

# LOVE : GOD + NEIGHBOR

*sunday school : module one*

*“To fall in love with God is the greatest romance;  
to seek him the greatest adventure;  
to find him, the greatest human achievement.”*

— Saint Augustine

## **A Frame.**

Of all the places to begin, why begin here? For generations, theologians have been trying to understand the Bible from beginning to end; a challenge because the Bible is long and complicated. It spans multiple millennia and continents. It was written by a dozen different hands and addresses thousands of topics. So how do you understand a document so complex? Many theologians have searched for a lens through which they might understand the Bible. They looked for key phrase or a unifying theme. Some chose the idea of covenant, others kingdom or dispensations. Some sought to understand it through the lens of genre like history, narrative or epistle, all in an attempt to frame the scriptures in a way that makes sense of it all.

The sheer amount of ways people have tried to understand the scriptures suggests that there isn't one right way. Nonetheless, a unifying idea can be a really helpful lens through which we can begin to understand the Bible and all its eccentricities and foreign (to us) ideas. When chosen wisely, a unifying idea is one that we can come back to over and over, catalyzing good questions and helping us understand some of the most confusing parts of the Bible. For us, that idea is found in the middle of the story. It is a statement that simply but profoundly encapsulates the whole desire of God for his

creation. The center of Christian faith and practice is found in Matthew 22. Jesus tells all people why they exist and what God has been doing throughout all of human history. That may seem like an exaggeration but it's not. In one moment, Jesus unveils the deepest knowledge that we could conceive of. What is this great revelation? That humanity was created to know and love God and that God, in his immeasurable love and grace, has been wooing us to this end since our birth. We'll go back to the beginning after this but first we have to see the center, otherwise we can easily get lost in the long and detailed story to come.

### **The Greatest Commandment.**

In Matthew 22:31-40, The religious leader asks Jesus to name the most important commandment, which on its face may not seem like a big deal but it was set to be a deadly trap. This was common practice for the religious leaders when it came to Jesus. He threatened their power structures and they hated and feared him for it. Jesus' teaching was resonating with the people of Israel and many of them had begun to follow him and sit under his teaching. Up to this point, the Pharisees had built a small but powerful religious empire that existed as a subculture under Roman rule. The Pharisees and teachers of the law (as they are called in the gospels) were highly influential among the Jews and they intended to keep it that way. Jesus' rising prominence threatened that power, so they constantly looked for ways to undermine him and reduce his influence with the people. This was not the first such interaction and it would not be the last.

This moment requires a little background. The Old Testament has 613 laws of various kinds and for various purposes. In Jesus' time, there were different factions of Jewish leaders who paid more and less attention to the laws. For instance, the Pharisees were sticklers for all of it while the Sadducees tended to be more relaxed in an attempt to find common ground (and influence) with their Roman captors. This religious leader is a Pharisee – one of the sticklers – and so his question is loaded with the precision of a lawyer interrogating a witness on the stand. For the Pharisees, obedience to the law wasn't simply a means of pleasing God or attaining true righteousness, it was also a

way to wield power. In a culture driven by law, adherence becomes currency and the Pharisees were awash with cash.

Jesus' answer is significant for them and for us. He says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Essentially, Jesus said that the most important thing that we can do with our lives is to love God with everything that we are. Stop and think about that for a moment. Of all the things that Jesus could have said at that moment, he chose this. Not, "Obey God" or "Be good" or "Don't sin", he said that loving God was the most important thing. This has a ton of important implications but I want to point out a few very quickly.

First, it means that God is the most lovely thing in the universe. In a world full of things to love, the only way that God could command us to love him above all is if he is the most lovely thing of all. It would be the height of arrogance for God to command love of Himself if he weren't in fact the being most worthy of love. Perhaps you've never thought about God this way but I'd encourage you to consider it. There are a lot of ways to think about God but none align more closely with his own testimony about what matters most in the universe.

Second, it means that the highest end of mankind is to love. There is no more important activity that we can engage in than love of God and our fellow human. Love is more important than honor, glory, money or fame and love is much more significant than simply kindness, tolerance or altruism. Love requires intimate knowledge, terrifying vulnerability and terminal sacrifice. Love is the complete giving up of oneself to another and it is the highest virtue of the Christian faith.

Third, it means that the path to truest and fullest flourishing is love. Not only is love the greatest thing we can do, but it is also the way to our own flourishing. This is one of the most important, if counterintuitive, ideas in the Bible. Jesus taught that humans were created for an essential "otherness" and because of that, we will both never be satisfied when we are self-centered but will always be tempted to do so. We are at our most fully

human when we are actively loving someone else, meaning that true flourishing requires knowledge, vulnerability and sacrifice.

Fourth, it means that the Christian life is one of radical “otherness”. God created us to be oriented upward towards him in worship and (as we’ll see in a moment) outward toward others in love. This is in direct competition with our culture which tells us to be primarily and even radically oriented towards ourselves, our needs, desires and hopes. Saint Augustine described the effects of sin as “Incurvatus in se” or a radical turning in on oneself. It makes sense that God’s enemy would work directly against our flourishing, so instead of being eternally oriented outwards in self-giving love, we are tempted to meet every whim and fancy and thus, gradually but inevitably turn in on ourselves.

Fifth, it means that the rest of the Bible - the entire story - is meant to show us just how lovely God is. It is meant to stir our hearts’ affections for him so that we would respond in love. The Bible is the story of the Creator God who, in spite of everything, pursues us in love so that we might be reconciled back to him in loving relationship. That’s why Matthew 22 makes such a good lens through which we can read the rest of the scriptures, it is literally the end to which it is oriented and the reason for its existence. We are able to know God primarily through the story of his gracious care for his creation. The Bible itself illustrates God’s love for us in ways that simple description could never accomplish.

Lastly, it means that the cross is the climactic demonstration of God’s unflinching and redemptive love. The cross shows us just how far God would go to draw us back into the love relationship we were meant to have with him. The cross beautifully illustrates the tension that every father feels for his children; both the deep desire to reconcile the broken relationship and the unwavering expectation for the quality of the relationship. God wants to be with us but knows that anything less than a relationship unified by love is a fraudulent approximation, unworthy of the vision for his good creation.

So where did Jesus get this idea? Did he just make it up? Did he, in this moment, change the game? Did he negate all of the scriptures that have come before? Not at all. In fact, if we look back at those scriptures, using Matthew 22 as our lens, we can see clearly that this has always been the plan.

### **Old Testament Roots.**

Beginning in Genesis 1:26, God established a unique relationship with mankind by creating us in his own image. From the outset, we are endowed with the mark of God himself. This is given to humans alone and establishes the level of relationship that God will always desire with his people. Genesis 2 describes this idea similarly, in verse seven it says that the Lord, “formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” This is a truly remarkable account of our creation. God, desiring to demonstrate the apex of his creation, not only makes us in his own image but actually breathes life into our nostrils. This level of intimacy is almost uncomfortable. There are very few people that I am ever that close to on purpose. In our very creation, God establishes the baseline vision for relationship with us, which is what Jesus described in Matthew 22 and that he pursues with us even now.

Of course, this all changed in Genesis 3. Notice the serpent’s temptation, he sows seeds of doubt about God’s honesty and goodness. He questions whether God actually loves Adam and Eve by saying, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Do you hear it? The serpent is undermining the love relationship that God has with his creation by suggesting that God is withholding a key piece of life that might lead to even greater flourishing. For the first time in their lives, Adam and Eve are made to wonder if they are missing out on something. They had never before considered their life with God to be insufficient but now, in light of this serpent’s lie, they were lured into rebellion. Whatever else could be said about this creation-altering moment, it is no less than a story about the serpent’s intrusion into the relationship between God and mankind. He

sowed suspicion where none existed, and thus created a schism of trust that caused Adam and Eve to believe the serpent's lies over the testimony of their creator.

The result of their rebellion was devastating. In the immediate aftermath of their sin, they felt compelled to hide, from each other and from God. Vulnerability is at the core of real love and their sin encouraged them to shed their vulnerability in exchange for protection and hiding. Genesis 3:8 tells us that they heard God walking in the garden, an event that was no doubt normal for them and probably one of the great joys of their lives, before the fall. This all changed after their rebellion, now when they hear God walking towards them, they hide from him. They don't trust him enough to be vulnerable, they have forgotten his goodness and the relationship that they were made to have with him. The final result is separation from God's presence and a fracture in the relationships that God created to be fulfilling and joyful. Woman's relationship with her own children would begin in struggle and the man's relationship with his work would be marked by toil and frustration. These relationships were meant to flow naturally from mankind's relationship with God and so, when the first relationship was fractured, the others followed closely behind.

Was this the end of the story; the end of the love relationship between God and his creation? Not at all. The relationship didn't end but it was significantly altered. Instead of a mutually intimate love relationship flowing back and forth, the relationship became a redemptive one, though not in the way one might expect. In our human culture, an offended party might rightfully expect an offender to be the instigator of reconciliation. It only makes sense that the one who cause relational strife would own the responsibility to make right what they did wrong. But this isn't how the story goes, instead God himself, over and over, initiates and pursues reconciliation. In spite of further rebellion and sin, God never relents in pursuing the kind of relationship with mankind that he created them for. Somewhat counterintuitively, we see this idea most plainly in the Law.

## **The Shema.**

When I said above that Jesus didn't pull his choice for Greatest Commandment out of thin air, I was understating the truth. Jesus' answer directly quoted Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a passage that every Jewish child would know by the name, "the Shema". It was, perhaps, the most recognized verse in the entire Hebrew Bible and was already considered the best distillation of the Law. The Shema comes at the tail end of the Ten Commandments, which is important because we often think of the Ten Commandments as simply rules to be followed by anyone who wants to please God. Seen through the eyes of Matthew 22, we see how God was describing the kind of behavior that marks someone who is in the kind of relationship with God that he created us for. God lays down a list of things that are the fruit of Adam and Eve's rebellion and then the epilogue on the whole section is the Shema. God sums up this description of life with him as simply loving him with everything that we are, "heart, soul and strength".

This statement is the axis around which the entirety of the Old Testament revolves. Every act of God is meant to demonstrate just how important this relationship is to him and for us. Every word out of his mouth is meant to either reaffirm this relationship or remind us of just how far away from it we've strayed. Every act of judgment is the discipline of a father, calling his children back to the ways of his household. This lens puts everything in new light: every story, every promise and every prophecy.

It should be no surprise then that after Matthew 22, this theme becomes pretty central to the Christian faith. The Apostle John in particular makes love the central idea of his writings. He narrates Jesus' "High Priestly Prayer" in which he prays that "they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Jesus asks the Father to unite us back to him, to give us the same relationship with the Father that Jesus has! There are countless examples like this one, where the scriptures affirm that what Jesus said in Matthew 22 is (and has always been) the central pursuit of God with his people.

The idea that God created us for a loving relationship with himself is an indescribable joy and that he is pursuing reconciliation with us is nearly unfathomable. The greatest

joy of all though is that he will accomplish what he set out to do. We will be reconciled with him and we will, once again walk with him as Adam and Eve did. Revelation 22:3 says, "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." What was made will be remade. God's purposes will not be thwarted. We who were made in his image and meant to dwell with him will be fully restored and will live eternally with him.

All of this means that as you consider God, you should do so knowing that he isn't asking you to simply believe in him or to learn about him but to love him. Now, in order to love him, you will have to learn about him but remember that the core desire is that you would love him. Knowledge is a means and obedience is a result but real, intimate relationship is the goal. Therefore our efforts, such as they are, should be directed toward the end of knowing God Himself and walking with him as Adam and Eve did, vulnerably and without fear.