living up to this expectation that we love others that are different than us can feel overwhelming for a lot of us. We don't have time. There's too many people different than us.

We don't know where to start. Start small. Remember, Jesus in his sermon called us to be perfect and that we are meant to work towards that maturing in our walk with God.

We can take steps towards being better at loving others. Remember, loving people who are different starts with having a relationship with people who are different.

So just do this. Make time for a social distance coffee or Zoom or whatever else with just one person this week that wouldn't normally fit into your routine or normal group of people.

This could be someone, a church, or someone from work that you've never had the opportunity to interact with, or a complete stranger. But make an effort to reach out to that one person.

[15:15] Now, if you're doing this already regularly, maybe you're in the Allie McGill Club, challenge yourself to extend even beyond your comfort zone. Because while we may be at different parts of our journey in learning to love others that are different well, we all have room to grow.

Now, the second group of people that Jesus calls us to love can be a bit harder. We are called to love our enemies.

In Matthew, Jesus tells us, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This can be so hard to understand. Why would God call us to love someone who hates us, who hurts us, who means to do bad to us?

Many of you know that in my day job, I'm an attorney. I work with clients who are survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, and other persecution because of who they are.

Often in my work, I find myself having to interact with people who have done these harm to my client. People who have targeted others just because of who they are.

[16:27] As a more personal example, as many of you know, I've been a pastor at the table for many years. And I've been involved in some aspect of ministry for much longer than that.

Part of what I feel my calling is as a pastor is to work with churches and communities who exclude LGBTQ people from their congregation or lives. I've been denied employment by religious organizations because I'm gay.

I've been called a variety of names that I do not believe were meant to be compliments. I've been on panels where I am told my marriage offends and disgusts God or more politely that it cannot be sanctified because God can only see marriage between a man and a woman.

I've been in too many conversations that start with no offense but and is followed by something that is always offensive. And I have been told my existence is an abomination to God and that I'm not worthy of love.

I know these statements are not true and are certainly not of God. I also know that for some individuals, they justify these statements by saying that that is how they love me, which pains me all the more.

[17:39] And yet I feel that part of what I am called to, part of how I am called to love is to sit in these moments and love those who would exclude me. Now I know that as I was speaking, many of you likely had some person or people or harm come to mind that you've also experienced, that you're carrying with you.

I mean, cities are literally and figuratively on fire because of the sin of racism right now, explicit and structural. There is a lot of harm that has been done because see whether it is people who cause harm to my clients or people that cause harm to me and other LGBTQ individuals or people that are part of that group that come to mind for you.

It is so much easier to box these people into the category of the bad guy, the unrighteous, and to just not deal with them, to not see them as people.

Easier, yes, but not loving and not what we are called to as followers of Jesus. There were a group of Jewish leaders called the Pharisees who worked hard to undermine Jesus and ultimately assisted in orchestrating Jesus's death.

And after Jesus's death and resurrection, the Pharisees zealously pursued followers of Jesus and many times sought death for them. One of the most famous Pharisees was Saul of Tarsus, famous for the number of Christians he had killed.

[19:17] Jesus had every reason to turn his back on Saul, every reason to strike him down and condemn him. But instead, Jesus made him an apostle. Some of you are likely familiar with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who then went by the name of Paul, which is recorded in Acts, On the road to Damascus, Jesus appears to Saul, this famous persecutor of Christians, and asks, why are you persecuting me?

Now, out of this story comes the most prolific New Testament writer. See, if Jesus stopped loving his enemies, Paul would have never come home.

Now, loving someone does not mean that we don't seek justice. God is a God of justice and a God of love. In fact, we see many times through the New Testament where Jesus is reprimanding the Pharisees for their rigidity and wrong-sightedness.

But if God stopped loving those who persecuted him, Paul would have never been such a powerful ambassador for the message of the gospel. Now, this is where I offer my caveat.

Loving your enemy does not require you to put yourself in harm's way or to be present with people who would harm you. We need to make choices that keep us and make us safe.

[20 : 42] And that's important. I want us to again reflect on the idea of perfecting ourselves, that it is a maturing in a way that can seek justice and safety while still unconditionally loving and being able to genuinely pray for the goodness and redemption of those who we would consider our enemies.

See, for me, when I look 10 feet away at the person who has assaulted my client, my human instinct is to wish the worst on that person or to dehumanize them altogether.

When I sit on a panel and someone tells me that I'm an abomination, my first instinct is to just write them off. But my faith compels me to pray for them, to love them, to seek justice, yes, but also to hope for redemption.

And I often have to remind myself that the worst person in the world is still a child of God. And in Jesus' eyes, that person was still worth dying for.

Now, that probably makes some of you really upset, really angry. But I told you up front that Jesus' definition of love is radically different.

[22 : 01] It's unconditional and it's universal. And honestly, I am so grateful for that. It is because of the expansiveness of God's love that I know no matter what, I am loved too.

So again, it may not be reasonable to ask to have you change your heart to love every person that is your enemy. But start small.

Think of one person to add to your prayer list. Maybe that annoying neighbor who has that dog that barks all night. Maybe that co-worker that somehow always just says the wrong thing at the wrong moment.

Maybe that parent who really caused some damage. or that friend or former friend who betrayed you. Whoever it is, add that person to your prayer list.

Pray for your heart to change and for theirs. Pray for their good and for their benefit. Pray for wisdom of what it looks like to love them as God does.

[23 : 06] So third, we need to love people where they're at. Jesus loved Paul when he was Saul, Matthew when he was a tax collector, Judas, even though he knew he would betray him.

And each and every one of us, despite our failures and our brokenness, certainly and critically, he loved them and loves us the whole time, not just at their best.

I joined the table nearly five years ago and the reason that I stayed and continue to stay is that this community loved me exactly as I was.

It was one of the first churches where I felt I could authentically be me and still be seen, heard, and accepted. Now, as we continue to grow as a church, it's my deepest conviction that we never lose that part of who we are, the part that loves others confidently and unabashedly.

We are called to love people exactly where they're at, whatever that looks like, whether with or without baggage, whatever gender identity, race, or ethnicity, origin, political persuasion, sexual orientation, ability, or place in their faith journey.

[24 : 26] Our value is to love people no exceptions, no additions, and no requirements. And this value is central to who we understand God to be.

See, we are told from the beginning that each of us is made in the image of God. This means that every person physically in this room or watching from at home, every person you pass by today or this week is made in the image of God.

And when we take the time to love them, we are loving a representation, a part of God's complex and beautiful image. One last point.

Fourth, and this is the hardest of all for some of us. See, in order to love our neighbors as ourselves, we also need to love ourselves, to see God's inherent worth in our own lives.

Now, I realize I said three things at the beginning, and the fourth is in some ways an add-on. But see, when we're called to love our neighbors as ourselves, there's an assumption that we know how to love ourselves, that we can see our worth inherently within ourselves.

[25 : 42] The worth that comes from God that is unable to be lost, lessened, or tarnished. But for some of us, this might be the hardest person to love.

And it's important that we know that Jesus' message is for you as well. You are to love yourself with the same grace that you are called to love others. Now, I recognize for some of us that that harm or that hurt has been taught for a long time, and some of that comes from church institutions.

But Jesus calls us to love others and calls us into being a representation of God's image.

And that requires us to understand the worth that God sees in us. And if you're in this space, if you're saying, I get it, I've heard it, I'm not there yet.

I'm always free for a virtual coffee, and I'm sure many other people are. But it's important for us because if we're meant to love our neighbors as ourselves, we have to know what it looks like to see God's worth in us so that we can see God's worth in others.

[26 : 54] So this week, my challenge to you is to love people boldly. Remembering that Christian love is radical and it's active.

Challenge yourself to love people who are different, who don't fit in to your everyday patterns, understanding that they are part of the image of God. Challenge yourself to love people who you see as your enemies, to transform your perspective to one of unconditional love, and to genuinely seek good for them and pray for them.

And challenge yourself to love people where they're at, to meet people in their current stage and sojourn with them rather than waiting for them to meet you where you want them to be.

Because when we as a community live out who God is calling us to be, it is my deepest hope that anyone who walks through our physical or virtual doors feels loved regardless of what they bring with them.

to begin, the beginning is my youngest of the characters who doesn't feel like I'm still out of strap