

DEPRESSION'S BEST MEDICINE

Matthew 22:34-40

*(some illustrations from "Helper's High," Homiletics,
October 2005, p. 57)*

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Amarillo, Texas
October 22, 2023**

You won't catch me counting the commandments. But those who have counted them say that the total number of Old Testament precepts and prohibitions is 613. That seems like an awful lot of commandments to memorize, and who could possibly keep them all? So let's narrow them down to ten main commandments. None of us can list the 613 commandments, but we can come pretty close, probably, to listing the Ten Commandments. But I have even a better deal for you today. Not 613, not even 10, but only two.

The whole Old Testament teaching can be summarized in just two commandments found in the New Testament. Two commandments that were chosen as the favorite of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We come to our passage in Matthew 22. Jesus has already silenced the Sadducees when they posed the question about the woman and her successive seven husbands. It was the Pharisees turn. Ready. Aim. Fire. If the Sadducees could not silence our Savior, maybe the Pharisees could find fault with the rabbi named Jesus.

The lawyer puts Him to the test. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? Out of 613, which one is the big one?"

Jesus does not hesitate. Deuteronomy 6:5. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment."

You see, if you love God then you're going to keep the other commandments.

- If you love God, you're not going to worship anyone or anything else.
- If you love God, you're going to honor His day of worship.
- If you love God, you're going to give and not be a person of greed.
- If you love God, you're not going to lie, for He is the Father of truth.

You get the picture. If you love God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your mind, it will change how you live. It will change who you are. If you keep the great commandment, the others fall into place.

But Jesus didn't rest with just one commandment. He gives us another. They are inextricably linked – our love vertically for God, and our love horizontally for humanity.

“Oh, the second commandment,” He said, “is like the first one. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets.”

Let me try to make the connection for us another way. When we love our neighbor, we are loving God. If we love our neighbor, we will not kill him, steal from him, lie about him, or covet what is his.

Turn a few pages over in your New Testament to that great judgment scene in Matthew 25. The judgment of the nations – dividing humanity among sheep and goats. Jesus says to those on His right hand, to the sheep, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. Naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.”

“Lord,” they asked, “when did we see you sick and visit you? When were you hungry and we gave you something to eat? When were you thirsty and we gave you drink?”

And Jesus says in verse 40, “When you did it to one of the brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.”

Conversely, He says to the goats on the left, “Get away from me. Go to the eternal fire, that one I prepared for the devil and his angels, because I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, sick and you did not visit me.”

“Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or sick?”

Verse 45.

“When you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

You can't read that passage and tell me that loving God and loving humanity are not linked. I'm certainly not saying that everyone who does a kind deed has good theology or understands God's plan of salvation through Christ Jesus. But I am saying you cannot understand God's plan of salvation through Christ Jesus and not correspondingly do good deeds.

Do an internet search on depression on a popular web browser. I came up with six billion references to depression within less than 1/2 second this week. Yet, you'll find significantly fewer references if you type in the word “happiness.”

We are not a very happy people. And the more we focus on our sadness, the sadder we become.

Now, I'm saying at the onset I'm not making light of anyone's clinical depression or their need for treatment for chemical imbalances. That's not what this sermon is about. That goes beyond the scope of my expertise. But this I do know, and it was said by Dr. Karl Menninger who was an expert in all these things. He said, “Love cures people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”

Sounds like he has read the great commandments. The great commandments are about love. Love God. Love your neighbor.

“Love cures people – both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it.”

Today, I want to focus on the ones who give it – the ones who love God and love their neighbor as themselves.

The Institute for Research into Unlimited Love, abbreviated IRUL (pronounced “I Rule”) was established in 2001 with a large grant from the John Templeton Foundation. IRUL focuses on love – that is, deep and unselfish love for others without exception. The kind of love, it says on their webpage, that is found in this passage, The Golden Rule.

While there have been about 100,000 scientific studies on depression in the last 40 years, and only about 7 on happiness, the tide is beginning to change. In fact, IRUL doles out money to colleges, universities, conferences, book publications – anything that gathers together scientists and scholars and educators to dialog on the prospects on how humans help each other by loving.

IRUL says that our world is full of hatred, group conflict, rudeness, even technologies of destruction. While we’ve all studied on how to kill each other, we might study how to love and serve each other.

Already IRUL has undertaken 50 scientific projects. Universities like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton are applying and receiving grants from IRUL to study how it helps you to love somebody else. It improves your well-being, your mental health when you reach out and help others. In fact, to date 200 newspapers and magazines have cited the Institute’s work, including the *Boston Globe*, *Toronto Star*, and the *National Post*. (www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org)

I was quite intrigued by the fact that such an elite institute existed to study the Golden Rule. Or the principle of love embedded in the Golden Rule.

Modern research is confirming what Christ already taught. It is good and wise and healthy to love others.

But in our fallen humanity, we are selfish, self-centered people. Have you ever sliced a pizza for children? Not a one of them will choose the small slice.

Today I want to tell you that as God’s people, we are to be the givers in this life – those who are refocused around self-sacrifice demonstrated through the cross of Christ Jesus. The kind of self-sacrificing service our Savior speaks about is not sentimentality or sweet emotion. Rather, it’s a steadfast love that leads to sacrificial service.

What might that look like?

I run across stories like this from time to time, and, well, they’re amazing.

Let me tell you the story of the Anglins. There is a mother, a father, and 15 children. Seven of them are biological children, but eight are adopted. And the adopted kids – the ones they chose – have special needs ranging from cognitive deficits to even the absence of limbs. There is a myriad of ethnic and racial backgrounds among the children they have adopted. They call their farm “Acres of Hope.” And their mission is to spread God’s love – well – one child at a time.

Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.”

Or take Christina Noble. She was a poor, abused Irish girl from the slums of Dublin. She had a dream, a dream that took her all the way to Vietnam – a vision that inspired her to work with the street children of a poor, disease-ridden city. It’s in her book entitled *Bridge Across My Sorrows*.

“You might laugh about my dream,” Noble says. “You might say it was nothing but a dream and that only someone who was Irish would act on a dream as if it were a message from God. And you could be right.”

But she acted on that dream, and moved – as a middle-aged woman – to Vietnam. She had no education, no money, no real idea what she was going to do. She got to Ho Chi Minh City and saw two little girls dressed in rags playing in the dirt across the street. She thought they were playing games but discovered they were actually grubbing for ants and eating them.

One of the little girls reached out to her, wanting to touch another human being. When Christina embraced her, she realized that she was making a life-changing connection. God was calling her to work with children who lived in poverty, children who were suffering as she did when she lived in the slums of Dublin.

From that one hug to the one little girl, she created a center for the care of street children, one that became a hospital and a social center. At any given time, 75 children receive inpatient residential care, and another 1,000 are treated each month on an outpatient basis. And Christina is making a real difference in Vietnam.

Love God. Love your neighbor. The two came together in Christina Noble’s dream.

Or, let’s travel back in history. There is the story of an 18th-century American Quaker named John Woolman. In his own heart, he found he could not bear to assist his employer in the sale of a slave. Woolman traveled to Quaker meetings all across the colonies and talked with people one-by-one about the evils of slavery. “My heart was tender and often contrite,” he wrote, “and universal love to my fellow creatures increased in me.”

It wasn’t an easy sell job, especially to Quakers who owned slaves in the mid-1700s. But Woolman succeeded through quiet one-on-one conversations, visiting his fellow Quakers individually on farm after farm, for most of the two decades of his adult life. And by the year 1770 – almost a century before the Civil War – there was not a single Quaker in the colonies who owned a slave.

He loved his neighbor as he loved himself.

What if there had been a John Woolman in every religious denomination? The institution of slavery could possibly have been eliminated without a Civil War.

A single visionary individual, committed to change under the power of unlimited love, can make a difference in the world.

I'm impressed with the Anglins who have taken in children who have so many great needs. I'm impressed with Christina Noble who set up a children's hospital in Vietnam. I am intrigued by John Woolman's being ahead of his time and leading his denomination to stop the practice of slavery long before slavery severed the North from the South by bloodshed.

But when I read the stories of these people, I realize our church is full of people like this, too. I have never seen or heard of a church where so many people live out their faith through acts of sacrificial service as I see demonstrated here at First Baptist Church.

In any given year, we may have 200 of you go on a mission trip – leave the safety of your soil and go to a land unknown, give up your annual vacation to hold and love children just like Christina was holding. (Lebanon, Zambia, Costa Rica, Hungary, Phoenix, Colorado Springs, Pensacola)

But you don't even have to board a bus, much less a plane, to live out your faith at First Baptist Church of Amarillo.

We have 50 volunteers – some who drive vans and some who tutor 150 pupils in our ESL (English as a Second Language) ministry in any given week. And it's not folks from one country, but from many countries who are helped by people who give of their time, without a penny of financial remuneration, to teach somebody the language of our land so they can survive and even begin to excel in Amarillo.

Did you know that last year, through your tithe dollars, thousands of individuals were helped through our Perkins Community Center, served by our volunteers, who sort and fold the clothes and bag the groceries to give them away.

And you know this Christmas we will give over 500 gifts to children who otherwise will have no Christmas gifts. And we don't even have to push the project. You just go to the tree. And you give and it happens. And every single gift, down to the final one, will be collected and distributed to children in our own community.

The list seemingly has no end – cars, computers, bikes, blankets. And Widow's Mite, helping the elderly members of our church who need a routine repair.

Whether it's teaching preschoolers every Sunday, or working with Christian Women's/Men's/Adolescent's Job Corps and teaching a new friend, who hasn't had the advantages you have had, how to run a computer or how to type a business letter, or serving as a

volunteer chaplain and visiting with senior adults on a monthly basis – people in our church are going and serving.

Maybe it's a deacon or the women's hospital ministry making a hospital visit. Happens every single day, 365 days a year – caring folks making hospital visits for First Baptist Church.

Maybe it's Fostering Hope – First Baptist Church showing up with a crib, diapers, baby clothes in the middle of the night when a foster family gets a call that a little one needs love and shelter.

Maybe it's a deacon taking a birthday cake to a lady who has just celebrated her 90th+ birthday – happens every week.

Maybe it's driving a cart in our parking lots and picking up a single mom who's trying to balance a bag of diapers, a baby, and a Bible and come in from the long-shot north parking lot.

Or the prison/jail ministry. “I was in prison and you did visit me, First Baptist Church of Amarillo.”

Or the unofficial, uncounted acts of kindness that happen every day by members of our church family. Watch as an FBC member shovels the snow for an elderly neighbor.

No, we can't do it all. And we have to limit what we commit ourselves to so that we can do it well. But you have no idea how much takes place under the banner of First Baptist Church of Amarillo in service to others. I don't know. Nobody knows. Nobody has ever calculated the hours. We have it for certain projects, but nobody has calculated all the hours that go into a given year.

Vacation Bible School.
Five ethnic congregations.

And yes, there are new dreams and new visions and new projects. The Loft will be a game-changer for students throughout our community.

You are the Christina Nobles of this world. God gives us dreams, too.

First Baptist Church of Amarillo – loving God and loving our neighbor.

First Baptist Church is not here to entertain you. We are here to engage you, to call you to sacrificial Kingdom service. Life is not about you or me. It is about Him and giving His love to others – being the hands and the feet of God.

Love cures – both the one who gives it and the one who receives it.

The minute we stop focusing on our own problems, the minute we start sweating to serve others, your perspective changes. The best cure for our self-centered focus is to focus on others through the Jesus Christ. It will change who you are. You can sit around and soak in your problems, be

they marital or physical or financial. But the moment you become the giver and not the receiver, life truly changes.

It's called being a disciple.