

## **SERMON: 25 October 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Make Love Your Goal**

**Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

**Matthew 22:34-46**

Arguments about the greatest commandment were rife in Jesus' time. The trouble was that the law, intended to bring freedom and life, had become burdens and complicated. There were too many laws. The 613 Mitzvot laws in the Torah were constantly being argued over by the Scribes and the Pharisees.

The Jews believed that these laws made up the oral law passed on from Moses to Joshua.

The Pharisees argued that every one of these oral laws needed to be treated equally.

Think about it.

There was a law which said "a man must not put frankincense on his wife's meal offering" (Numbers 5:15). That was as important as "to love God" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Or another law said you weren't allowed to plant a tree in the Temple courtyard (Deuteronomy 16:21). Just as important as to know there is a God (Exodus 20:2).

Or not cooking meat and milk together as important as knowing that God is One.

They basically argued that the ceremonial laws were as important as the ethical ones.

In other words, keeping to the rules was more important than how people were to treat each other.

This is maybe why they, and many others, approached Jesus with the motive to try to catch him out, or put him to the test.

They wanted him to agree that all the laws should be treated equally and I think they kind of knew that he wasn't going to say that.

They would have seen it in his actions, that how he treated people mattered more than not healing a sick person on the Sabbath for example.

As a Rabbi, a teacher, Jesus would be expected to give his take on the laws of Moses and he wasn't slow to do so.

He made what had been made complicated, plain and simple.

The whole law, all the commandments, can be summed up with one word, love.

Love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

Anything less than this, or anything that excluded this, or made it too difficult, would fail to live up to the beauty, goodness and truth that God intended.

We might ask ourselves the question, what does it mean to love God, what does it mean to love our neighbour and what does it mean to love ourselves?

That, of course is three questions.

About the three loves - God, neighbour and self.

We often forget love of self.

Many people struggle with this idea of self love.

It doesn't mean a selfish narcissism but a healthy concept of who God made us to be.

It's not about our how we look or what we wear. It's about our true self.

Someone put it like this,

“We love who we are because we can see ourselves as God sees us and love ourselves because we know how much God loves us”.

You've got to love yourself in order to be able to begin to love others.

You've got to have a healthy sense of your own self worth before you can see that in others.

You've got to believe in the importance of your own being before you can engage in the good news of life giving and life affirming in others.

You've got to have an idea of how God sees you not as the world sees you.

God sees you as the apple of God's eye.

God sees you as he sees Jesus, as an only beloved child.

God sees you as if there's no one else to see.

So if God loves you like this why would you not love yourself and allow that love to play out in your relationships with both God and with neighbours.

We cannot love God if we refuse to love what God loves.

Love for God is directly linked to our love of self and our love of our neighbour, the neighbour who God loves.

I don't think love is easy.

That's why to love is a commandment.

We are told by Jesus to do it. It doesn't come naturally at first. It's costly and it often has to be worked at.

It's not this warm fuzzy feeling that comes over you. That's probably something else.

You don't get that feeling when faced with an enemy and the words of Jesus ringing out 'love your enemies'.

Love has to be chosen, because if we're honest most of the time we'd probably rather not choose to love.

It will mean to weep with those who weep, to laugh with those who laugh, to touch the untouchable, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the outcast, forgive the sinner, confront the oppressor, comfort the oppressed, wash each other's feet and tell each other the truth.

Think of Jesus, possibly only a matter of days after this encounter, loving and forgiving those who were beating him, falsely accusing him and nailing him to the cross.

Choosing to love though every fibre in his being was tempted to do otherwise.

Only if we, as Jesus did, remain rooted in the Source can we tap into a supply of love that is both unfailing and inexhaustible.

Let's make love our goal as it was for Jesus.

And let me add a word about the verses 41-46 where Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees and asks them the question, whose son is the messiah?

He knew they'd say, the son of David and what's interesting about that is that the implication is that the messiah, the anointed presence of God, would, in the Pharisees opinion, be less than the great king David.

What a high view of David to hold.

The murderous and the adulterous king David.

Not even David held such an exalted view of himself.

Which is perhaps why Jesus says that even David called the messiah Lord. The Messiah couldn't possibly therefore be less than David.

But yet the Pharisees, imprisoned by their attempts at law keeping, held such a low view of God.

They couldn't see that God the Messiah was present among them.

Their god was too small.

We saw last week that one definition of sin is to make God less than God is.

JB Philips wrote a book called "your god is too small" in which he said that people could never have too big a concept of God but only ever an expanding one.

He spends half of the book demolishing the inadequate descriptions that people have for God and then talks about a focussed God of beauty, goodness and truth, and the importance of God, who can never be fully grasped or understood, being focussed into a human life so that people could begin to see and understand.

We see that focussed God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the life in the Spirit of Christ which is now ours through faith and by grace.

So with God's help,

Let's not fall into the trap of making our god too small and let's make love our goal.

As it was for Jesus, so may it be for us.