

9-1-24

Isn't Loving One Another Enough?

Matthew 22: 34 – 40

In my previous sermons, I've tried to make the point that we are now living in a post-Christian society. This should come as no surprise to any of us. Not that long ago, say forty or fifty years ago, the echoes of Christianity were still ringing in the ears of the unchurched. In other words, if we had gone out to the street in 1968 to interview John Q. Public, and asked him a question like "Do you believe in God? Or How do you get to heaven?" we would most likely hear a response that would in some way reference Christianity. Not true today.

In 2024, we are assuming way too much of the general public if we expect a response that even remotely hints at the prospect that our respondent has had any church or Sunday School background.

In today's conversations, we no longer ask, "Do you believe in God?" Now we preface our question with, "Since God is basically a figment of your imagination, in whom or what do you look to for strength / guidance?" We don't even use the word faith, for it tips our hand revealing our prejudice for a creator!

The ramifications of society's disbelief of God are far-reaching and troubling to say the least. But as unsettling as this is, what's even more problematic is not what's going on outside the church, but what's going on inside God's church. But again, when we think about it, we shouldn't be surprised.

All we need to do is to look at the arts, academia, news outlets, baffling decisions by judges and other powerful institutions that strive to influence our culture, to see where the church is heading. It just takes a little longer to start seeing the effects in the church. The lag time might be a few decades, but it is easy to see what is heading down the pike for the church.

Obviously, one of the major implications of this anti-Christian philosophy that has insidiously infiltrated our churches is the shocking belief or mindset that Christ is no longer necessary for our salvation, that one's eternal destiny no longer hinges on whether or not one believes in the deity of Christ, his atoning work on the cross, or his physical resurrection from the dead.

You would think that such heretical developments would have been arrested and rejected from the outset, but due to the fact that many people who attend churches have failed to be sanctified by the Word of God as Jesus prayed in John 17, we are now susceptible to what the apostle Paul warned the church of Colossians in verse 2:8, *"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."*

A few verses later Paul goes on to say that church leaders who allow such false-teaching in the church are *"unspiritual"* and *"have lost connection with the Head"*, which we know to be none other than Christ himself since Paul already established this fact in chapter 1 of Colossians: ***"And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."***

But the interesting thing about some church's decision to dispense with Christ in order to be more palatable to our culture is that it's typically not a blatant or overt operation. Rather, it's one that's covert and occurs via the backdoor.

What I mean by this is that other basic Christian tenets and doctrines such as the inerrancy of scripture, the literal and bodily resurrection of Christ, the divine nature of Christ, and the teaching that hell is a real place, just to name a few, are called into question so much so, that when they are discretely cut out of the church's doctrinal statement, no one seems to notice. Or worse yet, we turn a blind eye, probably because some semblance of harmony is achieved – and everybody likes harmony right?

After all, isn't peace among the parishioners more important than holding fast to some stuffy, dry doctrinal statement that can offend our civil sensibilities? With these doctrines jettisoned, now the church can appear to be more tolerant of mainstream thought. Who cares if it's unbiblical?

Unfortunately this mainstream thought which is deemed to be more enlightened simply on the basis of its newness, is none other than the broad road that leads to destruction that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 7 because it's attacking the very foundation of Christianity which is Christ Jesus himself. *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”*

The gate Jesus spoke about is none other than himself. John 10:9: *"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture."*

So the big idea I want to address this morning is one that I believe is beginning to pop up more and more in church circles. And the question is, **"Isn't loving one another enough?"** Or to put it another way, **"Why must we get so hung up on Jesus?"**

"Isn't loving one another the ultimate point of all religion anyway?"

After all, didn't Paul say 1 Corinthians 13 that *"the greatest of these is love"*? And that if *"I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal"*? **If we give it our best shot to love one another, won't God give us the benefit of the doubt and let us in to heaven?"**

I believe people in church are asking these questions mainly for a couple reasons: One, many Christians are feeling the pressure from society to conform to its way of thinking. This can be summed up in one word: **tolerance**, **"Why can't we put our differences aside and just all get along?"**

For Christians to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven – even though Jesus himself declared this without any ambiguity when he stated, *"I am the Way and the truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* is viewed from the world's perspective as being out-dated, narrow – minded, intolerant and prejudiced. How dare the Christian God claim exclusive rights on heaven when there are so many other religions vying for the same privilege?

To be honest, this argument is put forth only by people who at least give faith in God some legitimacy. More often than not, society takes the position that belief in a supreme being is antiquated and the result of small-mindedness.

So society is putting pressure on Christians to conform. But pressure also comes from unsanctified and disqualified church leaders within the church.

Even in the Apostle Paul's time, he had to warn leaders like Titus and Timothy to be on the lookout for those who preached a Gospel contrary to what he taught. Here's just a little sampling of his warnings: Galatians 1: 6 - 7: *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ."*

And 1 Timothy 4:1: *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and the things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."*

So pressure on Christians to abandon Christ as the central figure of church doctrine is coming from both inside and outside the church. How do we combat this? How do we remain a Christ-centered church in the midst of such cultural upheaval both in the church and in society at large?

First, we sanctify ourselves in God's truth, just as Jesus prayed to his Father, *"Sanctify them by your word. Your word is truth."*

The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that one of the key reasons we find ourselves taken captive by *“find-sounding arguments”* which have no merit is because our relationship with God is weak and isn't mature as it should be.

Why else would Paul say the following words right after his warning to be on guard for false teaching? *“So then just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing thankfulness.”*

Our relationship with God is an organic one. Not organic in the modern usage of the word, but in the sense that it is a living, growing, and personal. It needs nurturing and care in order for it to thrive and produce fruit.

If on the other hand we neglect our relationship with Christ, the living plant that represents our connection with Christ will wither and fade. And the best way to nourish our relationship with God is to get to know him better by taking in his words.

And when we do, we will soon realize the utter foolishness and absurdity it is to try to separate Christ from Christianity - which some have undertaken to do - in order to present to the world a more tolerant, inclusive, and loving form of religion.

So let's tackle the question I mentioned earlier: Isn't loving one another enough? First, in asking the question, we immediately learn something about the questioner, namely that they assume that apart from God we human beings are capable of love. And the answer to this is that without Christ, we are incapable of love. We cannot love.

But pastor, this doesn't make any sense! I know a lot of happy couples who don't profess Christianity – who are even card-carrying atheists that love each other. How can you say they aren't loving?

My response: God is the lord of the righteous and the unrighteous. He makes the rain fall on both. A deaf ear and a cold heart toward God by no means nullify God's desire to be benevolent to his creation, nor does it incapacitate His ability to love.

Psalm 84:3: "Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself where she may have her young – a place near your altar."

God's kind and benevolent hand extends to us in so many ways that we can only begin to count our blessings. James 1:17: *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."*

Not only are we incapable of loving apart from God, we don't even know what love is! 1 John 3:16, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down his life for our brothers."*

So pastor, what you're saying is that everyone who lived before Christ came to earth did not know what love is? That sounds pretty ridiculous! Adam didn't love Eve? Abraham didn't love Isaac? How about Jacob and his son Joseph? David and Jonathan? (I know these arguments sound silly, but as believers, we, who *"in our hearts have set apart Christ as Lord, must always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have."*

In light of this admonition, I direct your attention to what is arguably the oldest book in the entire Bible. This is God pummeling Job with rhetorical questions. *“Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who provides food for the Raven when its young cry out to God?”*

Job knows the answer and so do we if we’re intellectually honest with ourselves. Can we know love? Are we capable of love apart from God? Jesus said it perfectly in Matthew 19:26 *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

Finally, let us revisit the Bible verses I read to introduce this message in order to answer the question, “Isn’t loving one-another enough?”

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

As we can tell by Jesus words, excluding God - the source, initiator, teacher, and perfect example of love - while at the same time attempting to love one another is not only foolish and illogical, but sinful. To not love God is breaking God’s greatest commandment.

To attempt to fulfill the second greatest commandment albeit in vain, while ignoring the first – which many people try to do, is delusional!

To not acknowledge the ultimate source of love and life in the world is tantamount to treason!

To be unable to or refuse to tip your hat to the one who made all, is sovereign over all, and who will judge all is worse than intellectual suicide, it's spiritual death!

But Pastor, I thought the question was about Christ! And you're going on and on about God. Muslims have their god and the Hindus have their god, and the university has its gods. All they have to do is love their god and love one another and they're in. You have yet to convince me that we need to be a Christ – centered church.

Ah Ha! I was hoping you'd say that: Read verse 40 again. Jesus said, *"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Do you know what Jesus was saying when he said this? When Jesus used the words the Law and the Prophets, he was referring to the entire Old Testament, and in Jesus' day, the Old Testament was their complete Bible! The New Testament wouldn't be written for another 50 years!

So when Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God with all one's heart, soul and mind and then to love you neighbor as yourself, Jesus used the Jewish Bible as exhibit A to make his argument. To paraphrase, Jesus said, "If there's anything that you take away from reading your Bible, I hope it is this: Love God and love your neighbor.

Now this is very interesting, because guess what ... The Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets are all about setting the stage for the coming Messiah. Whether you look at Genesis and read about the seed of the woman crushing the serpent's head, or God closing and sealing the door of the ark to preserve Noah and his family, or God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten son, or God's detailed

instructions to the Jews concerning the building of the temple and the list goes on and on. The one common denominator through it all is the picture of Jesus Christ coming to save not only his people from their sins, but to save anyone who believe and call upon his name.

The Old Testament points all its ammunition toward Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – the same Old Testament that can be summed up by quoting the greatest commandment.

This is not what I say. This is what Jesus said.

So yes, we will be, we must be a Christ-centered church, because if we aren't, we'll have no love for God, our neighbors, or ourselves.

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Amen