

Matthew 22.34-40

Love: God

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Love

Boy: 'I love you so much, I could never live without you.'

Girl: 'Is that you or the beer talking?'

Boy: 'It's me talking *to* the beer.'

What's the difference between love and marriage? Love is blind and marriage is an eye-opener!

I wonder what you first think when you hear the word 'love'? What you think 'love' means? I might say, 'I love you' to Jess and then turn around and say, 'I love pizza' when she asks me what we could have for tea. I love my mum and I love my computer (most of the time) – but not in the same way.

Today we have the Old Testament law telling the people of Israel to love God alone, to love God their only God, to love God who is one, who is unique and stands alone. Centuries later Jesus himself quoted that law as the **'first and greatest'** commandment.

Some of you may know that CS Lewis, who wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* among many other things, wrote a book called *The Four Loves*. It has become a classic, inspiring countless wedding sermons through the years.

Lewis writes that the ancient Greeks had four different words that we translate as ‘love’: *storge*, *philia*, *eros* and *agape*.

storge

The first is *storge*, which means ‘affection’ or ‘enjoyment’. This is the love we might have for pizza, our favourite football team, or shoe shopping. It can be enjoying people’s company as well, and is often used to describe family relationships. The negative side of this sort of love is selfishness, hoarding something, keeping it to ourselves because we like it.

philia

The second is *philia*, which is ‘friendship’ or ‘common interest’. This is a sort of community love of something else, of an object or a shared goal. We might call it companionship; it’s the sort of love that happens quite naturally when we discover shared interests, and Lewis says it is the longest lasting of the earthly loves.

eros

The third is *eros*, from which we get our word ‘erotic’. Lewis says this is the hottest of fires in our emotions – a wonderful light, or a scorching fire. It is uncontrollable, it focuses like a laser beam on one person only. Its aim isn’t happiness, but a person – and that is an important distinction to make. We might call it ‘being in love’ – the explosion that starts the engine of a relationship, but not the thing that keeps it running over the years.

Those first three loves are the ‘earthly’ loves. Most of the time they come quite naturally to us because they are tied to our emotions, to our reactions to other people, situations and physical objects. There is nothing wrong with them – but to quote St Paul, there is a more excellent way.

agape

The fourth love is of course *agape*. This is the highest and most unselfish of the four loves. We get a glimpse of this love in the way we might love our spouse, or our children. But even there it pales in comparison to the love God has for us. This love loves the unlovable, the undeserving, the ugly. It loves asking nothing in return – its aim is simply to love, nothing more. It is the love that takes the biggest risk, and so comes at the greatest cost.

CS Lewis writes:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

CS Lewis, The Four Loves (page number unknown)

To love is to be vulnerable. If you need any further proof of that, look at Jesus. He showed God's love for us by becoming human, submitting himself to the cruelty of human pride and greed. He showed God's love for us by giving away everything – his majesty, his glory, his power – his very *life*, for no other reason than because he, because God loves us.

This is *agape*. This is the highest and greatest expression of love, and it means sacrifice, vulnerability, risk. It means whole-hearted, holding-nothing-back love. It is how God has loved and will always love us – and how we should love him back in response.

With all your...

What's the difference between a jellyfish and a lawyer?

One is a spineless, poisonous blob. The other lives in the sea.

How does a lawyer sleep?

First he lies on one side, then he lies on the other.

How can you tell a lawyer is lying?

Her lips are moving.

Everyone loves a good lawyer joke – except lawyers I suppose!

Jesus had a number of debates with lawyers, who were often trying to catch him out so they could arrest him for blasphemy.

That's exactly what was happening in our gospel reading this morning, from Matthew 22. Jesus was in the Temple, teaching the people, and the religious leaders, scribes and lawyers didn't like it because people were listening to Jesus, not them.

So they tested him with a series of questions, about taxes, life after death – things like that. Then one of them asked him, **'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'** (26)

I'm not entirely sure what they hoped he would say, but he gave what has become one of the best-known of all Jesus' teachings:

Jesus replied: ‘ “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 neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’

Matthew 22.37-40 (NIV)

If microphones had existed in those days, he'd have dropped it. Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. We'll come back to the second commandment – today our focus is the **first and greatest commandment**.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Can you guess which Greek word for 'love' Matthew uses here? That's right: *agape*. Quoting the Law, Jesus says that the **first and greatest commandment** is to love God with our whole selves. We are not a soul trapped in a body, we are a person, made up of heart, emotions, body, soul, mind, thoughts and strength. Love the Lord your God with all your everything, with your whole being, with all you are – that's what Jesus is getting at here.

It's not that this is all there is – Jesus doesn't say, 'All the Law and the Prophets boil down to this,' he says, '**All the Law and the Prophets hang on this**' (40). This isn't a Beatles song – *love is all you need*. There is more – but this is what is *first*, this is what is *greatest*. This is what gives *meaning* to the rest of the Bible.

You see, without love, the Law is nothing more than religion – and that is what the scribes and religious teachers had reduced the Old Testament to. There's nothing *wrong* with religion, as long as it is expression of a relationship. If you like, religion is knowing *about* God, but a relationship is *knowing* God. Both are important and necessary, but what is *first* and *greatest* is loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Command

And so we come to land on the word I think we often rush over when we quote these words of Jesus to each other. We like to focus on *love*, on *agape*, ignoring the fact that this is a *command*. Unlike the other loves, which come quite naturally to us, *agape* takes effort and energy and commitment. It doesn't simply happen – if it did, Jesus would not have had to command it.

So I suppose the question for us is this:

Do we love God with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul and with *all* our mind? What do we hold back? Our time? Our money? Our thoughts? Our energy?

Another way of asking the same question is this: what in our lives do we love *first*, before we love God? Family? Possessions? Going on holiday?

Because friends, God's love means being vulnerable. God's love means being open, God's love means risking everything, for the sake of the one who gave up everything, even his life, for you.

That is how Jesus commands us to love God.

Is that how you love God?