

Matthew 22 36-40 URC sermon 17th March 2024

This is the mission statement that binds together all 66 books in two pithy sentences. If you wanted to explain your task on earth to someone you can start here and then unpack it with some of Jesus's parables.

Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem (we will celebrate this next Sunday) and been welcomed as the Messiah by the crowd laying down psalms and saying (John 12 v13)
'Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord
Hail to the king of Israel'

Events are speeding up now and in a week, the crowds will be calling for his execution. Jesus, fully man and fully divine knows about the fickleness of man.

In his final week, Jesus confronts the teachers of the law who he accuses of creating a heavy yoke for the Israelites to meet all the extra regulations they drew up, which are for external show of purity, whilst inwardly they are far from loving the Israelites or other nations... they have hearts of stone.

Jesus doesn't mince his words and knows he is signing his own death warrant, albeit it will be temporary.

We are created in God's image (character not physical) and have the capacity to love others as he loves us, but he gives us free will to choose. 600 years earlier, God had promised to the Israelites in exile in Babylon that he would restore Israel physically and Spiritually by giving them a new heart to follow him and put his Spirit within them.

- Ezekiel 36:26 NIV' I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'

Some 1100 years earlier, God had made this point before; He tells the prophet Samuel to anoint the next king of Israel to rule after Saul, whose heart was turning black. Samuel looks for worldly qualities, expecting God to choose someone who is strapping and good looking, instead God tells him to anoint a young shepherd called David.

- Samuel 16:7 'People judge by outward appearances but the Lord looks at the heart'

Jesus had recruited his followers in the same way, choosing a group of teenagers who were not exemplary students, a tax collector, two men with raging tempers, a man who stole from the charitable purse and so on. He also chose to include women and gentiles

and later chooses an executioner of his followers to become a key Apostle. In all cases Jesus knew their failings and yet he was showing the heart of God to love everyone.

In his last week, the teachers are constantly trying to catch him out and he confounds them with his answers. Finally they ask him what is the greatest commandment? In our passage for today, Jesus answers

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important, love your neighbour as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these commandments.

In Hebrew tradition, the Heart, body and soul were all joined and God breathed life into the body he had created and this was the soul. To follow these commandments the three must work in unison, but as Paul commented, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

These two commandments neatly summarise the 10 commandments God gave to Moses some 1400 years earlier. Loving the Lord encapsulates having no other Gods before him, not taking the name of the Lord in vain and keeping the Sabbath Holy.

Loving your neighbour represents the instructions to honour your father and mother, not killing or committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, lusting or coveting.

So to the scholars who were questioning Jesus, they knew all this. In Deuteronomy 6:5 we are taken back 1400 years again to Moses speaking to the sons and daughters of the Israelites who had wandered in the desert for 40 years but would never see the promised land because of their disobedience.

Moses reminds those who will enter the promised land shortly of their history, that God brought them out of exile, and so they should have Hope in Him, should listen and obey and love Him.

Listen O Israel, the Lord is our God alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength....repeat them to your children, talk about them, tie them to your hands.....

This theme is picked up again in Psalm 22, from which Jesus quotes on the cross.

So why were the teachers asking Jesus something they already knew? OK they hoped to catch him out... why was Jesus so cross with them, because they hadn't put into practice the scriptures they had memorised since being children.

Jesus said they were giving the Israelites heavy yokes by implementing laws so stupidly (such as not healing on the sabbath) and adding so many onerous laws of their own. Jesus' yoke in contrast is light.

One of the restrictions they applied was the definition of who their neighbour was... Samaritans were not their neighbours and so they didn't have to be nice to them or help them. Jesus tells the shocking story of the Good Samaritan to show them how wrong that is. We see Jesus going out of his way to meet a Samaritan woman and obvious sinners to emphasise this point, he has come to love the Gentile and the Jew, men and women, it is the sick who need a doctor he says.

All organisations have to define the future state they want to achieve (Vision) and how they are going to get there (the Mission). It is really hard to do. Most are terrible, being long winded or lacking in a sense of purpose, passion or integrity.

Coca Cola's vision is such

- Our Vision: Our vision is to craft the brands and choice of drinks that people love, to refresh them in body & spirit. And done in ways that create a more sustainable business and better shared future that makes a difference in people's lives, communities and our planet.
- Our Mission (Purpose): Refresh the world. Make a difference.

God's vision statement might be that every knee shall bow and call him Lord and that he could thus be in daily relationship with us (as he was with Adam). He wants us to thrive, not just survive, to live a fruitful, purposeful, and fulfilling lives that bless one another. This is not because God needs our adoration or our help, but because He knows it is good for us as we meet our deepest spiritual need for meaning and purpose.

Matthew is the Mission statement of how we get there in 23 words, so perfect! The Greek word used to describe the love we should have for God and our neighbour is Agape, or sacrificial divine love, the highest kind. This is the love that God has for his world in John 3:16 and Romans 8:38, that he commands his Disciples to have in John 13:34, and the love Jesus demonstrated on the cross in 1 John 3:16. We are even called to Agape love our enemies and those who persecute us in Matthew 5: 43-46.

There are 3 other kinds of love in Greek whereas our language does not easily distinguish them. They are Storge, to describe love between family members, Phileo to describe love between friends and Eros to describe sexual attraction.

CS Lewis describes a maturing process of our love. Firstly we choose to show love to others (storge and Phileo) and as we do our hearts align more closely to God's heart.

In time more of the selfless Agape love will pour out of us blessing others and ourselves. Proverbs 3;3 tells us to never let love and faithfulness leave us... write them on the tablet of your heart

In John 21 15;17, when Jesus reinstates Peter on the beach after his resurrection, we see that whilst Jesus calls us to love God and each other with Agape love, he knows we will often fall short.

Jesus asks Peter three times, do you love me? The first two times Jesus uses the Agape love in his question but Peter affirms his love as Phileo love. The third time Jesus says do you love me Peter using Phileo and Peter replies yes Lord using Phileo. But as CS Lewis describes, Peter will mature and demonstrate Agape love for Jesus and his neighbours by the time of his martyrdom.

So what might it look like if we all followed this?...

Jesus spoke about not storing up our treasures on earth but storing them in Heaven. He spoke about money more than love because he knew the corrosive effect it has on us. He encouraged us to give away one cloak if we have two and to love our enemies and turn the other cheek if we were struck.

In acts 2:42-46 we see what life could be....

- 'All the believers devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and to fellowship and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's supper) and to prayer.
- A deep sense of awe came over them and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.... And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.'

I have asked a link to be shared that describes God moving in Manchester Kentucky which shows what can happen when we obey 2 Chronicles 7:14

If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and heal their land [and the people in it].

2 Chronicles 7;15 says

Now my eyes will be open and my ears be attentive to the prayers in this place.

Manchester was described as the most depressed city in the United States, and the opioid capital. 80-90% of schoolchildren were addicted to drugs or alcohol. 60% of the population were on government aid and there was massive corruption in government.

62 Pastors came together to repent that they had cared more about their church growth than the terrible conditions of Manchester. Bystanders said the atmosphere shifted since that moment. 4000 marched through the main street.

Now only 5% of children are addicted, there were 3000 arrests in Clay County with a 90% conviction rate.

The water that was toxic became pure and is sold as bottles of Hope water.

The fruit came back on the trees and deer, bears and Elk came back after an absence of 100 years restoring the tourist industry.

So I want you to imagine... What would Canterbury look like if we all loved God that much and stopped focussing on our own needs, if we realised it's not all about us?

What would it be like if we had heavenly mindsets and worried less about storing treasures on earth?

What if our neighbour was anyone else on the planet all 8 billion of them, the ones who don't look or sound like us, even ones who are behaving badly or cruelly?

What would it be like if we had Agape love for our Father creator and our neighbour?

Jesus doesn't want us to be on a guilt trip, he knows we will fail to find Agape love to that high bar, but what he wants is our heart to persistently try, risk, fail and keep running the race.

I have always been struck by the traditions of the Jewish faith whereby they hand down their History through traditions that educate the children and remind everyone where they have come from. We are called to share the Good news with the children, as Paul wrote in Romans 10:14

How can they believe in one of whom they have never heard. How can they hear unless someone proclaims Him? And who will go to tell them unless he is sent?

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