

Would He Have Asked You For a Ride?

Matthew 22:34-40

“Which commandment is the greatest?” a lawyer asked Jesus. Now the Lord knew that the religious elite counted no fewer than 613 commandments – 248 positive ones, linked to the parts of the body, and 365 negative ones, corresponding to the number of days in a year. Which one of 613 could possibly be the greatest? Jesus also understood this question to be a theological land mine. To elevate one commandment over another, or declare that a category of laws, such as moral law, was more important than another group of laws, such as ceremonial law, was to invite derision and controversy. So, how did Jesus respond? “Love!” Stunningly simple. Absolutely brilliant.

Jesus also didn’t fabricate his answer out of thin air. He turned to the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. Quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 he said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Then citing Leviticus 19:18, Jesus added, “And the second is like it – you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus then put the capstone on by saying, “On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets.”

Jesus says the key to life is love. We look around our world and we see some pretty awful things – the effects of Nine-Eleven are still with us after ten years, the Middle East situation with our fervent prayers that Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, and now Libya with the death of Gadhafi, will be able to establish democratic, representative governments in place of the decades old repressive dictator regimes under which they have struggled. Then there are the natural disasters of hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, floods, and mudslides that have killed and displaced thousands. Bad things happen to good people. Much of the bad is deliberately inflicted on humanity by those who carry deep hatred in the hearts.

Let me share some statistics on hatred. There were 36,525 days during the 100 years of the 20th century. In that time, about 125 million civilians lost their lives in massacres. That’s an average of more than 3,000 innocent deaths per day, and the pace has not slackened in the 21st century. Statistically speaking, Nine-Eleven was a normal day.

If love is the greatest commandment from Jesus, then why don’t we love our neighbors as ourselves? The answer, I believe, is that love is harder to master than hatred. Hatred comes easily. Our feelings get hurt, we recoil and lash back. Eventually it can disintegrate into something quite ugly. Hatred is almost a reflex action. We have to intentionally work at loving others as ourselves. Hatred is a snap; love, in many circumstances, is a challenge.

Maybe we need to take a lesson from children. A group of young kids aged four to eight were asked to share their meaning of love. Here’s what some of them said:

- “There are two kinds of love. Our love and God’s love, but God made both kinds.”
- “Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on cologne and they go out and sniff each other.”
- “Love is like a little old woman and little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”
- “Love is when my daddy makes coffee for my mommy and takes a sip before giving it to her to make sure it tastes okay.”
- “Love is when mommy sees daddy all sweaty and smelly, and still says he handsomer than Robert Redford.”
- “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

Why is hatred so easy and love so hard? Because of the human barriers we erect to the kind of love Jesus commands. There are five such barriers: our self-interest / it can be inconvenient to reach out to others / we distrust those we don’t really know / we dislike people who are different from us / and we lack the interest to look beyond ourselves.

If we were left to our own devices, we probably would never break down these barriers and obey the love commandment. Fortunately, Jesus never leaves us alone. He makes it clear that the commandment to love God is intimately tied to the far more difficult command to love our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot first love God, and when we think we have gotten really good at doing so, then take on the challenge of loving our neighbors. To love God is identical to loving neighbors! They are as inseparable as the horizontal and vertical beams of the cross. Jesus said, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Note the irony of our Lord’s use of the word “hang” here.

Writer Ron DelBene tells a story that when he was growing up his mother had “a real thing about cleanliness.” Anyone have a mom like that? I did, although not to the extent that DelBene’s mother did. From an early age she taught her son that when he went through a push door he was to open it with his fist. If the door had a handle he was to pull it open with his little finger. The purpose of all this, she instructed him, was to prevent his getting germs on his hands.

Ron DelBene never forgot the lesson. By the age of 48 he said that he “probably had the strongest little finger in America.” But then one day DelBene was serving a hot meal at a soup kitchen. On that day they were serving chili with two pieces of buttered bread. A man came through the line who looked even more scruffy and broken than the others. DelBene was overwhelmed by the man’s stench. “Like the pull of a magnet,” he recalls, “my gaze went to the dirt and dried blood on his hands.” Before he realized what was happening, the man clasped DelBene’s hand in both of his. “Brother,” the man said, “I love you. Thanks for being here.”

“I’m glad you came,” DelBene responded haltingly. The next man stepped up. As DelBene handed him a bowl of chili, a little of it spilled on DelBene’s hand. Without thinking, DelBene licked it off. Then it hit him and he froze in horror. That was the hand the other man had just clasped! DelBene was repelled to realize that he had licked something that the smelly, dirty man had just touched. It was also a moment of revelation for DelBene. He wrote. “The light of awareness changed my vision and my heart warmed up with a new understanding. No longer was Jesus only the handsome man I pictured in my mind and seen in paintings. Now he had a scarred, stubbled face with fingers stained yellow. He was dirty, he smelled bad, and he wore cast-off clothes. I had just served Jesus chili and bread!

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Jesus then added that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. You see, if you truly love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, then you will love yourself. You will like who you are, because you will know you are one with God. Jesus says that then you must turn to your neighbor in like manner.

Zig Ziglar wrote a book entitled *See You at the Top*. In it he tells a true story. Many years ago, an elderly man stood on a Virginia riverbank. He was waiting to cross the river, and since it was cold and there weren’t any bridges nearby, he waited, hoping to catch a ride to the other side. After a lengthy wait he saw a group of horsemen approaching. He let the first one pass, the second, then the third, fourth, and fifth. One rider remained. As he drew abreast, the elderly man looked the rider in the eye and asked, “Sir, would you please give me a ride across the river?” The rider immediately replied, “Of course.”

Once across on the other side, the older man slid to the ground. “Sir,” the horseman said before leaving, “I noticed that you permitted all the other riders ahead of me to pass without asking them for a ride. Then, when I came beside you, you immediately asked me to carry you across. I am curious as to why you didn’t ask any of them but you did ask me.”

The old man responded quietly, “I looked into their eyes and could see no love in them, and I knew in my heart that it would be useless to trouble them for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes I saw compassion, love, and the willingness to help. I knew you would be glad to give me a ride across the river.”

The horseman was touched. “I’m grateful for your words,” he said, “and I appreciate them very much.” With that, President Thomas Jefferson wheeled his horse and rode off toward Washington, D.C. and the White House.

To love one's neighbor is to love God. Nothing more. Nothing less. They are exactly the same. Ziglar reminds us that our eyes are the windows into our souls. Then he asks a profound question, which I leave with you: "If you had been the last rider, would the old man have asked you for a ride." Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 23 October 2011