

Great Commandment Pt. 2 - Loving Neighbor

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[0:00] Good evening. It is a joy and a blessing to be here.! With your patience tonight, let me share some insight about this retreat.

! Now, I know that he set the table, but, you know, I have to get my word in, too. All right? This is the first retreat Bill and I have ever facilitated together.

You notice I didn't say the word lead. Our time tonight and tomorrow is all about inviting the Holy Spirit in. Into your hearts and into your hearts.

And what a blessing it was downstairs to hear everybody communicating, everybody sharing. This fellowship is what this retreat is all about. So, I want to thank you.

Now, you're going to notice quite quickly that Bill and I are polar opposites. I can say that because I flew planes in Antarctica and I went as far as Alert Canada, which is the furthest Canadian base that we have.

[1:02] So, I've been pole to pole. And Bill and I are complete opposites. He's kind. He's quiet. He's good. He's polite. He's thoughtful. He's gentle.

That means that I'm aggressive, blunt, enthusiastic, energized, and loud. Which is probably good because we just ate a wonderful dinner.

My students have had a dessert where I taught high school for 14.5 years. Always use one word to describe me. Loud. Okay?

And as you can imagine, no one slept in my classroom. Okay? So, think about it. I am your worst nightmare.

He may be invited back. I may never be invited back. I am militant. I was in the military 31 years. I am direct.

[1:59] I flew airplanes for 22 years, which means I break everything into processes and checklists. Amen? All right. And I am regimented.

I taught 17 years. I taught math in high school. So, I put everything into formulas to include life. And I try to solve it.

So, put all this together. And my talks are going to be very focused, very mission-oriented, and very loud. Okay? And I want you to understand my approach so that I do not scare you as I unpack my two talks.

Please note, I'm human. I'm going to make mistakes. I told Father Ife that, you know what, I may say heuracy. Okay? But that I have enough ministers in here that will correct me if I say anything that is wrong or illegal.

You know? So, I just want you to say I'm a work in progress. I'm a role follower. And most importantly, I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, strength, will.

[3:06] I love God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And I have a passion for the Bible, for Bible studies. I have passion for teenagers. And I have a passion for mission.

But just like you, I am on a journey seeking to serve our Lord with all my heart, my mind, and soul until I hear those words.

Well done, good and faithful servant. Now, I have been blessed to talk at women's retreats and churches. And whenever I do, I always pepper my talk with what I am currently studying now.

So, be prepared to hear a couple thoughts from Hebrews. The basics of Hebrews is that it's from the New Testament. It was written by an unknown author at an unknown time, perhaps 65 to 69 A.D.

to an unknown group, perhaps a single Hebrew Christian congregation in the Roman Empire, experiencing persecution and discomfort.

[4:10] It contains five warnings. They were good back then. They're good right now. So, the five warnings are, One, the danger of drifting away.

Two, the danger of disobeying. Three, the danger of not maturing. That's called deformity. Four, the danger of willful sin.

And five, the danger of denying. One, I'm also a Colson Fellows program member. So, our son Chris did this program a couple years ago.

The purpose of the Colson Fellows is to equip Christians with a robust Christian worldview so that they can thoughtfully engage our post-Christian culture, inspire reflection in others, and work effectively towards reshaping the world in light of God's kingdom.

This is the end of my fourth month of study. The program is ten months long. I'm required to read 13 books, attend webinars, bi-monthly Zoom classes, watch and listen to amazing podcasts.

[5:24] So, I will be using material from the Colson Fellows program, and I'll be referencing how now shall we live, strange new world, and I've also tackled some more stuff into my talk related to that.

And so, with all these disclaimers and all these sources so stated, I'm going to modify Ephesians 6, 19 and 20 and turn to prayer right now.

So, please join me. Heavenly Father, help me speak words that will enable me to fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.

I pray I may declare the gospel fearlessly as I should. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Fill us with your presence, your wisdom, your knowledge, and most especially with your love.

Help us as we unpack loving your neighbor as yourself. Give me your words and only your words. It's Friday night and we are tired.

[6:35] Renew and revive us. Help us to become even more rooted in Christ. I pray all this in Jesus' most holy and mighty name.

Amen. Love. The word love is so overused these days that I have to address from the get-go the essence of its usage.

This is what he tried to steal from me. As Caleb, my number two grandson, says, Mouth mom, that's me. We love people.

We like things. I am not allowed to tell you I love fishing or that I love food. I can say I love babies. I love grandkids.

I love people. And I love dogs. But I don't know if that fits into the lover life category. Okay? We'll talk later. Okay. So, when we think of love, don't you guys all, you think of Hallmark movies, you think of princess movies, and happily ever after, and at the end, what happens?

[7:47] Snow. Right? And, of course, they lived happily ever after. But, as you know, that's just a fairy tale, right? Did anybody...

Okay, I want to see the hands, all right? Did anybody watch Princess Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding? All right. I guess I'm the only one that watched the wedding.

Confession here. I was totally transfixed by Bishop Curry's sermon, which was titled, The Power of Love.

You know, I met Bishop Curry a couple months later, and he told me he couldn't even walk down an airport corridor without being recognized. He was a celebrity. Now, I shared my enamor with Bishop Curry's message with our dear friend, Bishop Harold Miller.

Bishop Harold Miller is a bishop in Northern Ireland, of Downing and Warren. We have known him over 20 years, and our diocese in Albany had a relationship with him for over 30 years.

[8:51] He gently reprogrammed my brain cells. You see, I was wrapped up on the message of love, the feeling, the emotion. Bishop Harold's correction was quite simple.

Get it right. Put Jesus into the equation. Something every math teacher wants to hear, right? And it works like this. Love is knowing Christ.

Hence, love is sharing Christ. By using the transitive property of equality, and I know you know what I mean.

I found out Lisa likes math. If I use that property, then love is simply knowing and sharing Christ. It's not the power of love that should have been the title of that speech.

It should have been the power of Christ's love. That's what love is all about. So let's apply this mathematical property now to love your neighbor as yourself.

[9:57] In order to love, we have to first love ourselves. Does anybody besides me have a problem loving themselves? Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. I love kids. All right. Now, I have struggled much of my life with loving or even liking the person in the mirror.

I've never been happy with my weight or my looks. I am my worst critic, and I am really hard on myself. I was raised Roman Catholic. I became Episcopalian at 25, and then Anglican at 63. I have always been on a journey to draw closer to God. The Lord has always been in the center of my life, but I carry around with me Catholic guilt, fear, worry, and paranoia.

Do you agree? Okay. Thank you, Pat. Even though I'm an overachiever, there are voices in my head, and they're always telling me I'm not good enough.

[11:00] Despite my faith and my focus, I feel like I'm not worthy. And I share my thoughts because when you see my mess, it reiterates that we are all broken and not worthy.

Yet Jesus takes our mess and allows his message to shine forth despite us. We are worthy to be loved because God created us.

In the beginning, Genesis 1, we're made in the image of God, the Imago Dei. That's from my books.

All right. After God made man, he blessed it.

He said it was very good. But the problem was sin got in the way. Yet God gave us the way to salvation by the blood of Jesus.

Romans 5, 8 says, But God demonstrated his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[12:03] And again, as we all know, John 3, 16, For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

If God loves us and he sent his Son to save us, then we are able to look in the mirror and love ourselves. Acts 3, 19 states it this way.

Repent then and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. Did you hear the R-E words that I just said?

Anybody? Ready? Refreshing? What was the other R-E word? Repent. Good job, Jack. Good job. Okay. All right.

I appreciate R-E suffolk words. R-E, re, means back or again.

[13:16] Like turn around. Like return. Return. It is the process we do over and over and over again. It is active and alive.

Restoration comes when we repent, recommit, reconcile, renew, return, redeem. This is a repeat process.

Our retreat is titled Rooted in Christ, the keys to being faithful to God. But in reality, as Christians, we need to be rerouted in Christ.

We are reliant on God's grace. We rejoice in God's grace. Jesus is the way to salvation. And when I repent, I receive forgiveness instead of what I deserve for my sins.

I receive grace, even though I don't deserve it. Okay. With God's love, our broken and cracked hearts are mended.

[14:23] God reconciles our hearts and makes them whole. Has anybody ever heard of Kintsugi pottery? Okay.

I'm probably pronouncing it wrong. Please forgive me. Correct me later so as not to embarrass me. Okay. Kintsugi is the Japanese art of taking broken pottery and mending the broken pieces together with gold.

It's built on the idea that embracing flaws and imperfections, you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art.

It is a beautiful imagery that we can use to think of how much more Jesus does with our heart. When we repent our sin, Christ comes into our fragmented hearts and fills them with his love, his mercy, his grace, his healing. In this process, Christ makes everything new.

[15:25] Revelations 21.5 We become a masterpiece worthy of God's love and being loved.

Romans 10.12 says, But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives righteousness.

The Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Christ lives in us. We know Christ. We can therefore love ourselves because Christ is in us. So once we establish love of self, we progress to love of others.

1 John 4.19 puts it best. We love because he first loved us. We can love God because God loved, past tense, God loved us first.

The Apostle John defines love for us all over the New Testament 1 John book. Here are three more verses worthy of mentioning. 1 John 3.16 This is how we know what love is.

[16 : 50] Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. In 1 John 3.18 He says, Let us not love with word or tongue, but with action and in truth.

And in 1 John 4.12 No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

These verses tell us loving others means laying down our lives, loving in truth and action, and when we love others, God lives in us.

Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French mathematician, is loosely quoted saying, there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God the creator made known through Jesus Christ.

When we fill our hearts with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we have the power of Christ's love. Wait a minute.

[18 : 09] That should have been the message from Bishop Curry. The power of Christ's love. Yes, he went downstairs. Lisa. Okay. St. Paul prayed in Ephesians 3.16.19 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with the power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide, how long, how high, and how deep is the love of Christ. And to know that this love surpasses knowledge and that you may be filled to the measure of all fullness of God. Christ dwells in our heart through faith.

There is no way, Jose, we can possibly wrap our minds around the love of Christ. Jesus fills our hearts, minds, and souls with Philippians 4.7.

The peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. This love, this peace completes us.

[19 : 40] Now I'm a big movie buff. Does anybody know the often quoted line from the movie Jerry Maguire? Okay, show me the number one.

You can complete me. Thank you. I'll give you a B plus on that. You complete me. Christ knows me. Christ completes me.

I am loved. So I can love myself and I am a new creation with and in and through Christ alone. It reminds me of a word from a stanza in Christ alone.

I was checking back to see if we were going to sing it. Maybe we'll sing it tomorrow anyway. In Christ alone my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song.

This cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are still, when striving ceases, my comforter, my all and all.

[20 : 49] Here in the love of Christ I stand. In the love of Christ I am complete. So now let's finish the statement, love your neighbor as yourself.

I think we've done the yourself okay, right? So love is simply seeing Christ in everyone. If love is knowing Jesus, then seeing Jesus in others makes love become action and truth as we serve one another.

Think of the verse from St. Patrick's breastplate. Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.

Now take that stanza and put Christ in every person you meet. Replace me with you, Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above you, Christ on your right, Christ on your left, Christ when you lie down, Christ when you sit, Christ when you arise, Christ in every heart of every man who thinks of you, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of you, Christ in every eye that sees you, Christ in every ear that hears you.

One of the reasons I fell in love with this man over 39 years ago, love, because I saw Jesus in him, and I still see Jesus in him today.

[22 : 54] We need to see Jesus in others and love them. So if love is knowing Jesus, which leads to loving self, and if love is sharing Jesus, which is seeing Christ in others, then you have love by knowing and sharing Jesus.

Love is us reaching out to others as Jesus did. If Christ is in me and Christ is in you, then we are the body of Christ, living, worshiping, and sharing together.

Me, you, all of us united together in the love of Christ. So here we go again. St. Patrick's breastplate.

I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I want you to get the picture, okay? I'm not trying to torture you, but here we go. Christ with us, Christ before us, Christ behind us, Christ in us, Christ beneath us, Christ above us.

The point is, we need each other corporately and physically in love as the body of Christ. We need real and honest relationships, not Zooming, not relationships through Facebook or on our phone, but real community, loving and learning together, which is why we're here.

[24 : 28] You know, when Bill was the rector at St. Mary's Church, there were a couple parishioners, whenever they couldn't make evening prayer or Sunday Eucharist, they would call him.

I used to thought that was a little bit crazy, but those people wanted to be accountable to their church family. Guys, we're in this together.

Church, the land of misfits, right? Misfit toys, broken hospital, knitted together in Christ's love. We are all family in the body of Christ.

We are children of God. Ephesians 5, 1 and 2 instructs us to follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So let's talk for a minute about love. Love is not a feeling or emotion like Bill said. It doesn't change with the wind. Love begins not with the heart but in the mind.

[25 : 39] Jen Wilkin, whose Bible study better, a study of Hebrews that I'm currently doing with 10 lovely ecumenical women, puts it this way. The heart cannot love what the mind does not know.

St. Paul tells us in Romans 12, 2, that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. God intends for us to be good students renewing our minds, which actually transforms our hearts so that we can truly love ourselves and others.

It is in the mind, fixing our thoughts on Jesus, Hebrews 3, 1, that allow us to love. Our mind needs focus, work, and exercise to grow.

I have to train my mind to love so that my heart responds accordingly. Remember that third warning in the book of Hebrews, the danger of not maturing?

Our faith should be moving us forward in the knowledge of God. Our mind, our head, transforms our heart.

[26 : 56] Now, knowledge of God is not just knowing the Bible or going to Bible study. Knowledge of God is wisdom, where I am applying and living out my faith by my word, by my deed, with my body of believers, despite the ebb and flow of feelings and emotions.

Like Bill said, love is thoughtful action, coupled with some not so popular words for the me, myself, and I culture. Love obeys. One of my favorite Bible verses is 1 John 5 3, short and simple.

This is love of God, to obey his commands. Love submits. James 4 7 tells us, submit yourself to God.

Love surrenders the will, not something I want to do as a military person, right? life. But like Jesus did in Matthew 26, 39, going a little further, Jesus fell with his face to the ground and prayed, my father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will.

We obey God's word. We submit to authority. We surrender our will, our pride, our control to and for God's glory.

[28 : 27] We are creatures created in God's image to trust and obey and worship him. We love him by action, by obeying, submitting and surrendering to our Lord, and following and learning his holy book more and more and more.

Like Bill, I am so proud of the Church of the Holy Trinity. When Father Ipe told me how many Bible studies were occurring here, it blew me away. But my question is, how are you applying and living

out God's message?

Matthew 5, 44, is truly where love becomes difficult. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. This isn't an easy pill to swallow.

It means loving people we cannot stand. The person who cuts us off while we're driving, I'm looking at you. The office person who purposely jokes at you at your expense or makes a joke at your expense.

The last person who insulted you because you had Christian beliefs. People from a different political party, okay, who think differently. The list is endless.

[29 : 46] This love your enemy is definitely countercultural and makes us unique in the world views. Yet we must remember we are not battling people we dislike.

We are battling the devil's schemes. We are at war against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Ephesians 6 13. We are not at war with God's image bearers along the journey. We hate the sin. We are called to love the sinner.

We are all fallen. As Christians, we are to love enemies because when we hate, when we dislike others, it tarnishes our relationship with God.

It hardens our heart. It allows sin to creep in. Our lives are a never-ending cycle of rewords, repent, return, refocus, repeat.

[30 : 53] We love with our mind, heart, and soul our God, ourselves, and our neighbors, and our enemies, despite those voices in our head.

We obey God's command, we submit to God, we surrender our wills. It's a never-ending cycle of repentance, restoration, rededication, renewal, and reliance on Christ as we recover our identity through and in Jesus Christ, through our mind, to our hearts, by loving.

Know Jesus equals share Jesus. I must caution you to actively love by sharing the truth of God's holy word. Nowadays, it is so much easier to tell folks what they want to hear.

Many are afraid of being canceled or hurting someone's feelings, but true love is speaking and sharing the truth even when the person doesn't want to hear it.

On a personal level, it would have been so much easier for Bishop Bill to be nice and agree with some of the people in the Episcopal Church who were twisting the gospel.

[32 : 09] But had he done so, we wouldn't be here today. We would not be graced with your fellowship. We would not be with people that truly believe in the word of God.

It takes courage to step up and step out to love your neighbors so much as to speak truth as in 2 Timothy 4 3-4.

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to turn aside to myths.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're all accountable. Ultimately, we will be judged. Ignorance and laziness are no excuse, neither is being nice.

2 Corinthians 5-10 tells us, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for all that was done while in the body, whether good or bad.

[33 : 22] There's a cost to love. Following God in his holy book can hurt. We can become unemployed. We can become disconnected with loved ones. Yet not to speak truth can cost even more.

It can cost someone their eternity with the Father. If we truly love, we must never stop learning, seeking, and growing.

It requires us to reach out to others in truth and love and live out the great commission which we're going to dive into tomorrow. True love means living according to the Holy Bible.

It means living out the word of God in all that we think, say, and do. It means staying on Facebook or Twitter with negative comments because others are watching us and they know we are Christians.

It means letting go of the control and power because God wants us to just be humble and kind.

[34 : 30] It means reaching out to people that don't look like us and loving them with no strings attached. It means establishing relationships with others who don't think like us.

It means loving God first, then loving your neighbor as yourself. It means repenting, obeying, submitting, and surrendering.

John 15, 13-15 tells us this, Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friend.

You are my friend if you do what I command. I can no longer call you servant because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I have called you friend for everything that I have learned from the Father, I have made known to you. May God bless you tonight as you pray and reflect on the great commandment.

[35 : 35] Bill read the one from Mark. I'm going to read the one from Matthew. Matthew 22, 35-40.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the laws and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

And I say all this in Jesus' mighty name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.