

Community Church of Issaquah

April 30, 2023

## The Two Hardest Rules for Living

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Growing up, I found myself in the Catholic Church. I didn't choose that, but it was my heritage. My grandfather was an Italian immigrant who came to America when he was 14 to flee the First World War in Europe. As the first male child in my family, Papa designated me as the future priest in the family since every Italian Catholic family must have one priest. I spent my early school years in parochial schools being taught by nuns. I was always deeply impressed with their devotion to the Church and to God. Even when Sister Mary Margaret would send me packing to the cloak room simply because I whined during morning mass, I always like the nuns much more than those priests. The nuns always seemed so focused on their commitment to God which was evidenced by the vows they took to be "married" to God. Now, years later, I still struggle with the whole concept of being that devoted to God.

Today's Scripture passages hammer home two very difficult aspects for living a meaningful Christian life. First, to love God with all our "passion, prayer, and intelligence" or as the old King James tells it, "With all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." We'll come back to that in a minute. The second rule is for us to love other people just as much as we love ourselves. Did you get all that? Trust me, this is some heavy stuff, so we'd better make

sure we have our signals straight lest we miss the message Jesus was saying to the Pharisees. And yes, I did say to the Pharisees and not his disciples. Here's the picture.

The Pharisees were the intellectual elite in Jewish society. They were the one who were educated in the Torah, or the Jewish holy writings. And it seems they were often trying to trick Jesus with misleading questions. One wrong answer and Jesus would be guilty of blasphemy. This passage in the Gospel of Matthew is one of those occasions. So they proposed the question, "Teacher (or actually, Rabbi which in Hebrew means Teacher), which command in the law is the most important?" That's when Jesus laid it on them with not one, but two very demanding commandments. First, love God with all you've got. Did you notice that Jesus used "mind" last in his list? I'd like to think it was a slam to show them that their heart or passion was more important than their brain, but that's just my take on it.

Here's the thing about loving God with all we've got. Do you love the personhood of God – who God IS as an identity or the concept of God as an idea that has been taught to us over the years. Let me ask you a couple of questions as we think about the person of God.

- How is it even possible to KNOW God?
- How can we love a God that is sometimes just a concept or idea we learned in Sunday School?

It's hard to wrap our heads around the commandment to love the unknown and the unseen. That's sure not like the

real world, is it? With our usual relationships, we meet someone, we get to know them, we choose to like them – or not, and sometimes we learn to love them. How does that compare to our relationship with God?

Jesus says if we are to love God with all we've got, it takes at least three areas of life that require some commitment and work. Be passionate – love God with all your heart; be prayerful – talk to God often, and more than that, listen to God; and finally, open your mind to really know not just who God is, but what God is doing. There is one thing I think I should mention to you about all this, however. Loving God with all you've got takes not just a commitment, but a lot of time. I hesitate to tell you this, but to do what Jesus is telling us requires just a tad bit more than a weekly visit to church and listening to the pastor's frail attempt to inspire. Do you pray every day or even a lot during the day? Do you read the Bible very often? Now I've done it. I've begun to meddle in your life. Sorry about that.

Part two of this little lesson in life draws us even deeper into this business of doing what Jesus is sharing in this story. And for me, it's really tough. Can you believe this? Jesus is telling us to love other people just as much as we love ourselves, and actually even MORE than ourselves. What's that all about? When I think about this instruction from the Lord, my mind begins to ask a lot of questions.

- If I don't love myself very much right now does that mean I can get by with loving other people a lot less?

- If someone loves himself or herself too much, do they have to go overboard with others?
- And who the heck are these “others” that Jesus is talking about?

We need to be clear that the “others” Jesus is mentioning here does not mean every person in the entire universe. These others are the people who populate your life – family, friends, co-workers. These are the people who we are asked to love as much as we love ourselves. I think Jesus is telling me that for me this means I must be more loving to my sister who is a radical Fundamentalist Christian and her beliefs are the very opposite of mine. But I must love her just as much as I love myself. We struggle with this – loving others. It’s easy to love some people, but I think ‘some people’ is not the total of ‘others.’

But you know what I have found over the years? I’ve learned that there are many, many people, even within the church, who do not love themselves. For whatever reason, there are many who see themselves as unworthy of love, who view themselves as undeserving or undesirable – whether that’s about their physical self, their emotional self, or their intellectual capacity. For many of these, it’s much easier to love someone else than it is to love themselves.

Imagine someone who grows up in a family of over-achievers or hate-filled relatives. Perhaps someone abused or bullied. Can you picture the struggle to love oneself in

that individual's life. And then to come to a worship service and hear a minister says, "Jesus tells us to love others as much as we love ourselves." Imagine the guilt imposed on a child who believes he or she can't even love self, so how can they love someone else?

Lest we all fall into despair grading ourselves on how well we have done in the work – and I do mean work – of loving God with all we've got and loving others as much as we love ourselves, I want to tell you the best news of hope I can ever give you. I can sum it up in one word – GRACE.

Jesus knew when he spoke these words in Mark that these two admonitions were hard and that we couldn't master both of them instantly. These are two roadmaps to living a more fully joyful life in Christ. And when we come down on ourselves and beat ourselves up mentally and spiritually for our failure to live this sort of perfect life in Christ, God gave us words of encouragement and hope. Can you hear God saying, "I already know how hard it is to love me with all you've got and how even harder it is to love all those crazy people I put in your life just as much as you love yourself. I get it. So let me tell you that I love you with all MY heart and I've created this thing called "grace" so that you can experience that love and move on to try harder. Just never forget that I'm on your side and that you are loved with all my heart." That's what I believe God says to me and my hope is that it's a message you hear God saying to you as well.

One final thought: these two commands are the pegs that everything in God's Word hang from. Pay attention to them and do your best. Take one step at a time. That's all God is asking of you.