

# The Greatest Commandment

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Matthew 22:34-30

Hello everyone. I have good news for you today.  
I have solved it.  
I have figured out the be-all-end-all solution to conflict.

After today you don't even need to come back and hear the rest of this sermon series.  
Cindy can go back to Tahiti, not that she would mind ☺.  
I can't really take credit for this revelation.  
It is all because someone had the guts to ask Jesus the key question.  
Nowadays they would call it a "life-hack".

You see this person was not just a good Jew, he was an efficient Jew.  
Instead of spending his time trying to follow all 613 of the laws rooted in the 10 commandments, he wanted to hack the system.  
He wanted to know which law was the most important of them all.  
Which law would lock-in his place in heaven.

So he asks Jesus, which of these laws is the greatest?  
What is beautiful is that Jesus answered his question.  
He didn't scold him for his pious laziness.  
But he answered this question in the most Jesus-like way.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.  
And love your neighbor as yourself.

If you think about it, the Greatest Commandment is all of the 10 Commandments wrapped up in a neat package.  
Jesus basically cut to the core of the law.  
Without directly saying it, he told this Pharisee that there are no shortcuts.  
There is no life-hack when it comes to living a life dedicated to God.

All you need to do is love God, yourself, and everyone else with everything that you have, all that you are, your entire being.

So yeah. I did figure it out.  
What is the key to conflict reconciliation?  
To living in peace with all of creation?  
With ourselves, other humans, and God?  
The Greatest Commandment.

Jesus gave us the answer on a golden platter.  
If we live into this commandment then we will be one step closer to living like Jesus did, loving like Jesus loved with true authenticity, compassion, and grace.

So why is it so hard?

Why are we wedged in this uncomfortable space with our country falling apart, our churches ripping at the seams, and families crumbling?

Jesus gave us three simple steps, an equation of sorts, to maintain our relationships.  
If we love our neighbor and we love ourselves, then we are loving God with all that we are.

If you remember, I already preached on what it means to love yourself.  
Therefore, by now you should all love yourselves with a kind of ferocity and strength that challenges our society's pressure to hate your body, your failures, and all that makes you unique.

Since that is already taken care of, I will focus on the other part of the equation today, the part where Jesus tells us to love our neighbor.

This begs the question, who is my neighbor?  
I believe that our neighbor is everyone who is not you.  
Everyone who is other.  
And since these people are not you, then they are a mystery of sorts.  
Your neighbor is someone who you don't fully understand.

I got married a month ago, so that is why I have the authority to preach on conflict resolution...because I am an expert now obviously 😊.  
Anyway, we used this verse for our meditation, and one of the pastors officiating advised that we remember that our spouse, our partner is our neighbor.

I think that this goes for anyone you are close to, anyone you have an intimate but not necessarily romantic relationship with.  
Your closest friends, your family, your best friends, your soul-mates, are your neighbors.

This means that even those you are closest with are a mystery.  
Despite your closeness, they are still separate beings.  
This was a challenge to remember that even if you know someone for years and years, you will still be surprised by them.

This is a good reminder not to assume you know all the intricacies that make up your neighbor, whoever that may be.

Ok, so now you know who your neighbor is---anyone but you.  
That's not too bad, we only have to love on 7 billion people or so.

As I sat and tried to unravel the complexity of why Jesus had to tell us to love others as we love ourselves—I wondered why Jesus had to say that.  
Why don't we just love one another inherently?  
Why is there conflict to begin with?

I think that part of it is that we don't think that our neighbors are truly human.  
This sounds really harsh but hear me out.

Our definition of being human is unavoidably selfish.  
We think that the essence of being human is how WE are human.  
We can't help but do this.  
We can't escape the fact that we see the world through our own perspective, our own two eyes.

But we must own up to the fact that we don't see others as truly human because we don't and can't fully understand them.

Whenever I talk to my therapist about a particular problem that Nick and I would be in the middle of, she would always respond with, "Try to understand...ask questions to better your understanding of the situation...of him."  
So I would try. I'd ask questions.  
But then I would end up in my therapist's office and complain and she would say again, "just try and understand."  
IT about drove me crazy. I would say, I am TRYING to understand. It's still not working.  
And then when I had the impulse to bring it up to her again, I had the epiphany that my roadblock was that *I didn't want to understand*.

I can't tell you how many times I have said..."I don't understand how someone could..." fill in the blank..."think that squirrels are a nuisance and not the best things in the world."

While this might seem like innocent befuddlement, the ugly reality is that I am actually saying, "I don't understand and I don't want to try to understand...because that is so far removed from how I experience and understand life...That is not what it means to be human...and therefore I don't want to associate with it."

When I was little, like eight, we were on a trip and my dad bought a swisher sweets cigar. We went to a park and he was going to smoke it, but my sister and I freaked out and wouldn't talk to him or be near him.

I mean he was a pastor, what would people think????

We grew up with the belief that smoking was bad...and then unfortunately that translated to that anyone who smokes is bad.

My poor dad was trying to relax in a park thousands of miles from our home-town and we literally shunned him for wanting to smoke a cigar.

I am not condoning smoking right now, but I thankfully have grown out of the black and white mindset that predetermined someone's worth based on things like smoking.

We all have certain triggers that flip a switch in our head which determines whether we perceive someone as the right kind of human or not.

When we flip that switch we shut down our capacity to take in new information from that person, we stop listening.

We literally and figuratively turn our eyes away from that person.

I want to tell you a story about a man who refused to turn his eyes away, someone who did not let differences keep him from extending friendship and compassion.

This story is from a Ted Talk about Daryl Davis, a black man who befriended Roger Kelly, an imperial wizard, or a national leader, of the KKK.

Davis met Kelly a month after Kelly got out of prison for attempted murder of two black men and for conspiring to blow up a synagogue.

After experiencing racism as a child, Davis began asking himself, "How could someone hate me when they don't even know me?"

He dedicated his life to understanding racism. He read all sorts of books but they didn't give him the answers he was looking for.

This quest for understanding led Davis to seek out Mr. Kelley. Who better to learn from than someone in charge of an organization founded on the historical premise of hating those who don't look like them, who don't believe like they believe.

And when he was trying to get Kelly's contact information, he was warned, "Do not mess with Mister Kelly, he will kill you."

But Davis began meeting with Kelly anyway.

In the beginning Kelly would bring his armed bodyguard with him.

Kelly made it very clear that Davis was not his equal, that he was inferior and Kelly was superior. And this was justified and determined by the color of Davis' skin.

Yet Davis persisted, telling himself that he wasn't there to fight Kelly, he was there to learn from him. To learn where his ideology comes from.

Davis would also invite over some of his other friends to meet Kelly, his Jewish, white, and black friends.

They would all sit and eat together at Davis's house.

Eventually Kelly stopped bringing his body guard.

And then he finally invited Davis into his own home.

He also got invited to Kelly's Klan rallies.

At the rally's Davis tried to absorb and understand all that he could. Not that he believed in what they were preaching, but he tried to learn and understand what was the impetus for their passion.

Through this friendship Davis came to the understanding that we humans are fearful of that which we don't understand. If we don't keep that fear in check then it will turn into hatred. We hate those things that frighten us. And if we don't keep our hatred in check then it will turn into destruction.

During Davis's Ted talk he showed an interview clip of Kelly where he said that he hasn't changed his views about the Klan because those views have been cemented in his mind for years.

He also said that he believes in the separation of the races because it is in the best interest for all races.

The clip included Kelly speaking at a Klan Rally.

And Kelly said something very interesting.

While addressing a crowd that had shown up to protest the KKK rally, he pointed at Davis and said, “I have more respect for this black man than I do for you white ‘n-word”

He also said that he would follow Davis to hell and back because he believes in what Davis stands for and Davis believes in what Kelly stands for. He said that a lot of times they don’t agree about everything, but at least Davis respects him enough to sit down and listen to him. And Kelly respects Davis enough to sit down and listen to him.

At the end of the Ted Talk Davis said that respect is key.  
After years of friendship, eventually Kelly left the KKK.

He advised everyone to take the time and sit down with your adversaries. When talking ceases the ground becomes fertile for violence. Keep the conversation going.

You see we all have visible and invisible messages that we carry around with us as we go about our lives.

We see these cues in other people and if they trigger fear, disgust, confusion, anxiety, or anger in us then our temptation is to turn away from them.

John Paul Lederach, the author of “Reconcile”, the book we are reading together, humbly admitted to turning away from homeless people. He didn’t want to engage and look them in the eye. He would rather avoid the interaction because it made him uncomfortable.

But Lederach says that Jesus was not like that.  
Jesus only had eyes for humanity.  
He paid no attention to the neon signs saying,

I’m poor  
I’m sick  
I’m unclean  
I’m rich

Instead he welcomed those people into his arms.  
He went into their homes.  
He broke bread with them and learned from them.

If we want to love our neighbors as ourselves we have to expand our understanding of what it means to be human.

Let’s try to look past the signs that blind us and turn us away from one another.

I was in the car with Nick and my friend Hannah when we listened to this Ted Talk together. After it was over, I asked them, “so do we still try to learn from others, even if they aren’t trying to learn from us?”

Hannah immediately said yes. She said that the point of trying to learn from others isn’t about trying to be heard.

The whole point is to listen and learn, no matter what.

This takes time, years maybe.

And we have to *want* to understand.

So yes, the key to conflict resolution may just lie in the Greatest Commandment.

Buried in plain view.

Jesus' simple words about love have profound implications for how we live our lives.

Jesus isn't asking for much, just our entire selves.

I pray that we can have the courage to dig deep and commit to a life of Jesus-like compassion and understanding that has no short-cuts.

May it be so.