

“LOVING GOD, LOVING THE WORLD.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Matthew 22:34-40

Introduction.

Welcome again to SERVE week. We have been planning and preparing and praying for you for many months.

We started several months ago having prayer meetings for you. Each of you has at least one or two prayer partners. Many of us are wearing prayer reminder bracelets. Last Wednesday evening there was a special prayer gathering to pray over every area of the church being used for SERVE. Last Friday evening a team of people went to each of the work sites to pray over them. We have prayed specifically for the Bradenton CRC because of the extra challenges you have faced over the past couple of weeks.

We will continue to be praying for all of you this week and we encourage all of you to enter into daily prayer for what God wants to do in and through you and with all of us together.

The theme of this SERVE week is Loving God, Loving the World. They are two sides of the same coin as you can see we have tried to represent with these gold coins. They go together and they can't be separated, you can't have one without the other.

Context:

The religious leaders hired a lawyer, an expert in the Jewish law to ask Jesus a question that seems relatively simple to us but in those days, it was a matter of huge controversy. Sort of like the immigration debate today.

They didn't ask Jesus this question to find out the answer. They didn't ask this because they were interested in spiritual things or because they wanted to learn and grow and be better people.

This was a question designed to trap Jesus no matter what He said. But they had no idea who they are up against. Instead of exposing Jesus as a fraud, they gave Him the opportunity to give one of the most profound summaries of religion ever given.

This is Jesus' definition of true religion. This is Christianity. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This is the purpose of your life, if you figure this out, you will have figured out life. If you do this, everything else will take care of itself.

True religion consists of two things, two sides of the same coin, two inseparable things.

But I have bad news, true religion consists of two things that we can't do on our own. Left to our own devices and our own resources and our own will power we will not and cannot do either of these things. That's how broken and fallen and dependent we are.

I have never once for even a single day loved God with all my heart, let alone all my soul and all my mind. And to add insult to injury, I have never selflessly loved my neighbor as myself.

But the good news is God wants us to do both these things and He takes it on Himself to enable us to do them in faith and reliance on Him.

Loving God.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

The Jews knew this by heart. This was the first Bible verse Jewish children learned. Devote Jews prayed this every morning and every evening. These verses are used to begin every worship service in the synagogue.

But we can't love God without something else happening first.

God loving us.

Now what kind of love does God have for us? Is it like the love between friends, or between a husband and a wife, or between parents and children, or grandparents and grandchildren? The world sees that kind of love and says that's how love should be, that's normal, that's natural.

Or is God's love the kind of love someone has for someone much less fortunate, like the love people show when they have compassion on the poor or down and out, the least, the lonely, the lost? The world sees that kind of love and is impressed, moved, it is an uncommon kind of love. Is that the kind of love God has for us? After all we are poor and needy, right?

No, there is a deeper kind of love, love for an enemy. Love for someone who hates, hurts, mocks, threatens, causes pain, is mean, like a bully.

We were sinners, we were enemies of God, we were like that bully at school causing all kinds of trouble.

One of our sons had trouble with a bully at school. It got worse and worse, our son didn't want to go to school. Then one day this bully pushed our son down a flight of stairs. That night at supper as he told the family the story, his older brothers started coming up with solutions for the problem. Their solutions involved various incendiary devices, sort of the Junior High equivalent of small explosives and torture. The sorts of solutions you would expect from boys.

But mom had a better idea. She came up with a plan to take this boy with our son to McDonalds for lunch. Our son was horrified. But a hamburger, some French fries and a playground turned a bully into a fast friend in about an hour.

The bully had not experienced that kind of kindness before and it got through.

God's plan for dealing with bullies was way better than hamburgers and French fries. God has offered us a way to turn from enemies into friends, haters of God into lovers of God.

God extends love to us in Christ and saves us from the worst kind of punishment imaginable, way worse than after school detention or suspension, but eternal separation and torment.

Now when someone loves you that much, the only right and sane and good thing to do is to respond with love. When someone saves your life, it is right to give your life to Him. When someone lays down His life for you it is good manners to return the kindness, and lay down your life for Him.

So, we love because He first loved. We learn what love looks like and what love does from God and then we love God back. Not to earn His love or gain His acceptance, He has already given that. We love Him out of gratitude.

Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

I John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.

Loving God is the greatest commandment but the greatest truth is God's lavish love of us.

God's love for us doesn't depend on our loving Him perfectly. God's love for us depends on Jesus loving God perfectly and on our behalf. He does for us what is required of us and enables us to do the same.

Love the Lord your God.

So now we can love. What is love? We need a definition because we use the word pretty loosely these days.

We love the Mariners or the Cubs, we love tacos or Dr. Pepper, we love Taylor Swift or the X-Files, we love soccer, we love our family, our kids, we love going on SERVE trips.

We use the word love for so many things it almost doesn't mean anything anymore.

Matthew 6:24 No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be ***devoted*** to the one and despise the other.

There it is. You can't be fully devoted to two masters, to two gods. We get this. In marriage you can't have a divided allegiance or loyalty or devotion. In the marriage vows we say, "forsaking all others I will be devoted only to you." Triangles don't work.

So, to love God is to forsake all your other gods. To love God is to give Him our highest and best, to put Him first, to give Him our highest allegiance, loyalty, devotion. In other words, *we are turned toward God*.

No one does this perfectly or completely. It doesn't just drop into us. It's an orientation of our lives, turned toward God, facing God, seeking God, wanting more of God, a longing for God.

It includes all we think of in the deepest and best kind of love, enjoyment, delight, satisfaction.

God wants our obedience to be from love rather than from duty, the love of sons not slaves. Love makes obedience a delight, not a duty. It is the mentality behind, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."

Jesus fills it out for us, love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Our heart means, our desires, our affections; and our souls mean our true self; and our minds means our thoughts, our reasoning, our desire to know God, to grow in that wisdom and understanding.

Turn toward God this week. Take advantage of the devotion time, the quiet time. Pray, ask God to show you Himself in a new, fresh way, to become more real. Ask God to help you love Him more and yourself less.

Ask God to make you more aware of how much He has done for you and how much grace and goodness He has given you and so make your hearts more responsive, filled with more gratitude, more thanks.

This is the greatest and most important thing you can do with your life and in your life, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

If you want to ruin your life, love yourself first and foremost.

If you want to ruin your life, think about yourself most, do what you want, love what you want.

If you want the best for your life, love the one who made you, love the one who loves you most.

Loving the world.

Wait a minute. I John 2 says *do not love the world or the things of the world*. So why does our theme say to love the world? We have to make sure what we mean by loving the world.

John is not using the world here to refer the world as God's creation or to people for whom Christ died, but the world as worldliness, world as being of the world. John defines love of the world as desires of the flesh, desires of the eyes, and pride of life (I John 2:15-16). The world uses this unholy trinity of temptations to get us to love the world more than God.

He is referring to the world that is the stronghold of the evil one, dominated by Satan, the godless world that is opposed to God and His will, the world that is full of idols and things we too often idolize, things that are contrary to God, things that appeal to our sinful desires and pleasures.

So, we are not talking about loving the world in that sense, but in the sense of John 3:16.

So how do we love others?

First, we will love others best if they are not our first and highest love. Maybe you have heard someone say that the best way a husband can love his wife is by loving God first and most. Or the best way to love your children is by loving God first and most.

That's why loving God is the first commandment and why the second commandment flows out of the first. If you don't love God you can't love others well or as they most need to be loved.

It is our love for God that enables us to see others as made in the image of God, it is love for God that opens our eyes to God's love for others just like He loves us.

In fact, that is why He tells us to love our enemies and why when we have His love in us that we actually can love our enemies. Because that's what God did to His enemies, to you and me. And that kind of love comes closest to God's love.

Second, love for others always moves beyond just thoughts and words, it moves to practical expressions of action.

I John 3:16-18 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but indeed and in truth.

Remember I said we can't do either of these commandments. So, God enables us to love Him by first loving us. God also enables us to love others by giving us His Spirit of love.

I Peter 4:8-11 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves *by the strength that God supplies*—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2:3-4 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Our neighbor is often those closest to us and those closest to us are often those who annoy or irritate us the most. The noisy or nosey or messy neighbor, the person in the next cubicle at work, that weird aunt or crazy cousin, the inconvenient stranger. Little brothers or sister, teammates, classmates, roommates.

We will all have opportunities to love others this week, here at the church as we live and work together, out on worksites, in our homes and at our jobs.

Die to yourself, make allowances for each other, exercise patience, give grace, forgive. Seek the good of others, do what is in their best interest.

The second love is the test and proof of the first love. What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder, let no one separate.

Implications and application.

Two sides of the same coin. Loving God and loving others.

We will do this by worshipping and working this week. That is the rhythm of the Christian life, worship and work, serving God and serving others, loving God and loving others.

We are being given an opportunity this week to grow into these two commandments in a deeper and more meaningful way. Don't miss it, don't sleep walk through it, don't let Satan steal the opportunity by distracting you with the world.

Engage the worship, turn your hearts attention to God.

Engage in the work, do good work, work hard, cooperate, help each other, submit to what you are told to do, do your work with excellence as unto the Lord.

Then go home and think on the things you heard and learned and did here. Go home able to answer two questions well:

Did I grow in my love for God? Did I love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, and strength? Did I love my neighbor as myself? Did I love others well?

Did I do this in my own small ability or did I do it relying every day on God's love and God's Spirit?

Can it be said when it is over that the world will know we are Christians by our love, by our love for our God and by our love for the world?

Jesus came to show us the depth of God's love for us. May His love for us awaken in us a fresh love for Him. He has created us with a capacity to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is His love for us, and He has created us with the capacity to return that love to Him and to give that love to others.

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today we are being sent out to serve.

Today you are being sent out to proclaim good news through good works.

Today you are being sent out to give recovery of sight to those blinded by their own needs and problems, who can't see because of the darkness of their own situation.

Today you are being sent out to set free those covered up by the chains of difficulty.

Today you are being sent out as ambassadors of Christ to announce the Lord's favor and love.