

Jesus Loves Us
March 17, 2024
Pastor John Mars

This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of Scripture for you that comes from the book of John, chapter 13. This occurs literally just a couple of hours before Jesus is arrested. This is Jesus telling them, "If you haven't heard anything I said; if you don't remember anything else; remember this!"

John 13, beginning with verse 31:

When Judas had gone, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in Himself, and will glorify him at once.

"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

May God bless the reading of the Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far away, my junior year of college at the University of Southern Mississippi, I was majoring in psychology, and I was pastoring my first church. And yes, in looking back on that, that's a little scary--a junior in college. Every week, at the Baptist Student Union on campus, we had a special speaker that would come and address the students. One particular Wednesday, I was there listening to a gentleman speak, and it was memorable. Forty-something years later, I still remember it. And he made his point very, very well, that we should serve God. We should dedicate our lives to serving God. But as he preached, I asked this question that I asked the children during the Children's Moment this morning: If God is all powerful, what does God need me for? What can I do for God that God can't do for God's Self? How do I serve God?

In our Scripture today Jesus answers that question once and for all, with no qualifications and no loopholes. This takes place just before he is arrested. And quite literally this is: "If you don't remember anything else I've said, remember this." Everything that he has said, everything that he has done, and what he is going to demonstrate in just a few hours after this on a Roman cross, is pointing toward this command. What I hope to do this morning is set up how we have gotten to this point, this point in the saga of Jesus life. Relatively speaking, it's going to be quick and an oversimplification. Now, don't you hate it when a pastor begins with a qualification? I admit what I'm about to give to you is an oversimplification of how we got to this point. But I want you to see some of the pivotal things that brought us to this command.

It begins in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew, chapters 5,6 and 7, Jesus' inaugural sermon. In that sermon, he establishes his authority to reinterpret, not the covenant, but tradition, In that sermon, on numerous occasions, he says, "You have heard it said by people of old...but I say to you..." He had the audacity to reinterpret traditional understanding of the Old Covenant. He moves them from the purely physical interpretation of the Covenant to making sin a matter of the heart or a matter of motivation. You see, at this point in history, the Jewish people believed the Covenant

was a matter of observation, a matter of doing, not a matter of thinking or feeling. In other words, I could hate your guts; I could pray every day for your demise; I could celebrate every time something bad happened to you; but as long as I didn't kill you, I was okay. And Jesus said, "No, you're not. No, you're not. It's a matter of what is in your heart that counts." And you can just hear the traditional-interpretation people going, "Who does he think he is, reinterpreting our traditions, messing around with what we believe? Don't confuse us with the facts; we've got our minds made up!" And they decided, "Well, we've got to keep an eye on this whippersnapper." And they did. They followed him around everywhere he went. And they tested him.

One day one of their experts decided to ask him a poignant question that Jesus knew instinctively was a trap. He asked him, "What is the greatest commandment?" Now, every Jew knew the answer to that question. Those nominal Jews on the fringe, we in the Christian church would call them Chreasters. Anybody know what a Chreaster is? Chreasters are people who come on Christmas and Easter! Even the Chreasters knew the answer to that question. It's the Shema. Everybody knows the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and all your strength, and serve Him only." That is the Shema. Everybody knew the answer to that question. And Jesus answered the question: "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your mind, with all of your soul, and with all of your strength," but then he had the audacity to add to it. Nobody adds to the Shema. It's the greatest commandment. It is a solo act. And Jesus said, "And the second is equal to the first: Love your neighbor as yourself." And you can hear the traditionalists going, "How dare he? How dare he add to the greatest commandment? And how dare he equate loving God and loving people? How dare he?" Now, both of these commands are in the Old Testament, first in Deuteronomy and then in Leviticus, but nobody would dare think, dream, even allow within their consciousness equating the two. And yet, that is exactly what Jesus does. You can hear them saying, "You mean loving people is as important as loving God?" You see, their religion was all vertical: man to God. They had no concept of loving people like they loved God. And you can hear them saying, if you listen very carefully, "This kid is dangerous. We've got to do something about this. Let's try to trap him in his words." And they tried.

Again, one of the experts, the same one, actually, says, "Okay. All right. Who is my neighbor?" Again, that's one of those questions that even the Chreasters knew. The Law, the Old Covenant, is very clear: Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. They interpreted "neighbor" as "my fellow Jew," and "my enemy" is potentially everyone else. Everybody knew that. And Jesus answers their questions with a story. That's how I know that Jesus is from the South, because we very often answer questions with a story. And he answers the question with a story. We call that story, "The Story of the Good Samaritan." A lot of you know it, but you need to understand how the Jews would receive it. And to understand how the Jews would receive it, you have to understand how the Jews viewed the Samaritans. There were very few, if anybody in the world, they hated more than the Samaritans. You see, for them, there was no such thing as a good Samaritan unless it was a dead Samaritan. The Samaritans arose during the exile. Some Jews married Gentile persons, and so they were of mixed races, and the Jews despised them. They would literally walk extra days to go around Samaria, so they wouldn't have to get Samaritan dust on them. And in his story, Jesus says there is a Jewish man who has been beaten, who has been robbed, who has been stripped naked. And he has been beaten so bad that there's some question as to whether or not the man is alive. Two pious, religious Jews come by; two professional, religious Jews

come by, and they pass by on the other side. They don't even check on him. But then a Samaritan comes by, and he has mercy on the man, and he checks on him. And he uses the best medicine he's got to clean his wounds. And then he bandages his wounds. And then the Samaritan puts him on his own animal, so the Samaritan has to walk now. And he takes him to an inn. And he doesn't drop him off so he can be cared for, but he stays with him all night, and he cares for the man, and he nurses the man. But he doesn't stop there. The next morning, when the Samaritan goes on his way, he gives the innkeeper more money, money that will care for him for several more days. And he said, "Use this and care for him, and if you spend more, I will pay you back when I come back through." Then Jesus asked the question everybody knows is coming: "Which one of these was a neighbor to the man in need?" And, just like right now, there was silence, because nobody, nobody, wants to acknowledge it was a Samaritan. Finally, the guy that asked the question cannot bring himself to say the word. But he says, "The one who had mercy on him." And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." And it's at this point they decide this man must die. He's dangerous. Not only is he reinterpreting the Covenant, not only is he adding to the Shema, he is having the audacity to say that we should love everyone, because Jesus forever and always established who our neighbor is. Our neighbor is anyone, even our enemies.

And finally, we come full circle. Jesus has established how to interpret the Old Covenant. Jesus has equated loving God and loving humanity. Jesus has established who our neighbor is. And now he is going to tell us what love is, and then he is going to demonstrate it on a Roman cross. Jesus boils it down. This is: "If you don't remember anything else I've said, remember this. A new commandment I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you, too, must love one another. By this will all people know you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jesus answers the questions: How do I serve God? What is the greatest commandment? Who is my neighbor? And what does it mean to love? What it means to love like Jesus loves is: Love others like he loves us. This is our command. Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant, and he gave us the New Covenant. And the New Testament is our commentary on how to fulfill this command. Jesus calls us to love like he loved. Yes, Jesus expects that of you and I.

Now, in the South, what I'm about to say, I would say it like this: I'm about to stop preaching and go to meddling. First of all, I want to tell you that just because I'm proclaiming it doesn't mean I'm doing it. I expect that I will spend a lifetime trying to learn how to love like Jesus. I suspect I will spend the rest of my days trying to approximate what Jesus Christ did. But I'm going to try. Lent is a time of challenge; it is a time of self-examination. If you will remember, I've told you on many occasions that I have two jobs. My job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. There will be a time when God allows me to pet you and pamper you and tell you how good you are. This ain't it. Lent is a time of introspection. Lent is a time of self-examination. And I want to ask you: Are you loving the people Jesus loves the way he loves you? If not, then today is the day to say, "Lord, I'm not there, but I will try and I will improve. And every day, Lord, I will strive to get better at it. Lord, help me love others the way you love me." Let's pray. Everyone looking within their own heart, you know what your needs are. You know where you're at on this journey. Make your commitment to love like Jesus loves you. Let's pray.

Lord, You have told us and demonstrated to us what love is. Lord, help us to love one another as You love us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.