



A couple weeks ago we talked about mercy as an aspect of God’s love, and how mercy is part of the mission of Jesus. Today we broaden that to the overarching theme of love. Love really is at the core of who God is, what he does, and what it means for us to be in relationship with him and with each other. **The letter of First John puts it succinctly, “God is love” (1 John 4:8 and 4:16). The Gospel of John reminds us that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son...” (John 4:16).** Countless verses and passages throughout the Bible speak of God’s love for creation, and in particular for humanity, created in his image. This love is at the core of who God is and at the core of Jesus’ mission and how he accomplishes that mission—which we are looking at in this series.

Today we are in Luke 10:25-37, and we’re going to take it all in one reading today. It’s a familiar passage to many of us, and the parable that Jesus tells is unforgettable. So, **Luke 10:25-37**. This is God’s word to you and me this morning...

So, **Jesus is approached by a man who is described as an “expert in the law.” This refers to Jewish religious law—the Old Testament, and especially the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.** Those books don’t just cover religious matters; they also include social and civic laws—things like property rights and livestock regulations. So, his expertise wasn’t limited to theology; it extended to what we might think of as government or civil law. So, he’s part theologian and part lawyer. Some translations even call him a lawyer, though that misses the theological aspect of his expertise.

This man comes to Jesus with a question. Maybe he wants to test Jesus’ teaching to see if it aligns with the long tradition of Jewish interpretation—that kind of thing certainly happened; or maybe this testing is that he’s simply curious (like Nicodemus in John 3). He asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

As Jesus often does, he responds with a question of his own—actually, two of them. **Asking questions is a wise way to engage people. It shows curiosity and openness, and draws out what they already know.** Often, people who ask questions – we’ve all probably done this ourselves – already have an idea of the answer, and drawing that out helps them recognize and clarify their own understanding, and realize “Oh, I knew more than I thought I did.”

These two questions Jesus asks are the foundation of all good Bible study that every student of Scripture should begin with. **First: “What is written?” In other words: What does the text actually say? What are the words on the page?** Starting with that basic question forces us to slow down and read carefully—seeing what’s really there instead of inserting words or ideas that aren’t (or missing things that are). It’s easy to assume we know what a passage says, but sometimes a closer look reveals that it’s slightly different than we thought—and that difference can have a big impact.

**Then comes the second question: “How do you read it?” In other words: What does the passage mean?** Given the actual words on the page that you read carefully because of the first question, what does the passage teach us about Father, Son or Holy Spirit, or about ourselves, or about some other aspect of the faith or theology? These two questions are a fantastic place to begin any kind of Bible study—whether you’re studying on your own, with a friend, or in a small group. You don’t need a formal curriculum or a theology degree to dig into Scripture; you can start right here, simply by asking these two questions.

So, the man answers—presumably from memory in this case—by quoting two Old Testament passages: **Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.**

**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

Let’s pause for a moment and focus on the first part of the man’s answer—the “love God” part. Our love for God is rooted in God’s love for us. That’s where the Bible starts: **We love God because God first loved us (1 John**

**4:19).** Scripture repeatedly shows that God is the great initiator – from Creation to Salvation and everything else. Anything we do spiritually is because God has taken the first step. We love because God first loved us.

With God’s love as our model, we are called to love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength. This is an all-encompassing, relational love, not a transactional one. A thriving relationship with God is essential to living out the mission Jesus sends us on. And if we neglect our relationship with God, our love will grow cold. We see the same principle in human relationships: if I say to my wife, “I love you,” but then ignore her for weeks while watching Mariners playoff games, she’ll start to wonder about my love. Not that that would happen in our household...this is completely hypothetical!

A few nights ago, about two minutes after Gwen and I laid down in bed, I asked her about her day and specifically about the principal she works for because Gwen had had an observation a few days prior. I wanted to know if there’d been a follow-up conversation. Gwen said, “The principal said that I asdfkj ogksnm lasnp gnlasd”. And then Gwen fell asleep! She literally fell asleep mid-sentence. She didn’t even remember the conversation the next day and laughed hysterically when I told the story. If this is how a relationship functions, it’s doomed.

The same principle applies to our relationship with God. **We demonstrate and grow our love by engaging with Him—through Scripture, prayer, worship, singing His praises, serving others, and participating in His mission.** This is what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Now, the Greek word for love here is agape. Grammatically, it’s a second-person future command: “You shall love God with all you’ve got...” Agape is divine, covenantal, sacrificial love—the kind of love God has for us. So again, we see quite clearly how our love for God (also agape love) is rooted in his love for us.

**Then we come to the second command: love your neighbor as yourself.** Interestingly, in the man’s answer, the word “love” isn’t repeated; it’s

understood from the first command. In the original Leviticus text, the command is explicit. This same divine, sacrificial, covenantal love is what we are called to show toward our neighbors.

Jesus commends the man for his answer—but the man presses further. You wonder if he should have quite while ahead, you know? He wants a definition of “neighbor,” Luke tells us, “to justify himself.”

Jesus responds with a parable set along the well-known road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A man is beaten by robbers and left for dead. Two men from his own nation and religion (assumed in the story the man is Jewish/Israelite)—the expected heroes, including a priest—pass by without helping. Then comes a Samaritan. Samaritans and Israelites, as I mentioned briefly last week, were culturally and religiously at odds; they avoided one another. Yet this Samaritan stops to help. He does so in no fewer than six ways: bandaging wounds, treating them with oil and wine, placing the man on his own donkey, taking him to an inn, caring for him there, and paying the innkeeper, promising to cover any further expenses.

Jesus asks which of the three acted as a neighbor. **Begrudgingly, the man answers, “The one who had mercy on him.”** Notice he can’t bring himself to say, “the Samaritan”. Jesus then says, “Go and do likewise.” It’s an ongoing imperative. Loving our neighbors isn’t a one-time action; it’s a continuous practice: “keep going and keep doing likewise,” all the time, wherever we are: where we live, work, and play. And “neighbor” extends broadly: anyone is potentially our neighbor.

This illustrates the third step of transformational Bible study. **First: what does the text say? Second: how do you interpret it? Third: *How are you going to live this out?*** Jesus actually doesn’t pose it as a question as if there’s a range of options to choose from here: it’s an ongoing command. Study that stops in your head does not lead to true discipleship. We must ask and consider, “How will this change my day, tomorrow, and beyond?” And then put it into practice.

Interestingly, **Jesus tells this parable to answer a question about who counts as a neighbor, but we often treat it as a full definition of loving others. But it's not complete.** He narrows the focus intentionally because of the man's heart; mercy being shown between a Samaritan and an Israelite was mind-blowing for the law expert. Jesus' love encompasses mercy and compassion, yes—but it is broader than that. The opening of John's gospel sums it up: Jesus came “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Some people cut out “truth” from love and then reduce and change the “grace” component of love to “be nice.” “Nice” focuses on being pleasant, agreeable, and liked by others. It has a surface-level politeness. The Bible never uses the word. Instead, Scripture speaks of being kind. **Biblical kindness is deeper, rooted in goodness and care for another's welfare, and therefore isn't afraid to speak the truth in love.** So, as an example: a nice person won't tell the pastor on Sunday morning that his zipper is unzipped because it could be awkward or impolite...and so truth is buried; a kind person will tell the pastor the truth because that person cares more about the pastor more than their own feelings. (That has never happened to me, by the way. 😊) This is what Jesus does. Because he is kind, he calls out sin, speaks hard or awkward truths, and graciously challenges. So true, Christlike love combines grace and truth. *Agape* love always embraces both.

**The truth can hurt, but Jesus speaks it with kindness because it's the first step in following Jesus.** Avoiding the truth would be unkind and morally wrong. And there are many truths Jesus tells that could rub us the wrong way. For example, Jesus confronts sexual sin. He does so with the woman at the well by naming her current situation of being in a sexual relationship with a guy who's not her husband (John 4). He also instructs the woman caught in adultery (John 8) to “go and sin no more,” while also exposing the men's hypocrisy and sin who accused her. Elsewhere, he equates lust with adultery (Matthew 5) and affirms marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman (Matthew 19). All of these are inconvenient truths told in kindness, for our benefit and well being.

He also links anger with murder (Mt. 5) and that both receive the same judgment from God; he commands us to love our enemies and pray for those

who persecute us (not praying for their harm; Mt. 5), speaks against greed (Mt. 6, Mark 10), calls out religious hypocrisy (Mt. 6 and Mark 12), and teaches that greatness comes through humility and service (Luke 9, what we looked at last week). Perhaps the hardest truth for many, however, is about himself: **“No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)**. Jesus offers an open invitation and there are no qualifications to meet in order to receive his invitation...it’s literally extended to anyone and everyone. But he teaches that he is the only way. That’s an inconvenient truth. He also warns of eternal consequences, describing the narrow gate and narrow path of following him that leads to life and the wide, easy road that leads to destruction. These truths are difficult, but they are part of the fullness of his love—truth and grace together.

Speaking hard truths is an act of love—when it’s done with kindness and grace. It’s loving because we need to hear the truth in order to recognize our sin and turn to Jesus for forgiveness; it’s the first step in discipleship. Ephesians 4:15 reminds us that “speaking the truth in love” helps us grow in maturity and become more deeply connected to Christ. Ignoring or affirming sin, on the other hand, isn’t loving—it leads us away from Jesus. We need both truth and grace. This is the agape love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—a sacrificial love that seeks our ultimate good.

**This love for neighbor, rooted in our love for God, which in turn is rooted in God’s agape love for us, is central to Jesus’ mission.** In fact, it’s central to the existence of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Everything Jesus does flows out of this agape love that is both gracious and truthful. His love is not wimpy, and it’s not harsh. His agape love is strong enough to tell the truth. It comforts the hurting and confronts the proud, so he can redeem all people. As disciples of Jesus, we are called and sent into the world—our homes, workplaces, and communities—to love our neighbors, whoever they may be, with this same love. This is the love that defines our mission and governs how we carry it out: agape love in action. It’s full of grace and truth, just like Jesus. May we be filled with that same grace and truth as we live on mission for him each and every day. Let’s pray...Amen.