

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about love and I begin by quoting a person who was a foremost authority on the subject, Mother Teresa. She said: **"We do not need to carry out grand things in order to show a great love for God and for our neighbor. Do not think that love, in order to be genuine, has to be extraordinary."** That is a profound insight. Love doesn't have to be extraordinary to be genuine. According to the Bible, in fact, it's actually more ordinary than it is extraordinary. We see that in the text I read earlier, Leviticus 19:17-18; 33-34.

What Love Is – the Negative

Let's start with what love is. These verses tell us.

In verse 17, God commands the Israelites and us not to hate people in our heart. That refers to harboring malice toward them, desiring to hurt them. According to the last line of the verse, we're sinning if we do. We should reprove them instead. That means make things right with them by telling them how they've wronged us.

Verse 18 goes on to restate the command, **"Don't hate in your heart"** this way, **"Don't bear any grudge."** It then identifies the behavior to which bearing grudges leads people. It's vengeance. They retaliate by making wrong doers pay. But God prohibits doing so. That corrects a gross misconception people have of the Old Testament. Misinterpreting the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" principle, they think it endorses retaliation. But verse 18 shows that it doesn't. It prohibits it instead.

Now let's move to a broader command in verse 33, **"you shall not do him wrong."** Don't do anything that is detrimental to people. Don't do anything that harms them or subtracts value from their lives.

The prohibitions in verses 17, 18, and 33 reveal the negative side of love. It's "The Silver Rule." Non-Christian traditions have recognized and formulated this Silver Rule. The Chinese emperor Tsze-Kung asked

Confucius, **"Is there one word which may serve as the rule of practice for all one's life?"** Confucius answered: **"Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to anyone else."** The Roman emperor Alexander Severus had a sentence that he could rule by engraved on his palace wall. It was an old stoic teaching that said: **"What you do not wish to be done to you, do not do to anyone else."** A non-Jew said to the ancient Jewish rabbi Hillel:, **"I will convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole law while I'm standing on one leg."** Hillel replied: **"What is hateful to yourself, do to no other. That is the whole law. The rest is commentary."** Confucius, Severus, and Hillel taught the Silver rule. Don't do to others what you would have others not do to you.

My college roommate got mad at me one time and gave me the cold shoulder. It was a tense two weeks that I've never forgotten. I don't want people to give me the cold shoulder. So, I've made it a rule of life, beginning with my wife, not to give it to them and don't.

That then is the negative side of love. Don't do to others what you would have others not do to you. Avoid harming people or subtracting value from their lives. Make that a rule of life and live by it.

What Love Is – the Positive

But the negative isn't the only side of love. Look at the qualifying words **"as yourself"** in verses 18 and 34. Love people as you do yourself. Jesus, Paul, and James reiterate that very same command in Matthew 22:39, Romans 13:9, and James 2:8 respectively. Notice something. It assumes that we love ourselves, which we do.

And because we do, we want more from people than just not harming us. We want them to benefit us as well. Wives, how many of you would be satisfied if your husbands never once harmed - or benefited - you? Or employees, how many of you would be satisfied if your boss never once harmed - or benefited - you? None of you would be satisfied because you love yourself. And because you do, you want people to benefit you as

much as you want them not to harm you.

Well, that's exactly what love does. There is a positive side to it. It's the Golden Rule. Jesus states it succinctly in Matthew 7:12, "**In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.**" Or to say it another way, do to others what you would have others do to you. That's different than what Confucius, Hillel, and the other non-Christian ethicists taught. Jesus unveiled a new dimension of love. The Golden Rule is directed toward the good of people in a way the Silver Rule isn't. The Silver Rule seeks to avoid harming people. It's about not subtracting goodness from their lives. But The Golden Rule seeks to benefit people. It's about adding goodness to their lives. It's about enriching their lives.

Last year, I got a flat tire on Route 680. That's normally not a problem except that I couldn't get the hubcap off. It was my father-in-law's car and I didn't know getting it off required a special tool that was in the glove compartment. Anyway, a man stopped and eventually helped me figure it out. When I thanked him profusely, he quickly replied, "**It's no big deal. I'd want someone to do the same for me.**"

That illustrates the positive side of love. Do to others what you would have others do to you.

Whom We Should Love

Now that we know what love is, let's examine whom it is we're to love. It's "**your neighbor,**" verse 18, and "**the stranger who resides with you,**" verse 34. Look at the words "**neighbor**" and "**resides with you.**" The idea in both is near dwellers. The Israelites were to love those who were near them, those with whom they had contact.

That is a distinctive emphasis of Biblical ethics. Non-Biblical ethics majors in loving "humanity," "mankind," or "everyone." But the Bible generally and Jesus specifically major in loving people who we can actually do something about. They are usually, not always but usually, those with whom we are in contact. Other ethicists and philosophers

understood and mentioned this. But none gave it the emphasis that the Bible and Jesus do. Mother Teresa explained that emphasis well: **“In order for love to be genuine, it has to be above all a love for our neighbor. We must love those who nearest to us. It is easy to love those who live far away. It is not always easy to love those who live right next to us.”**

Now look at the term **“the stranger”** in verse 34, which injects an additional ingredient into the mix of love. That term referred to the non-Israelites who lived in Israel. The command to love them is one of the most startling statements in the Old Testament. The very idea of loving foreigners was alien to the ancient world and the command to do so must have stunned the Israelites when they heard it. Verse 34, therefore, refers to the “outsiders” who are near us, those whom others exclude.

Like telemarketers. Telemarketers are one of the most castigated groups of people today. They’re almost disregarded as deserving of respect and love. But they are “the stranger” of verse 34. We need to live by two rules, therefore, whenever we have contact with them. #1 – don’t do to them what we would have others not to do to us. We wouldn’t want to be spoken to and treated rudely. So we don’t do that to them. And #2 – do to them what we would have others do to us. We would want to be spoken to and treated kindly. So, we do that to them.

So there you have it, a distinctive emphasis of Biblical love. It directs itself to the neighbor-stranger. We love those who are near, indiscriminately.

Love as Ordinary

To this point, we’ve learned what love is and to whom it directs itself, both of which, together, reveal this - the “ordinariness of love.”

So much of the love that secular ethicists speak and write about has to do with extraordinary acts. We occasionally come across people who have desperate spiritual, physical, material, and psychological needs that we’re able to meet and we do. I know a Christian couple that just took a

disadvantaged four year-old girl into their home. Her unfit mother has signed over guardianship rights to them and they plan on raising her, at great personal cost to themselves. True love is ready, willing, and able to do heroic acts like that one when they come along.

But the verses I read imply this. Love's essence isn't extraordinary acts on rare occasions. It's ordinary acts all the time. And that's the posture we need to develop toward it. Look for opportunities to live out the Silver and Golden Rules everywhere, with everyone, and in everything. Dallas Willard explains it this way: **"But when Jesus speaks of love as the principle of life it ought to be, he's referring mainly to the posture of *benefiting others in the ordinary relations of ordinary life*. The heroic occasions will then fit in as they come along, but the reverse is not true."** He's right. Biblical love is a posture of benefiting people in the ordinary relations of ordinary life.

My wife Jill ran into someone at Target that she hadn't seen in several years. This woman was eager to catch her up on what was going on in her life and talked non-stop for 15 minutes. The Silver Rule – no one wants to be half-listened to. So Jill didn't half-listen. The Golden Rule - everyone wants to be attentively listened to. So Jill attentively listened. It was an ordinary act of love in an ordinary situation of life.

Which demonstrates the essence of Biblical love. It's ordinary.

Love as Sacrificial

And because it's ordinary, it's sacrificial as well. The willingness to sacrifice, in fact, is a presupposition of love. Unwilling to sacrifice – unable to love. Francis de Sales said it this way: **"Large tasks require great sacrifice for a moment; small things require constant sacrifice. The small occasions return every moment. If we want to be faithful to these small things, nature never has time to breathe, and we must die to all our inclinations."** De Sales tells us that ordinary love requires constant sacrifice. He also tells us generally what that sacrifice is. It's dying to all our inclinations.

That is a vital point. Ordinary love requires that we die to all our inclinations. That means that we abandon having our own way, fulfilling our own desires, as a rule of life. We can't succeed in love unless we do. Some years ago, a traveling salesman complained bitterly to me about a problem he had. He wanted to relax when he got home but his wife wanted to do things, which created constant conflict between them. The solution to his problem though was a simple one. Abandon having his own way, fulfilling his own desires, as a rule of his life. He'd do things not relax if he did and enjoy it. Ordinary love requires that we die to all our inclinations.

You and I will never do that, however, until we trust love as a way of life. Most of us don't. Because it's so sacrificial, we think that loving prejudices us. I've heard so many say that if they love as the Bible says, people will walk all over them or they'll never get ahead. Those comments contain the inherent belief that it's dangerous to love – that to love is to lose. That's a defining belief and those who have it won't love.

The fact is that you and I must trust love as a way of life in order to love. The Bible promises that God has our back when we love. He intervenes and gives us a power of life that's not our own when we do. That power in turn achieves an outcome in whatever the situation is that is beyond our abilities to achieve. It's safe, therefore, to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to give the benefit of the doubt, to protect reputations, to root for competitors, to give money, to give time, and so on. God has our back when we love, which makes it safe, not dangerous, to do so.

Conclusion

I quoted Mother Teresa at the beginning and in the middle of this message. So I might as well quote her at the end as well: **“God has created us so we do small things with great love. I believe in that great love, that comes or should come from our heart, that should start at home: with my family, my neighbors across the street, those right next door.”** That's the “ordinariness” of love.