

“LOVE SUPREME”

**A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW’S GOSPEL (22:34:46)
AND PRESENTED AT ORLEAN UMC ON OCTOBER 26,
2014**

**MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT
IT, THERE IS NO DEBATE LIKE A RELIGIOUS DEBATE.....
RELIGIOUS DISPUTES ARE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO
HANDLE BECAUSE EVERYONE ENGAGED IN A
RELIGIOUS DISPUTE CLAIMS TO HAVE THE WORD OF
GOD AND THE WILL OF GOD ON HIS OR HER SIDE.....
EVERYONE INVOLVED IN A RELIGIOUS DEBATE CLAIMS
TO SPEAK FOR GOD, AND WHEN A PERSON IS
CONVINCED THAT HE OR SHE SPEAKS FOR GOD, THERE
IS REALLY NOT MUCH, IF ANYTHING, THAT ANYONE
ELSE CAN SAY.....**

**WHEN A PERSON BELIEVES THAT HE OR SHE KNOWS
THE WORD, HAS THE WORD, READS THE WORD, AND
SPEAKS THE WORD..... THERE'S NOT REALLY MUCH
ROOM LEFT FOR OPEN DIALOGUE AND CRITICAL
REFLECTION ON WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WHY WE
BELIEVE IT..... NO WONDER THAT IN THE HISTORY OF
HUMANITY, EVERY RELIGIOUS REFORMER, EVERY
PERSON WHO ATTEMPTED TO CHALLENGE,
REINTERPRET, OR BROADEN THE TRADITIONAL LONG-
STANDING RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF THE FAITHFUL MET
WITH VIRULENT AND SOMETIMES EVEN VIOLENT
OPPOSITION-----**

OPPOSITION THAT WAS MOUNTED AND ADVANCED BY RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO SINCERELY BELIEVED THAT THEY WERE DEFENDING THE WORD AND THE WILL OF GOD FROM BEING ALTERED, CONTAMINATED, OR CHANGED BY SOMETHING OR SOMEONE CONSIDERED TO BE NEW, DIFFERENT, RADICAL, EXTREME OR STRANGE.

IN THE FIRST CENTURY, THE APOSTLE PAUL DARED TO CHALLENGE THE SCRIPTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF JEWS WHO HAD FOR CENTURIES BASED THEIR FAITH ON THE LAW OF GOD AS IT WAS GIVEN TO MOSES AND RECEIVED IN THE TORAH.....

**WHEN PAUL STARTED PREACHING THAT WE ARE
SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH AND NOT BY
OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW, HE WAS RUN OUT OF THE
TEMPLE, BEATEN, ARRESTED, CASTIGATED, CRITICIZED,
OSTRACIZED, AND EVENTUALLY EXECUTED BY
RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED THAT PAUL WAS
TEACHING AND PREACHING THAT WHICH WAS
CONTRARY TO THE WILL AND THE WORD OF GOD.**

**IN 1517, MARTIN LUTHER, THE GREAT CATHOLIC REBEL
AND REFORMER, NAILED HIS NOW-FAMOUS NINETY-FIVE
THESES TO THE DOOR OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN
WITTENBERG-----**

IN PROTEST OF WHAT HE TERMED THE INDULGENCES OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH BASED UPON HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNJUST SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM OF REPENTANCE WHICH HAD BEEN IMPOSED UPON THE PEOPLE.

AS MUCH AS WE SEEK TO AVOID RELIGIOUS CONFLICT, HISTORY AND THE BIBLE TEACHES US THAT, OUTSIDE OF RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND CRITICAL BIBLE REFLECTION, THE CHURCH HAS NEVER GROWN BEYOND ITS INSTITUTIONAL TRADITIONS AND LIMITATIONS. THERE CAN BE NO GROWTH WITHOUT STRUGGLE..... THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO NEW TESTAMENT WITHOUT A REINTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT..... WE WOULD NOT TODAY BE LIVING BY GRACE IF SOMEBODY HAD NOT CHALLENGED THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE LAW.

BUT CHURCH CONTROVERSY DID NOT BEGIN WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL OR MARTIN LUTHER OR ANY OTHER PAST OR CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS REFORMER. CHURCH CONTROVERSY HAS ITS FOUNDATION AND ITS IMPETUS IN NONE OTHER THAN THE CHURCH FOUNDER HIMSELF—JESUS THE CHRIST..... THE GOSPELS TEACH US THAT JESUS CONSTANTLY FOUND HIMSELF IN DEBATE AND/OR OPEN DIALOGUE WITH RELIGIOUS PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED THAT THEY KNEW THE WORD AND THE WILL OF GOD; AND SO THEY TEMPTED, TESTED, AND DEBATED WITH JESUS THE WORD MADE FLESH CONCERNING THE WORD IN SCRIPTURE THAT THEY THOUGHT THEY KNEW.....

WHEN THE PHARISEES HEARD THAT JESUS HAD SILENCED OR SETTLED THE DISPUTE WITH THE SADDUCEES, THEY GATHERED TOGETHER AND ONE OF THEM, A LAWYER WHO HAD BEEN TRAINED IN THE LAW OF MOSES, A RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONAL IF YOU PLEASE---- A LAWYER---- ASKED JESUS A QUESTION TO TEMPT OR TO TEST JESUS.

THE QUESTION, “TEACHER, WHICH COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW IS THE GREATEST,” MAY APPEAR RATHER STRAIGHTFORWARD AND NON-CONFRONTATIONAL TODAY. BUT WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY PUT TO JESUS, IT WAS FULL OF HIDDEN LANDMINES.

IT WAS FULL OF POSSIBILITY FOR ENDLESS DEBATE BECAUSE MOST RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, AND ESPECIALLY MOST RELIGIOUS EXPERTS LIKE THE LAWYER IN THE TEXT ASSUMED THAT THEY ALREADY KNEW THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION.

IN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, “WHICH COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW IS THE GREATEST?” MOST RELIGIOUS EXPERTS AND LEGAL AUTHORITIES WOULD HAVE ANSWERED, “EVERY COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW IS GREAT, BECAUSE ALL OF THEM COME FROM GOD, AND IT IS GOD’S WILL THAT WE OBEY ALL OF GOD’S COMMANDMENTS.” THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ACCEPTABLE ANSWER. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE ORTHODOX RESPONSE.

**THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAD DERIVED 613
COMMANDMENTS FROM GOD OUT OF THE PENTATEUCH
OR THE FIVE BOOKS OF THE LAW..... TWO HUNDRED
AND FORTY-EIGHT OF THEM WERE PRESCRIPTIVE OR
THINGS THAT GOD TOLD THEM TO DO..... THREE
HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE OF THEM WERE PROHIBITIVE
OR THINGS THAT GOD FORBADE THEM TO DO..... SIX
HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN LAWS IN TOTALITY, EACH ONE
OF THEM CARRYING THE TRUTH OF A DIVINE
IMPERATIVE, EACH ONE OF THEM CARRYING THE
AUTHORITY OF A DIVINELY APPOINTED LEADER—
MOSES—EACH ONE OF THEM HAVING THE HISTORIC
SANCTION OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND THE FULL
ENDORSEMENT OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY.**

THE LAWYER BELIEVES THAT HE NOW HAS JESUS IN A COMPROMISING POSITION, IN A NO-WIN SITUATION. SURELY JESUS, WHO CLAIMED TO BE SENT FROM GOD, COULD NOT NEGATE OR DENY ANY ONE OF THE 613 COMMANDMENTS GIVEN BY GOD, BUT IF JESUS GIVES THIS ANSWER AS THE LAWYER ASSUMES HE MUST, THEN THE LAWYER COULD FOLLOW UP WITH THIS QUESTION:

“JESUS, IF EVERY COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW IS GREAT, BECAUSE EVERY COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW COMES FROM GOD, THEN, JESUS, WE NEED FOR YOU TO TELL US WHY YOU ARE GUILTY OF BREAKING SO MANY OF THEM.”

**IN MY MIND'S EYE, I CAN SEE THE LAWYER PUT HIS
LEGAL FACE ON AND TAKE THE POSTURE OF A
PROSECUTING ATTORNEY SAYING, "JESUS, YOU ARE
GUILTY OF BREAKING THE LAW WHICH FORBIDS US TO
DO ANY WORK ON THE SABBATH..... JESUS, YOU ARE
GUILTY OF TEACHING PEOPLE TO DISREGARD OUR
STRICT DIETARY CODES WHICH GOVERN WHAT WE CAN
AND CANNOT EAT ACCORDING TO GOD'S LAW.....
JESUS, YOU ARE GUILTY OF VIOLATING THE
CLEANLINESS CODES WHICH REQUIRE US TO WASH
OUR HANDS BEFORE WE EAT AND AVOID ANY CONTACT
WITH BLOOD..... JESUS, YOU ARE GUILTY OF
DISREGARDING THE STRICT, DIVINELY ORDAINED
REQUIREMENTS FOR CIRCUMCISION AND ABSTINENCE**

BY INVITING ALL WHO LABOR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN TO COME TO YOU AND THEN PROMISING THEM THAT YOUR YOKE IS EASY AND YOUR BURDEN IS LIGHT..... THAT, JESUS, IS REALLY A BACKHANDED SLAP AGAINST THOSE OF US WHO INSIST THAT EVERY LAW OF GOD BE OBEYED.”

IF JESUS RESPONDS THAT EVERY COMMANDMENT IN THE LAW OF GOD IS GREAT, AS THE LAWYER EXPECTED HIM TO, JESUS WOULD HAVE STOOD GUILTY AS CHARGED FOR DISOBEYING THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD’S LAW. THE LAWYER THINKS HE HAS JESUS WHERE HE WANTS HIM, BUT JESUS DOES NOT FOLLOW THE SCRIPT. JESUS ALWAYS STEPS OVER AND STEPS BEYOND HUMAN EXPECTATIONS.

ON THE ONE HAND, JESUS DOES NOT SAY THAT EVERY COMMANDMENT HAS EQUAL WEIGHT IN THE EYES OF GOD. ON THE OTHER HAND, JESUS DOES NOT SAY THAT ANY ONE COMMANDMENT IS NOT IMPORTANT IN THE EYES OF GOD..... JESUS DOES NOT INVALIDATE ANY ONE OF THE COMMANDMENTS, BUT INSTEAD JESUS RADICALLY REINTERPRETS AND REPRIORITIZES ALL OF THE COMMANDMENTS..... AND IN SO DOING, JESUS GIVES US A RELIABLE MEANS WHEREBY WE CAN DISCERN AND INTERPRET THE WILL OF GOD IN THE WORD OF GOD.

JESUS TAKES THE WORDS OF ALL 613 COMMANDMENTS OF THE LAW AND CUTS TO THE CHASE OF GOD'S WILL, CUTS TO THE CORE OF GOD'S PURPOSE.

I CAN ALMOST HEAR JESUS SAYING TO THE LAWYER, “I KNOW THAT YOU’VE READ THE SCRIPTURE, BUT LET ME GIVE YOU THE DIVINE PURPOSE FOR EVERY SCRIPTURE THAT YOU’VE READ.”

JESUS SAYS TO THE LAWYER IN ANSWER TO HIS QUESTION, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND..... THIS IS THE GREATEST AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT, AND THE SECOND IS LIKE IT. YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”

THEN BEFORE THE LAWYER COULD ASK, “WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER COMMANDMENTS?” JESUS SAID, “ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS HANG ALL THE LAW AND ALL THE PROPHETS.”

ACCORDING TO JESUS, WE MUST FIRST LOVE GOD WITH ALL OF OUR HEART, SOUL, AND MIND. THAT MEANS THAT OUR LOVE FOR GOD IS NOT JUST VISCERAL, SPIRITUAL, AND EMOTIONAL..... OUR LOVE FOR GOD MUST ALSO BE RATIONAL, COMPREHENSIBLE, AND INTELLECTUAL, BECAUSE JESUS COMMANDS US TO LOVE GOD NOT JUST WITH OUR HEARTS AND NOT JUST WITH OUR SOULS..... *JESUS COMMANDS US TO LOVE GOD WITH OUR HEARTS, SOULS, AND MINDS. THAT MEANS THAT WE DO NOT HAVE TO CHECK OUR MINDS AT THE DOOR WHEN WE COME TO CHURCH. THAT MEANS THAT EVEN AS WE WORSHIP GOD IN SPIRIT, WE CAN AT THE SAME TIME CRITICALLY LOOK AT WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WHY WE BELIEVE IT AS WE CONTINUE TO WORSHIP GOD WITH OUR MINDS. WE MUST LOVE GOD WITH A COMPLETE TOTALITY OF OUR BEING.*

WE MUST NOT SEPARATE ANY PART OF OURSELVES FROM OUR COMPLETE DEVOTION AND LOVE FOR GOD. THIS IS THE GREATEST AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT.

NOW THAT WOULD HAVE ANSWERED THE LAWYER'S QUESTION; HOWEVER, JESUS ALSO WENT ON TO ANSWER A QUESTION THAT THE LAWYER HAD NOT RAISED..... *YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF*..... WHY DIDN'T JESUS JUST GIVE US THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT AS HE WAS ASKED BY THE LAWYER? *THE ANSWER IS BECAUSE WE CANNOT REALLY LOVE GOD WITH OUR HEART, SOUL, AND MIND UNLESS AND UNTIL WE LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS WE LOVE OURSELVES.*

THE SECOND GREATEST COMMANDMENT IS NOT JUST
SECONDARY TO THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT. IT IS
ESSENTIAL TO THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT, FOR WE
CANNOT LOVE GOD WHOM WE DO NOT SEE AND
DESPISE OUR NEIGHBORS WHOM WE SEE EVERY DAY.

**IF JESUS HAD ONLY GIVEN THE FIRST COMMANDMENT,
IT WOULD HAVE LET A WHOLE LOT OF US OFF THE
HOOK AND ALLOWED US TO PIOUSLY PROCLAIM OUR
LOVE FOR GOD WHILE WE TREAT ONE ANOTHER BADLY.
SO JESUS SAYS, “LOVE GOD WITH YOUR HEART, SOUL,
AND MIND AND LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”**

MIND YOU, IT'S RATHER EASY TO LOVE A BROTHER OR A SISTER WHO AGREES WITH US, SHARES OUR VALUES, BELIEVES WHAT WE BELIEVE, AND LIVES THE WAY WE THINK THEY OUGHT TO LIVE..... BUT JESUS DOES NOT JUST INSTRUCT US TO JUST LOVE BROTHERS AND SISTERS WHO ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH US. JESUS SAYS LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

IN THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN, JESUS TEACHES US THAT OUR NEIGHBOR IS NOT JUST THE PERSON WHO SHARES AND AGREES WITH OUR VALUES AND OUR PERSPECTIVES OR EVEN OUR RELIGION.

JESUS TEACHES US IN THAT PARABLE THAT A NEIGHBOR IS ANYONE LAYING ALONG THE ROAD OF LIFE IN NEED.

THAT'S WHY JESUS MADE THE SAMARITAN, WHO DID NOT SHARE THE VALUES, THE LIFESTYLE, OR THE RELIGION OF THE JEWISH VICTIM IN THE STORY, THE HERO OF THE STORY..... OUR NEIGHBOR, ACCORDING TO JESUS, IS NOT JUST THE PERSON WHO AGREES WITH US OR THE PERSON WE MAY AGREE WITH. OUR NEIGHBOR IS ANYONE WHO IS IN NEED. JESUS SAYS LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF. IN OTHER WORDS, PUT YOURSELF ON THE SAME LEVEL AS YOUR NEIGHBOR. WHY? *BECAUSE IT IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE TO TRULY LOVE SOMEONE THAT YOU BELIEVE IS BENEATH YOU.....* SO JESUS SAYS LOVE GOD WITH YOUR HEART, SOUL, AND MIND; LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.

**IN OTHER WORDS, WHATEVER RESPECT AND
CONSIDERATION YOU WANT FOR YOURSELF, JESUS
SAYS GIVE THAT TO YOUR NEIGHBOR. WHATEVER
OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIVILEGES AND PERKS YOU
THINK YOU DESERVE, MAKE SURE YOU OFFER WHAT
YOU WANT FOR YOURSELF TO YOUR NEIGHBOR.**

**IF OUR NATION WERE TO LOVE LIKE JESUS COMMANDS
US TO LOVE, WE WOULD NOT JUST BE MOURNING FOR
THE LOSS OF AMERICAN LIVES DUE TO OUR
INVOLVEMENT IN SUCH PLACES AS IRAQ AND
AFGHANISTAN AND SYRIA AND KENYA AND THE SUDAN
AND NIGERIA AND THE DEVASTATION OF SEPT. 11,
2001.....**

**WE WOULD ALSO BE MOURNING FOR THE LIVES OF OUR
NEIGHBORS, THE INNOCENT AND PEACEFUL CIVILIANS
OF THESE NATIONS WHOSE LIVES HAVE BEEN LOST**

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**I HEAR JESUS SAY AGAIN, “LOVE. IT’S ALL ABOUT
LOVE. LOVE FOR GOD AND LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.”
JESUS SAID, “ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS, HANG
ALL THE LAW AND ALL THE PROPHETS.” THIS IS OUR
PRIMARY PRINCIPLE AND METHODOLOGY FOR BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION BECAUSE—**

MORE THAN GOD IS LAW, GOD IS LOVE.

MORE THAN GOD IS JUDGMENT, GOD IS LOVE.

MORE THAN GOD IS DOCTRINE, GOD IS LOVE.

MORE THAN GOD IS PROPHECY, GOD IS LOVE.

**PAUL WRITES IN HIS EVER FAMOUS LETTER TO THE
CORINTHIAN CHURCH: NOW ABIDETH FAITH, HOPE, AND
LOVE..... BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE.**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR
ME.....AMEN**