

## **“What The World Needs Now”**

**Matthew 22:34-40**

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When I was sixteen years old, I worked at a service station. I spent all day Saturday washing cars. The most important piece of equipment I had was not a sponge, brush, vacuum cleaner or chamois, but a radio. I would turn up the volume and rip the knob off. I sang along with many of the artists and one of my favorite songs was “What the World Needs Now.” It was written by Hal David and sung by Jackie DeShannon.

While scrubbing tires I would belt out the words to that old tune, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing there’s just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some but everyone. Lord, we don’t need another mountain. There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb. There are oceans and rivers enough to cross, enough to last until the end of time. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing there’s just too little of.”

Evidently, love was on Jesus’ mind the day he was asked by a Pharisee what the greatest commandment was. He replied by saying, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.”*

Had Jesus stopped there, I think he would have frustrated the Pharisees and passed their test. I say he would have frustrated them because their purpose was to trick him. They were reeling from the cleansing of the temple and Jesus’ interpretation of ancient scriptures. They wanted to discredit him and put a dent in his popularity. Asking tough questions was one way they attempted to do this.

Jesus was aware of their motives, but he was also aware of the people’s need to hear the truth. Too much was at stake for him to be cautious and self-preserving. Therefore, he continued. *“And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”* Matthew 22:37-40.

Why did the second part of Jesus’ answer disturb the religious leaders? They did not love their neighbor, certainly not as much as they loved themselves. Read the next chapter, Matthew 23. Jesus boldly exposed his interrogators for what they were, egotistical, greedy, dishonest, unmerciful and corrupt.

There was no doubt that Jesus’ world needed love, sweet love. There was just too little of it as there is in ours, too.

**This morning, I want to focus our attention upon the second command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”** I am fascinated by this part of Jesus’ answer. What intrigues me so much is how personal, specific and particular it is. I might have responded to the question by saying, *“Love everybody as yourself”* or *“Love the whole world as yourself.”* My command would have been far broader. It would also have missed the point that Jesus was trying to make with his antagonists.

**How do you love the world?** How do you love everybody? You do it one person at a time and you begin where you are.

We all know people that say they love the world but treat their neighbor like they are from another planet. As a minister, my biggest struggle has been with people that fail to put faces and names with this command. They sing about love. They teach love. They write about love and even talk about love but make it so abstract and impersonal. Jesus refused to do this and rebuked others when they tried, as this conversation with the Pharisees revealed.

In the second command, Jesus forces us to make love personal, doesn’t he? He compels us to put a name and face with our intent to love.

Recently, some children were asked what love is. Their responses were priceless and insightful. Notice how specific and personal they define love.

“When my grandmother got arthritis, she could not bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So, my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands hurt, too.”

“Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.”

“Love is when mommy makes coffee for daddy and takes a sip before giving it to him to make sure it is ok.”

“Love is when mommy gives daddy the best piece of chicken.”

“Love is when mommy sees daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford.”

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man that are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

I really like that last one and think it is at the heart of what Jesus was telling the Pharisees and us. He insisted that we love people that we know and may know too well.

I discovered years ago that it is sometimes easier to love people from a distance than it is to love people close up. I think this is called infatuation. For sure, it is a fantasy.

Jesus won't allow us to fantasize about relationships, at least not for long. Every person is a combination of the good, bad and ugly and we must accept and love them even when the less desirable parts emerge. Some have labeled this “tough love” and it is. I'm sure it was tough for Jesus to love his tormentors while hanging on the cross. “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*” had to be some of the hardest words Jesus ever spoke. He certainly loved many people that day at their worst.

I recently read an article about a man and his neighbor. The author was relating how fortunate he was to have such a good neighbor. He was always cheerful and helpful. If he needed to borrow a tool, his neighbor was more than willing to loan it to him.

On the other hand, he had a neighbor that was very noisy at times. He loved to fish and went almost every Saturday. This created a problem because the neighbor would leave the house before the sun came up and he would not leave quietly. He made a lot of noise getting his gear ready, hooking up his boat and warming the truck up before he headed out on his weekly fishing trip. By the time this neighbor pulled out of the driveway, the sleeping neighbor was wide-awake and unable to go back to sleep.

What made this so interesting was that the good neighbor and the bad neighbor were the same guy. Loving his good neighbor meant accepting the fact that he was not perfect and could be very irritating. It means the same for us, too.

No one lives with or beside perfect people. No one works or goes to school with people that have no flaws. No one rides a plane, a bus or a taxi with only perfect people. Everyone we encounter or have a relationship with has imperfections. We must love them anyway just as we want to be accepted, embraced and loved by them.

Recently I was in a meeting with a group of pastors when one said, “I don't have to agree with people to like them and especially to love them.” I think Jesus would say “amen” to that. And yet, most of us shun people that think or believe differently from us. We make no room in our hearts and lives for them.

Perhaps this is because we are very good at trading love but not nearly as good at giving it away. We trade love frequently with people that like us and are like us. There is nothing wrong with this unless you limit your desire and ability to love to this small circle of people with whom you are compatible. What do you do when you encounter the neighbor you do not like or with whom you disagree on important issues? As followers of Jesus, you have no choice but to love them, too, and treat them with dignity, kindness and respect. Anything less is an inappropriate response.

**How can you fulfill this command and love people “close-up?”** You can’t, at least on your own. Look at the order of Jesus’ response to the Pharisee’s question about the greatest commandment. Loving your neighbor is second, isn’t it? I don’t think you can love your neighbor like Jesus instructed until you love God with all your heart, soul and mind. And maybe this is why Jesus changed the last word in that command from “strength” as recorded in the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:5 to “mind.” Loving our neighbor will require a change of thinking. It will require that we challenge the world’s standard of behavior in relationships and adopt God’s.

**Why should we listen to Jesus and love God and others so sacrificially?** Doing so will make the world better and your life function more smoothly.

How did Matthew conclude this paragraph? Jesus said, *“All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Have you ever tried to open or close a door when the hinges were not secure? It is clumsy at best if not impossible. Only when the door has been hung properly and the hinges are fastened tightly will the door work efficiently.

*“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* Loving God and others will keep the hinges securely in place.

**Who is the most difficult person for you to love?** What makes it so tough for you right now? Do you think they know it? What needs to change for you to act more loving toward them? Talk to God about it during this final hymn. He just may put a new song in your heart and change your attitude and behavior.

By the way, one little six year old child responded to the question, “What is love?” by saying, “If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend that you hate.” I believe Jesus would give her a hug!