
The Priorities of Jesus

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets* (Matt. 22:37-40).

Well . . . There they are!

And after nearly 2,000 years hardly anyone has taken them seriously.

The author of the Bible summarizes the totality of its message in only two simple commandments, but most of us are determined to make Christianity something complicated and technical.

Jesus reduced the essence of pure religion to a lifestyle so utterly simple that as Isaiah predicted "fools and wayfaring men cannot err therein" but such simplicity is hidden from the "wise and prudent" (Matt. 11:25).

The Master of one-syllable words has stated the total purpose of God for man in two cardinal commandments, but His well-intentioned followers have inserted enough fine print to divide the Christian world into hundreds of warring factions.

In a single paragraph Jesus proposed a philosophy of life broad enough to encompass all of humanity, yet narrow enough to be

eternally unique. Why do we persist in compounding these simple commandments into complicated creeds?

Sweeping away the clutter and confusion of tradition and interpretation, Jesus informs us that love is all! Through the inspiration of His Spirit we know that tongues and prophecy will vanish into oblivion, but love abides forever. Faith will become sight and hope will become reality, but the essence of love transcends the element of time.

In spite of the unequivocal statement of Jesus about the supremacy of love, most of us are hell-bent to establish our own priorities. We approach the scriptures with a predetermined theological bias so that having eyes — we see not. And having ears — we do not hear. Such a problem is nothing new. It is the same mentality that precipitated Calvary as we will later seek to prove.

Controversy Over Priorities

Jesus taught these two commandments in a context of controversy. The Jewish Nation at the time of Christ was divided into various "sects" or "denominations." Three of these are mentioned in connection with the event before us. Each sect was distinguished from the others by its priorities in religion.

The first sect mentioned in this context was the Pharisees (Matt. 22:15). The Scriptures teach that they took counsel how they might entangle Jesus in His talk. The name "Pharisee" means "separated." Their historical roots reached back to the period of the Maccabees when certain leaders of their nation began to fraternize with the heathen. In righteous indignation these pious Jews "separated" themselves and became the strictest and most numerous of the Jewish denominations.

The second group mentioned was the Herodians (Matt. 22:16). Very little is known of them but their name implies political priorities. They are thrice mentioned in the Scriptures, each time in league with the Pharisees in opposition to Jesus (see also Mk. 3:6; 12:13).

The third group was the Sadducees, distinguished by their denial of the resurrection (Matt. 22:23).

All three groups did have one thing in common; they were opposed to Jesus. Each sought to trap Him with its favorite theological questions.

The Herodians asked, "Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?" The question was designed to divide Jesus from His followers, or the Government of Rome, or both.

The Sadducees proposed the hypothetical situation of a woman who had been married and widowed seven times. Then they asked triumphantly, "Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven?"

Both questions were designed to embarrass Jesus and to precipitate some damaging controversy. Much to the chagrin of the theologians, however, Jesus answered both questions with authority and simplicity.

When the Pharisees heard that the Sadducees had been put to silence, one of them who was a lawyer asked Him another question to tempt Him. "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?"

The answer to this question was intended to polarize and divide the disciples of Jesus. The lawyer assumed that no matter how Jesus answered the question He would be alienated from many of His followers.

Jesus, however, established priorities which boldly transcended denominationalism. He said that to love God in the right way was the number one priority in life. He continued that to love your neighbor in the right way was priority number two. Please observe that there was no third priority. The two great commandments consummated everything.

But those who seek to justify themselves will want to ask . . . "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus once told a story to answer this question. He spoke of a man who fell among thieves and was left by the roadside wounded and half dead.

The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side. Their religious priorities were such that they did not want to get involved. Perhaps they wanted nothing to interfere with their holy duties in the Temple. Then along came a Samaritan — an irreligious man by their standards. The conduct of the Samaritan was not regulated by religious rules . . . but by love. He did not have to search the Scriptures for an answer to the wounded man's dilemma; he simply did for that man what he would have wanted that man to do for him if their situations had been reversed. And Jesus said, "Go thou and do likewise."

Priorities Today

The plight of Christendom in the 20th century makes Jewish legalism look watered down and weak. They had a handful of denominations . . . we have hundreds. They had a handful of

differing priorities . . . we have hundreds of different priorities. Virtually every denomination has its own rationale for existence, and new factions are being formed every year. As long as we insist upon establishing our own priorities this horrendous problem will continue. Every denomination is convinced that the "main thing" is something different; and if Jesus should suddenly appear in the flesh, we would badger Him with questions like the ancient Pharisees just to show our "brethren in error" that we were right all the time.

In reality none of us is right. There is none righteous . . . no, not one. Those who insist upon justifying themselves cannot avail themselves of the righteousness of God. The very idea that our salvation depends upon grasping some theological technicality is utterly absurd . . . yet everywhere believed.

Christendom is fortunate indeed that the Author and Finisher of our Faith has established a set of priorities for us. He insisted that the "main thing" was love. This is not to say that matters of Christian doctrine are not important; it is only to say that they are not the most important. Love precedes agreement, not vice versa. We do not come to love because we agree, but we come to agree because we love.

Accepting the priorities of Jesus is not a triviality; it is the most revolutionary concept in the world. Those committed to the priority of love will find themselves like strangers and pilgrims in a strange land. They will be frequently called upon to suffer affliction and to endure the loneliness of seeking someone who will understand.

People with strong convictions do not change easily. Jesus died upon a cross trying to convince the world that God is love. Paradoxically, persecution sometimes comes at the hands of deeply religious people who destroy others under the illusion of doing God a service.

Albert Einstein ushered in the age of nuclear power by writing a simple formula ($E=mc^2$). There is a vast difference, however, between writing a formula upon a blackboard and exploding an atomic bomb. Someone had to transform the equation into reality . . . and it was not an easy project.

In similar fashion the words of Jesus about love will have little relevance to our generation until they find expression in human lives . . . and the project will not be easy. The ultimate expression of love is seen at Calvary. God so loved that He gave . . . and the gift which He gave was Himself. The Scriptures affirm, "Hereby

perceive we the love of God because He laid down His life for us," and then it adds, "and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I Jn. 3:16).

Crosses are not just to sing about, they are to die upon. Those who would know the power of His resurrection must share in the fellowship of His suffering. Not all will be called upon for a literal martyrdom, but each of us must be spiritually crucified with Christ in order that His resurrection power may operate in our lives. We cannot experiment with humanity like rats in a maze or ingredients in a test tube. We cannot flip some spiritual switch and remain uninvolved with people. By love we become enslaved to one another. Those who do not deny themselves and take up a cross cannot be His disciples.

- You may speak with the tongues of men and angels, but if you have not love you are like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.
- You may have the gift of prophecy and you may understand all mysteries and all knowledge. You may have all faith so that you can remove mountains, but if you have not love, you are nothing.
- You may bestow all your goods to feed the poor, and you may even give your body to be burned, but if you have not love it will profit you nothing.

*The "Main Thing" in Christianity is to Love . . .
If You Miss Love,
You Have Missed It All!*

Questions for Discussion — Lesson 1

1. Name several major denominations and list their points of emphasis which immediately come to mind.
2. What would an outsider see as a major emphasis in your church?
3. Do you know of a group known primarily for loving one another?
4. Could Jesus have been wrong in establishing the priority of love?
5. Is it possible that Jesus would change this priority if He was preaching to our generation?
6. Why has an emphasis on love been so consistently avoided?
7. Can you think of anything in Christianity more important than love?
8. Can you think of a third commandment which Jesus should have listed?