



The Difference in Love

Lev 19:1-2,15-18; Ps 90:1-6,13-17; Mt 22:34-46; 1 Th 2:1-8

Love—we write songs about it. We write poems about it. We watch movies and shows about it. We romanticize about it. Somehow, our writing, singing, talking and romanticizing about love does not always translate into living according to the love we claim to love. Relationships are not always romantic, sweet, loving, and picture perfect. Relationships include people, and that is where it all gets messy. Beyond the glitter, sparkle and glamour of romance, love requires a difference in commitment and the investment of our lives in the life of another. It requires that we give up something of ourselves on behalf of another.

My wife tells me that love means spending time with her. She has this idea that love means that I actually listen when she speaks. It means attention, respect, honor, time, and the use of my resources in her behalf and on behalf of the things, causes, and events that she values. Can you believe that she actually wants me to spend time with her, listen to her, do things with her, and be interested or pay attention to the things that interest her? You had better believe it, and so had I. Our relationship may depend on my attending to the time, energy, attention, and resources that I invest in Karen. Why would we carry on, as though God did not care for these things? Why would we act as though God did not have high expectations on that relationship we call salvation and faith?

The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus and discredit him before the people. Their attempts with the aid of the Herodians in the question about tribute to Cesar had failed. The attempt of the Sadducees over marriage and resurrection had fallen by the wayside. They decided to try again.

They had studied the Torah and broken it down to a science. They knew every one of *Yahweh's* commandments by heart, defining a list of 613 separate commands in the Pentateuch. They had defined categories of observing the commands. They had developed interpretations on the various laws to make sure that by following their traditions one could not become inadvertently guilty of breaking God's laws. They had defined work as everything that had gone into the construction of the Temple, from carting loads to weaving, building fires, threshing grain, and walking distances, all to make sure that one knew how to observe the Sabbath appropriately.

They knew about law. They had studied it with a fine toothed comb. Some itinerant teacher who had never been formally instructed was sure to fail their examination on the subject. This was their bread and butter. Unlike the Sadducees, they also accepted the validity of the prophetic histories and the poetic materials that comprise the rest of our Old Testament. They were not the conservatives the Sadducees were. They were the more *avant garde* liberal element in Jewish religious life. They prided themselves on going beyond the limitations of the Sadducees in understanding revelation about resurrection, the spirit, angels, and the like. Even so, the Torah--God's instructions--was their bread and butter. This was their strong suit and they were sure to trap Jesus here, if anywhere.

“Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?” Out of 613, how could Jesus choose well?

Jesus surpassed their expectations. He referred them to two commands that summarized all the rest of their prized legal code and interpretations. They rendered all their interpretative history empty and meaningless. They addressed much weightier issues than how one defines work, how much weight

one can carry without it being considered work, and how one can get around God's instructions and still do what one wants to do.

They had the wrong take and wrong focus on following God. They wanted everything battened down and codified in terms of lists, actions, and rituals. They wanted a safe, orderly world that did not require much of them in terms of relationship and seeking God's will. They wanted the means to circumvent God and still enjoy the blessings of being God's people. God wanted so much more.

The first and greatest command is to love God. This is not just any quality of love. It is not like the way some of us love chocolate. It is not the way we love ice cream, rides in the countryside, walks in the meadow, or even hunting and fishing. On the other hand, maybe it is more like hunting for some folks around here than anything else. Love for God is to consume our lives. It is to make its way into our bank accounts. It is to define how we spend our time. It is to control how we use our energy, how to focus our attention, and change our living.

Leviticus couches the concept in terms of being holy or different from all the world, specifically because God is such. We become more like those we love. True love for God should transform our lives, making us more and more like God and less and less as we are otherwise. As Jesus puts it, we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. That does not necessarily mean what we might take it to mean. The heart was to the Jew the center of one's decision. It was a reference to what we might consider our will. Soul referred to all that one is. It was not some segmentation of the person, but the whole of one's identity, personality, direction, character, and being. Mind was one's demeanor. It was how one related to and with others.

The psalmist spoke of God as a refuge, living to seek satisfaction and fulfillment in God alone. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, spoke of living to please God, who tests our inner lives. The true believer's motivation is to please God with our living, breathing, and doing. To Paul, suffering, shame, and adverse conditions in life paled before the motivation of pleasing God. To live according to this plan was to make loving and pleasing God the sole motivation and direction in life. Anything else just would not pass muster.

Jesus turned the questioning to the Pharisees to end their questioning and define their direction in living. Is Messiah greater or lesser than David? If greater, then why are you not seeking to serve Messiah rather than have Messiah serve you?

Where do we stand with regard to our love for God? It makes a nice claim, but an empty claim is worthless. Does a love for God invade our lives and find reflection in the way we utilize our resources, time, energy, and finances? Love requires an investment. Loving God in Jesus' terms requires the investment of our whole lives, not just a leftover scrap of our attention.

Many have said that if you want to determine someone's priorities, just take a look at their checkbook. We spend our resources on the things we value. We write checks for education, food, clothes, entertainment, family, friends, health care, fuel, utilities, insurance, and taxes. Where we chose to spend our resources says a lot about what we truly value. Where are we investing our time, talents, and resources? Loving God will make a difference. Is there a real difference in the investments we make with our lives?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*