

# "The Three Loves"

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**Matthew 22:34-40**

We live in an age of lists. From the New York Times list of best selling books to the most "Googled" sites on the web - we like lists, we seem fascinated with - who is the best? who's hot? who's #1? who's trending now? This is nothing new. You see it even in ancient times. Rabbis in the First Century debated among themselves - what's the most important passage in all the Bible? Of all the commandments given to us by God, what's #1? Jesus had gained quite a reputation as a teacher, a Rabbi (the word Rabbi means, "teacher") People said that Jesus "taught as one with authority," as if his teachings came right from God. So one day he was asked what was at the top of his list. Let's take a look.

## **Matthew 22:34-40**

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."*

This month we've been studying the great love passages in the Bible. We've looked at I Corinthians 13 and I John 4. Last week we looked at the amazing passages written by St. John, the Apostle of Love. Today, this wonderful text from Matthew 22.

We see in this passage - The 3 Loves - 3 calls to love, 3 directions for our love to flow.

## **I. The first, of course, is the Call to Love God.**

Jesus is quoting from Deut. 6:5 - *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."* This passage is part of the *"Shema Israel."* It starts out: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* It's the first passage that a Hebrew child would have to memorize. And still today it's used at the start of Jewish worship services. It calls us to love God with all that we are - our emotions, our intellect, our actions. It calls for a total commitment to God. But here's the amazing truth within this call - God wants our Love!

You know, there are different images for God. Each one speaks to what God wants from us. There's -

A. God, the Referee - who wants us to play the game fairly, honestly with no penalties. It's an image of playing by the rules, doing right things so you won't get penalized

B. There's God, the IRS agent - wants us to pay our fair share, what we owe the Kingdom of God. This image also has the idea of staying on God's good side and avoiding penalties.

C. There's God the Judge, who from time to time slams the gavel down and yells, "Guilty!"

D. There's God, the Principal of the School - He just asks for your help in making the school run properly. It's about organization and cooperation.

Each of these ways of thinking about God misses the mark in a big way because, the God revealed in scripture wants our love! And not just our obedience!

God wants your love! Why? Because God needs it to be whole? Is God the ultimate, omnipotent co-dependent? No. God is love, and love has to be

shared. Love has to be shared and God wishes to share it with us. God wants our love!

A husband takes home flowers to his wife. He gives them to her and she is overwhelmed with joy. Then he says, "Well, I thought it was my duty. After all, you are my wife and I'm your lawfully married husband. I thought it was something I should do." How does she feel then? Does she even want the flowers anymore?

Prodigal Son - This is also the truth of the Prodigal Son story. The Father isn't waiting back on the farm ready to scold his wayward son. He's waiting with open arms for him to return. He wants his son close to him. God wants us close to his heart.

Holy Communion is about this same truth. God invites us to dinner, to the table, to welcome us home again! We come here to come home again to God's love - to let God love us and to express our love to God. Make sure you do that each Sunday - express your love for God in a very personal way through prayer and song.

I had a close friend in college named Jim. He became a UCC pastor and we stayed in touch throughout our 20s. I prayed together with Jim on numerous occasions in college. I heard him offer pastoral prayers several times in worship. And every time I've ever heard him pray he began his prayer like this: "Lord, we just love you so much." In my Princeton Seminary days I probably looked down my nose a little bit at an opening like that. But one day it hit me that he was just trying to fulfill the first and greatest commandment: Love the Lord thy God. Of course we strive to do that with our lives, but just like other relationships it helps to do that with our words as well.

*"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

**II. Love your Neighbor as you love yourself.**

This line is actually a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18 - *"Love your neighbor as you love yourself."* It's interesting how Jesus introduces this phrase: *"A second commandment is like it"* - like it but distinct. We shouldn't combine them too quickly - "I love God by loving my neighbor." That's true, but we're first distinctly called to love God, and then, Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Loving our neighbor means literally our next door neighbor. But it also means all those we share our lives with - our family, our co-workers, our classmates.

Years ago I met some folks who were next door neighbors to Nick & Joan, parishioners of the church I was serving at the time. They were new to the church. The neighbors said something I've never forgotten. They said, "We have to tell you something. Nick & Joan have always been nice people, but since they've been going to your church, they're even nicer." Nick & Joan were loving God and loving their neighbor.

Of course, we're called to love beyond our next door neighbors. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus redefines the concept of "neighbor." A man was beaten and robbed and left for dead at the side of the road. Three men came by and only one helped him. Jesus asked, "Which man was a neighbor to the man?" Clearly teaching us that anyone in need is our neighbor.

Love God. Love your neighbor. And, thirdly . . .

**III. Love yourself.** *"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." - "in the same way"*

Jesus clearly implies that we're to love ourselves. It's hard to find hymns for this subject.

*"Yes, I love me. Yes, I care for me. Yes, I love me. The Bible tells me so."*

The Bible does tell us that there is such a thing as selfish narcissism,

where all we think about is ourselves. But the Bible also teaches that there is a healthy love of self that we're to foster within us.

*Ephesians 5 - "He who loves his wife loves himself. Husbands should love their wives as they love their own bodies. For no one hates his body. Instead they nourish it and tenderly care for it. In the same way, each of you should love your wives as yourself."*

Like Jesus, Paul implies that loving oneself is foundational for loving others. If we don't love ourselves we don't have near as much to offer others. If we don't care for ourselves we don't have near as much to offer others.

Here's some red flags when it comes to the issue of loving ourselves. When we're not loving ourselves . . . .

1. We look to others constantly to meet our emotional needs and fill our tanks.
2. We are perfectionistic with ourselves and incredibly impatient about our progress or lack thereof. - "I should be way beyond this by now." But "Love is patient." We need to be patient with ourselves
3. Our minds are filled with Negative Self-Talk - "You idiot, Rich. How could you be so stupid."
4. We are quick to feel, not only guilt, but also shame. "I am such a loser. There is no hope for me." Guilt is, "I made a mistake." Shame is, "I am a mistake." There's a big difference.
5. We have difficulty receiving compliments - we may crave them, but when we actually receive one we feel terribly embarrassed & don't know what to do with it."
6. We don't take care of ourselves. Eating. Sleeping. Exercising. Friendships. Spiritual & Personal Growth. When we make time for these things we are loving ourselves. When we don't care for our bodies & souls

we're not loving ourselves. As Paul wrote, *"For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church. For this reason, love your wife as you love yourself."*

One more thought on Loving Yourself - and it's this: God Loves You - not only because God is gracious, merciful, forgiving, and incredibly understanding. God is all that and more. But hear this - God Loves You - because you are worth it! You are worth loving! God made you and God likes what he made! When we aren't loving ourselves-"God you did a bad job"

Illustration. (as told by Douglas Pratt) In the 1993 movie, "In the Line of Fire," Clint Eastwood played Secret Service agent Frank Horrigan. Horrigan had been with the Secret Service for more than 30 years. He was on duty in Dallas on that fateful day in 1963 when President Kennedy was shot. And when the bullets rang out, Horrigan froze. For 30 years he wrestled with the ultimate question for a Secret Service agent: Can I take a bullet for the President.

In the climax of the movie, Horrigan did what he had been unable to do earlier: he threw himself into the path of an assassin's bullet to save the President. Secret Service agents are willing to do such a thing because they believe the President is so valuable to our country and the world that he is worth dying for. They would not take a bullet for just anyone. On Good Friday the situation was reversed. The President of the Universe actually took a bullet for us. At the Cross we see how valuable we are to God. Jesus willingly threw himself into the line of fire because we are worth it.

You are worth loving, and that's the Gospel Truth.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Amen.

Dear Lord, we love you so much. Thank you for your precious love. Teach us to love ourselves that we might truly live in your love and share it with all we meet. Amen.