



Last week I mentioned that I would begin a new series of messages this morning titled *Living In A Divided World*. I will not begin that series until next Sunday, as I need some more time to put that series together. Today is a transitional message, one that leads us into that series by providing a foundation to what I will say in regard to *Living In A Divided World*. Today's message is *Love Over Law*, and love will be the foundational principle in what I have to say about *Living In A Divided World*.

I was in a business in Louisville once, and the main area wasn't very large and I was the only customer in the business at the time. At the counter, one of the employees was on the phone with another employee sitting next to him. The employee talking on the phone was very friendly to the person on the other end of the line, and his final words before hanging up were *I love you man*. As soon as he hung up the phone he turned to the person next to him and said *I really can't stand that guy. He is a real 'so and so', but I'm nice to him because he spends a lot of money here*. That was discouraging to hear, but it demonstrates how the word *love* has been stripped of much of its meaning.

Someone asked me once what formed my central philosophy of life and faith. This message is my answer to that question. Of all the sermons I have preached in this church, or anywhere else, today's message is the absolute center of my religious belief and philosophy.

Our Scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew 22:34-40 –

*34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.*

*35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*

*37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'*

*38 This is the first and greatest commandment.*

*39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

*40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Matthew says the Pharisees approached Jesus with this question – *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?* because they wanted to test him. The previous passage tells us the Sadducees had also attempted to test Jesus with a question, but they failed. The Pharisees would have been wise to learn from the experience of the Sadducees, but they didn't; they had to learn the hard way.

I am fascinated by how often people feel the need to test other people to see if they are theologically sound. Some people believe we must meet their belief tests and their theological tests before we are

acceptable to them. As a minister, I get asked questions about a lot of issues, and I understand that sometimes those questions are asked to see if I will give the “right” answer. Someone (not from our church) asked me not long ago my thoughts about a particular issue, an issue that is a point of conflict in many churches. It was one of those moments that a question was asked of me to see if my answer was, in their mind, correct. Sometimes I am asked such questions with this preface – *If I come to your church, what do I have to believe about...* My answer to any question that begins in such a way is to say *first of all, it's not my church; it's God's church. Second, we do not have any required beliefs. We do not have a creed you must accept. We will not quiz you about your theological positions. You are free – and encouraged – to believe what you will, and we pledge to help you find answers to your questions.* That answer doesn't satisfy some people, so they will press for specifics about theological matters. Now, to be honest, I like to talk about theology. I enjoy discussing, and debating, theological matters, but as I get older, I find there are many arguments that just don't become life and death issues to me. It's not that I don't care about them; it's just that I care about something else much more. Some churches, for instance, are totally absorbed in debates about Calvinism, or whether or not they are of Reformed theology, or what passages of Scripture are to be taken literally and which ones are figurative, and on and on such debates go. I don't mind talking about those questions, but I have to admit I don't get very excited about them or overly interested in them. I can't get excited about those discussions when there is an issue about which I care much more, and it is this – we are called, as the people of God and as his church, to love God and love others above and beyond every other matter, and if loving God and loving others is not at the absolute core of who we are then we have moved away from what was of the greatest importance to Jesus.

That's it. That's the absolute center for me. That's the absolute foundation, I believe, of who we are to be as followers of Jesus, and if churches continue to be held captive to all their various arguments they will eventually fade away into either irrelevance or oblivion, and rightly so. If love is not central to the life of any church, if anything other than love takes over as the heart and soul of a congregation, it is better for that church to fade into irrelevance or oblivion because it has become nothing but a hindrance to bearing witness to who God really is. When anything other than love finds its way to the center of the life and mission of a church, it becomes, in my opinion, heresy and idolatry.

In my opinion, it's not secularism that is the biggest challenge facing the church. And it's not a lack of belief or a lack of faith that has brought about a decline in church attendance in Western society. I believe, as strange as this may sound, it is in great measure the fault of the church itself, because the church, in far too many instances has allowed love to slip away as its foundation and the core of ministry. In too many instances churches have chosen law over love, seeking to control the lives of others, seeking to tell them how to live, how to think, and how to act, when we are called to love. Or, they have talked about love while treating people terribly, and nowhere is that more evident than in what is facing the Catholic Church. Pope Francis is visiting Ireland this weekend, which was ground zero for two things – Catholic faithfulness and some of the most horrific examples of abuse. If Ireland has become largely lost to the Church, it is the fault of the Church.

The love of Jesus was so radical that it can be hard for us to wrap our minds around it. Jesus had an incredible love for people, and not just some people. All people. All people. Disciples churches are fond of using the phrase *all means all*. That is a wonderful sentiment, but it is not easy to live. Jesus loved the most unlovable people of his day and he challenged us to do the same, and that is certainly not an easy task. In Matthew 5:46-47 he challenges us with these words – *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?*

This is why there is such an easy pull toward legalism and rules in churches, because they are far easier than love. I can follow a rule that tells me not to kill someone, but that doesn't require much beyond a little restraint. In fact, to be honest, some of the great commands of Scripture are a fairly low

bar. Read the Ten Commandments. How many of them are all that difficult? It doesn't take much effort, for example, for me to not kill. That's a very, very low bar. But, to be honest, the bar is higher when I am dealing with the traffic on I64 on the weekends when construction is taking place and there is that one driver who passes up everyone else while all the other drives are patiently merging into one lane. Rules and religious laws do not require all that much of us, while love requires a great deal from us.

Now let's get a bit more personal about this. Let's take love out of the theoretical realm and put it into the world of everyday life. Notice the pronoun Jesus uses – *with all your heart, and your soul, and your mind Love your neighbor*. When I picture this scene in my mind I can see Jesus walking among those who were testing him, pointing at them, and reminding them to love their neighbors. He makes this very personal, because love is not about what someone else is doing, but what I am doing.

The love of which Jesus taught was not just some feel good, mushy kind of love. It wasn't a greeting card type of love. It was a love that was, in fact, very controversial. Jesus advocated for a love that made some people very angry, angry enough to want to kill him. It is ironic, isn't it, that love provoked such an unloving response. The love of Jesus provoked a horrific response of violence – the crucifixion. And it was, in part, because Jesus demonstrated a love without any qualifications. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he means it. How can we love our enemies when we struggle so mightily to love those with whom we disagree? Can a left-wing Democrat and a right-wing Republican love each other? Can a gun-toting NRA member and a tree-hugging environmentalist love each other? Can we love the coworker who took credit for our idea and thus got the bonus and the raise? Can we love the person who broke a confidence and shared a personal detail about our lives with others? Can we love the person who did something to break apart a relationship? Can we love the person who is even now coming to our minds as the person we cannot – or would not – ever dream of loving? I want to be honest and say I struggle mightily in this area. Even as I say this, there are people, and situations, and hurts that arise in my mind that are great hindrances to my ability and willingness to love, even to the point that I thought *maybe I should just leave this point out of this sermon*.

My mother-in-law used to live on Tybee Island, Georgia. After she had lived there for a number of years and we had visited on a number of occasions, I had an interesting realization one day. It's a rather small community on the island, a community I believed I was very familiar with, but one day as I was driving down the street I passed one of the churches. I suddenly realized I hadn't paid any attention to that church before. Church has been my life, for all of my life. I generally notice every church I pass, and sometimes I stop and go in them and look around, just out of curiosity. I had driven by this church dozens of times and never gave it a single thought. It made me wonder, how many people drive by it and never give it a thought? And how many people drive by our church and never give it a thought, or even pay much attention to its existence?

Too many times churches get wrapped up in controversies and issues that just don't matter, and it's no wonder, then, that so many people walk or drive by our buildings and never give them another thought. But when we love like Jesus, they'll notice. Love always gets noticed!