



CHURCH of  
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## “Love Includes”

May 8, 2022

Leviticus 19:18, 33-34

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When Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” he offered not one, but two commandments from scripture. The first is the Shema, the passage we focused on last week at the start of our sermon series: *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 might.* “This is the greatest and first commandment,” he said. “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* In other words, everything in the scripture is predicated on doing these two things. You might say that loving God and loving neighbor is what our faith is all about; the rest of scripture is just the details about how we are to do that.

That’s an interesting way to think about the Bible, isn’t it? What if we approached everything about our faith – our teaching, our doctrine, our rules, our practice, our words and witness, the way we function as a church – as simply an expansion on the simple commandments to love God and neighbor? I’ve found myself thinking a lot about that lately.

But I’m also curious about another part of what Jesus said. After reminding us to love God with every part of ourselves, he said that the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is *like* the first commandment. Did he mean those two commandments are alike because they are grammatically similar so they sound kind of the same? Did he mean that the two are alike because love is the common value underlying both commandments? Or is there a deeper connection Jesus wanted us to understand?

The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves comes from Leviticus 19:18. It’s part of the Torah referred to as the holiness code, because the commandments found there are about being holy. Leviticus 19:2 reads, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Chapter 19 spells out expectations for how we are to treat others. It includes the instruction to leave a portion of the harvest for the poor. It prohibits stealing, lying, and fraud. It commands care for those who are deaf and blind. It instructs us not to show partiality in dealing either with the poor *or* the wealthy. It forbids profiting off the misfortune of others. It teaches us not to harbor hatred toward anyone. These social instructions are then summed up in the key verse from our text for today, sometimes referred to as the Golden Rule in Judaism: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* This commandment is the culmination of what it means to be holy toward others as God is holy. Jesus knew his scriptures and he certainly knew how Leviticus teaches us to love our neighbors. So he wasn’t just talking about having good *feelings* toward our neighbors, but about love expressed in our *actions* toward those around us.

Let’s face it: loving our neighbor is a lot harder than loving God. Loving my neighbor doesn’t just mean my neighbors who are nice to me, but the one who complains that my dogs bark too much. Loving my neighbor doesn’t just mean the ones I agree with, but the ones who have campaign signs in their yard for people I would never vote for. It doesn’t just mean loving my Christian neighbors, but my Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and atheist neighbors, too. It’s not just the ones who can do something to reciprocate my kindness, but those who can’t or won’t ever repay me. Not just the ones who live next door or in the next zip code, but *everyone* who I share this Earth with, including those who hate me for what I believe or where I live or what I have, those whose language and customs and values are different from mine, and those who brave perilous journeys to cross our borders in search of a better life.

Perhaps the point being made in this section of Leviticus is that striving to be holy as God is holy is the highest expression of our love for God. And it tells us that the way to be holy as God is holy is through loving our neighbors, treating them the way God would treat them. It seems to me, then, that the way we show our love for *God* is by how we love our *neighbors*.

Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Christian mystic, said:

We cannot know whether or not we love God, although there are strong indications for recognizing that we do...; but we can know whether we love our neighbor. And be certain that the more advanced you

see you are in love for your neighbor the more advanced you will be in the love of God, for the love God's Majesty has for us is so great that to repay us for our love of neighbor God will in a thousand ways increase the love we have for God.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, loving others is *how* we love God. And the more we grow in our love for others, the more we grow in our love for God.

So, friends, our faith is summed up in this. Love God, love neighbor. It's that simple. And it's that hard. I pray that God will help us to be more loving toward our neighbors – *all of them* – and that our love for God will increase as we do. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle*. "The Fifth Mansions." Chapter 3, paragraph 5.