

We Are the Church: Loving Self
September 25, 2022
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Good morning, Central United Protestant Church! This Sunday as you go about the rest of your day, would you please keep those on our eastern coast in prayer? There's a storm headed towards them, and we just want to make sure that they are covered in the prayer that they may need. This morning we're going to look at Matthew 22:37-40. We're going to cover quite a bit of information and so you're going to want to put your finger at Matthew 21:23 and 24:1, if you are taking notes. If you can, would you please stand with me as we read from God's Word.

Matthew 22:37-40.

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And on these two commandments depend all the law and all the prophets. This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it.

Now, one of the things about being a pastor and, more specifically, being a pastor who delivers a sermon, is the more sermons you deliver, the more you guys get to know me and the more I start to wonder: Why do they let me come up here on a Sunday? I suppose that none of you get nervous when you are going through a TSA checkpoint at the airport. I do. I bought a backpack almost 20 years ago on my first deployment. I bought a laptop, and I needed a backpack that had enough padding to protect that laptop while I traveled to Iraq and back. That backpack proved to be more durable than I could have imagined. It has made it 20 years and I still use that backpack today. It has contained the fuses of a Chinese 107-millimeter rocket along with some of the fragments of that same rocket. I cannot confirm or deny that it has held a grenade or two. And although it has, I can't confirm that it has held grenade simulators and artillery simulators. It's held several components of improvised explosives on their way to forensic analysis, and ammunition--more ammunition than I can count. And every time I go through Security, and they bring out that little wipe that wipes it for explosives, I think, "This is the flight I'm gonna miss!" My poor wife, I dropped her off at Pasco to catch a flight to North Dakota to see one of her friends. I was halfway home when I got a text from her: "Why are there bullets in my purse?" Now, I don't have a concealed permit in every state and so when I travel across state lines, I will put the firearm in one piece of luggage and I'll put the ammunition in another piece of luggage. And little did I know that one of my magazines was dropping bullets and they ended up at the bottom of her purse when she tried to go through TSA at the airport. So I quickly pulled over to the side of the road and I thought, "I'll give her a call and see if I can smooth it out." But she had already told my story and the TSA inspector had agreed that she was legit. And his biggest problem was that it was a shame to have to dispose of those bullets because, his quote, "Your husband buys the good stuff!"

Then there was the time that I was pulled off to the side. Again, it was that backpack. They said, "Is that your bag, sir?" and I said, "Yup." Fortunately, we had passed the explosive wipe test, and after a short time rummaging through my bag, he pulled out a 6-inch pin with a T-handle on one side of it and a slight bend in the middle. He said, "What's this?" Now I had to be careful; this could get me in trouble. I immediately asked,

“Have you ever served in the Armed Forces?” and when he replied, “No,” I said, “Then I'm gonna need to see your supervisor.” You see, several days before, I was in the motor pool working with 14 tanks, and we had staggered our tanks and we were working on basic maintenance of that vehicle. And I was in the midst of that when my first sergeant brought me a 6-inch pin. It's about as big around as your pinky and it had a bend in the center of it. And he said, “Sir, if we don't get this pin put into our mount correctly, when we elevate the machine gun, that machine gun slides back in its rack and it bends that pin. And to replace that pin is going to cost the state of Oregon \$300!” And so here I am at the airport. It's no longer the state's problem. If I lose this pin, I'm now out \$300. That's not gonna go over well with my wife. Finally, I get to a supervisor who had been in the Marine Corps, who proudly served. He holds up the pin and says, “Sir, what is this?” I said, “Well, that's the pin that holds a machine gun on to a tank. It's neither a machine gun nor a tank, but if I lose it, I'm out 300 bucks that I owe to Uncle Sam.” And he handed me the pin back and said, “Sir, you better hurry up and get on your airplane!”

In a very general sense, the Old Testament and the New Testament are full of situations in which the importance of loving God is demonstrated. And, likewise, we find exhortation after exhortation to love others. But while these two tenets are central to both Christianity and Judaism, what I believe I have found in this passage is a pin that holds the love of God with our love for one another. And if we get that pin wrong, we're going to get both of those wrong. So, what we're going to find out this morning is that loving ourselves correctly connects our love of God to our love of others.

Now, this is a short passage and if we're not careful, we can pull that short passage out of its context. And so, when we're studying a passage in the Bible, we've got to find where it fits in the context. And what I like to look for are what I call bookends. It's a sign that this is the beginning of a section, and this is the end of a section. And as I prepared for this sermon, I realized there's a lot of context here. The bookends that I found are in chapter 21, verse 23, which reads, “And when he, Jesus, entered the temple...” and then the bookend at the other end is in chapter 24, verse 1, “Jesus left the temple.” So, the things in between those verses are connected. And what we're going to discover is they're connected in a surprising way. The good news is: I'm not going to cover all 109 verses but I'm going to give you the Aaron paraphrase. And when I give you an Aaron paraphrase, that's dangerous for you guys. That means you've got some homework and you've got to go back and make sure that Aaron's paraphrase is accurate. And if not, I expect to hear about it. But to understand the first and second greatest commandment and, more specifically, this little pin that connects them, we need to know the whole context of the conversation. And that context begins in chapter 21, verses 23 to 37, when the chief priests and elders challenge Jesus' authority: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus' authority is being challenged by the Jewish authorities and those Jewish authorities, right here in the context of this, come in three flavors. The first ones are the Sadducees. After the death of Alexander in 323 BC, Israel came under the authority of the Seleucid empire. And did you know that Israel forgot to pay their taxes? When they forgot to pay their taxes, the Seleucids said, “You get one more chance! This guy named Joseph here, he's in charge. He's going to collect the taxes and ensure that we get our part of it.” Simultaneously, the Seleucids tried to Hellenize Israel, and Joseph's family embraced that program. As long as the Seleucids were in power, Joseph's family retained the power to tax and their wealth grew. The Sadducees grew out of this princely class. They were essentially a loose confederation of wealthy and powerful men who took a secular

and pragmatic, rather than a religious and ideological stance, with regard to the nation and its laws. (And I can't leave it alone. The easiest way to remember them is that they did not believe in an afterlife or a resurrection and so they were "Sad, you see!")

The Pharisees are the second flavor of scribes and leaders. In the Jewish revolt against the Seleucids, a rebellion known as the Maccabean revolt, it is likely that the Pharisees were one of several groups to grow out of the revival and resistance movement of the Maccabean period. Their influence grew from their staunch opposition to the Seleucid Hellenization program. They believed that for the Messiah to return, Israel had to be in complete compliance with the law. They were strongly committed to the daily application and observance of that law, and they accepted the traditional elaborations of the law that made daily application possible. They believed, moreover, in the existence of spirits and angels, and the resurrection and the coming of the Messiah. Now, the third flavor is the Herodians. Unfortunately, neither the Sadducees nor the Pharisees were in charge of Israel at the time of Jesus. Don't get me wrong, they had a tremendous amount of influence. However, in 63 BC, Pompey besieged Jerusalem and Rome becomes entangled as a third party in the Sadducees and Pharisees' power struggle, when they installed Herod the Great. After the death of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas inherited much of that kingdom and the Herodians were those who supported Herod the Great's successor, Herod Antipas. The Herodians favored submitting to the Herods, and therefore to Rome, for political expediency. But it's never that simple. Some Herodians felt that the Messiah would come in spirit, and in that spirit, Herod could actually be considered for messianic status.

Now, these chief priests and elders actually think that they've got Jesus up against the ropes. They are on the offense. In their world, credentials mattered, and they were asking Jesus for His credentials, knowing fully well that they considered he had been born of an adulterer and of a carpenter. Who had he learned under? But Jesus doesn't answer their questions, he poses one of his own: "Where did John the Baptist's authority come from?" John the Baptist had no credentials either. Jesus was pointing out that while the chief priests and the elders were credentialed, they feared the people who considered that John and Jesus might just have been from God. Jesus's credentials rest on the truth that He is God. So now Jesus goes on the offense. We find from verses 28 to 32, the Parable of the Two Sons. In this parable Jesus tells the chief priests and the elders, "The tax collectors and the prostitutes will go into the kingdom of heaven before you guys do." Then we move on to the Parable of the Tenants in verses 33 to 44. In this parable, Jesus gets the chief priests and the elders to actually admit that they are the wretches who should lose what they have been given and be put to a miserable death. What's funny is in verses 45 to 46, the chief priests and the Pharisees perceive that Jesus might be speaking about them: "Wait a minute, you're talking about me!" But Jesus continues his offensive and goes into the Parable of the Wedding Feast. In this parable, Jesus is telling them that they should know better; they are aware that there is a coming wedding feast, and they know that they have been invited to attend, but in their attendance, they should have been appropriately dressed. What's astonishing to the Jewish mind is that someone would attend a wedding inappropriately dressed. And yet Jesus is saying, "You guys, not only are you inappropriately dressed, but you think you are the guests of honor at this wedding. And still you're inappropriately dressed!" They should have been dressed in the sackcloth and ashes of humility and repentance. and yet they have dressed themselves in the purple and the gold of royalty. Now right now, you're saying, "Aaron, you were given the task of preaching in a series called, "We Are the Church." There's a lot of history. Trust me, we're getting to us.

Now we move into what I call the Three Condemnations. Jesus is going to condemn each of those parties separately. In Matthew 22:15-22, Jesus is asked about paying taxes to Caesar and Jesus's response is a condemnation of the Herodians: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." They were mixing the things of God with the things of Rome. Next, the Sadducees are up, and they ask a ridiculous question about the resurrection: "If this guy marries this girl and he dies, and the girl goes to his brother and he dies, and the girl goes to his brother and he dies, and the girl goes to his brother and he dies, and she goes to his brother, when they all get to heaven, whose wife is she?" And they're just snickering in the background, "That's so ridiculous! Surely there can't be a resurrection." And Jesus condemns them by saying, "You don't understand the Scripture, or even God's power." And then we get to our passage, the Great Commandment, which is also a condemnation, only this time it is of the Pharisees. He said to them, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Now, the Pharisees watched the Herodians fail miserably in front of this guy that the people were on the verge of accepting as their Messiah. And then they watched as the Sadducees failed miserably, and so now it's their turn at bat. And they ask, "What is the most important law?" and he responds, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind." That was what was written on their foreheads. That's what was written on their hands. It was written on their doorposts. And so now the Pharisees are standing up, "We've got this!" but Jesus says, "There's a second commandment. Love your neighbors as yourself." The Pharisees had gotten it wrong. They were not loving others like they were loving themselves, and that's the condemnation. In fact, they had elevated themselves above not only the Gentiles, but even their fellow Jews.

Going farther in this conversation, Jesus says, "They preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. And they love the place of honor at feasts, and the best seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by the others." No greater example of this inaction is when Jesus tells the story of the publican in Luke, chapter 18:10-14. "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank You that I'm not like other men: extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes up to heaven. He beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'" Jesus said, "I tell you this: This man went down his house justified, rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

What is our right position before God? The Pharisees had got it wrong. Ezra writes, "Oh my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens." Job confessed, "I had heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see You. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." What about the centurion who said, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I'm not worthy to have you under my roof."

And in Ecclesiastes we read, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." What we find, and this surprised me, is that Jesus isn't saying that we have to first love ourselves to love our neighbors. What he is saying is that we have to be careful not to let our pride or our love of ourselves get in the way of our love for God, or our love for others. What does this mean for the church? What constitutes a proud person? The negative sense points to a sinful individual who shifts ultimate confidence from God to self. Our pride today can be just as hindering as the self-righteousness of the Pharisees of Jesus's day. Today, Christians think that being Christian is about being good people. And I think that many Christians think their entrance into heaven is based on that goodness. But how good do we have to be? Is it enough not to curse? Do you have to be a member of the choir? Do you have to wear a tie? Is it enough to have provided for your family? Is it enough not to do drugs or drink alcohol? Sometimes I think we as Christians live by the same maxim as the Pharisees. We've just rephrased it for our day: "The faults in others I can clearly see, but thank God, there are none in me." If we're not careful, our pride in these matters can get in the way of knowing our real position before God. In fact, Jesus was very clear about that. While condemning the Pharisees, he also said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter into the kingdom of heaven." Our goodness can never be enough.

I was reading a story about a family whose kids won four free goldfish at the carnival. (I remember those goldfish!) The only aquarium they could afford was a dirty, discarded display model. It took them two hours of scrubbing to get that aquarium looking good and those fish looked good in it. But the next day, one of the fish had died. The next day another died, and the third night yet another. When they finally talked to a friend and an expert, they discovered that their mistake was in washing the tank with soap. Their uninformed efforts had destroyed the very lives they were trying to protect. The author of this story concluded that sometimes, in our zeal to clean up our own lives or the lives of others, we unfortunately use killer soaps: condemnation, criticism, nagging, fits of temper. We think we're doing right, but our harsh, self-righteous treatment is more than others can bear.

Jesus closes this conversation with the Seven Woes to the scribes and Pharisees, and a lament over Jerusalem. And what's awe-inspiring is that the Seven Woes are the natural outcomes of a people and a congregation that elevate themselves above others. If we elevate ourselves, we will shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces as we require them to do more and more good things to be good enough. If we elevate ourselves, we will make disciples who are more children of hell than we are. We will make disciples who put those same burdens on other people. If we elevate ourselves, we become blind guides. If we elevate ourselves, we will make a show of the small laws, wearing ties, not cursing, but we will neglect justice and mercy. If we elevate ourselves, we will appear good, when inside we will be full of greed and self-indulgence. We will appear beautiful, but inside we will be dead bones and unclean, unrighteous, unworthy of the presence of our Lord. We will become the same as those who murdered the very prophets sent to give us the message. This little passage: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the first great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And that "as yourself" is the pin that holds that together. And I fear that we too often misunderstand that pin. You don't have to love yourself to properly love God. You don't have to love yourself to properly love your neighbor. But if we're not careful, our love of self will hinder us from doing either. We need to think seriously about our own

pride as a church. Do we consider ourselves better than those kids across the parking lot in the skate park? Do we consider ourselves better than the homeless who enter here on a Sunday for doughnuts and coffee? Have we elevated ourselves above the Word of God? Have we elevated ourselves above the words of Jesus? Finally, just before Jesus delivered the Seven Woes to the Pharisees, he makes this statement: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Do you know what makes us all equal? I can't exalt myself above you any more than I can push you below me. The price that God paid for our redemption is the same for you and for me, for the skate kid across the parking lot, for the homeless man sleeping in a bush outside. It is of eternal value, not because you gain eternal life, but because the one who died is eternal. "Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name." To properly love God, to properly love others, we have to make sure that we are not standing in our own way.