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Beverly ECC, Chicago, IL

**“KINGDOM LOVE” (Part 3)
Matthew 25:31-46**

■¹ {Mt 22:37, 39-40} **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart... all your soul and ... all your mind.’.... And...‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

We believe this in our minds. We confess this with our mouths. We are seeking to fulfill it through our actions.

☹ Yet aren't we tempted to moderate the love command as it relates to other people, to narrow its scope, to look for exceptions, and to justify ourselves when we fail?

☑ A homeless man named Frank used to come by Beverly Covenant every other month or so and pound on the door (he never knocked, always pounded).

Frank needed significant financial help, which I could not give. He needed heavy-duty psychiatric treatment, which I could not provide. He desperately needed spiritual counsel, but he would not accept it.

About 2 ½ years ago Frank stopped showing up. He probably died of alcohol poisoning or cirrhosis. Maybe he suffered a fatal accident. Maybe he was murdered.

I do not regret my actions toward Frank, but I do regret my attitude. Often when he came by I groaned inwardly. Sometimes as he talked about his life, I let my attention wander. And when Frank vanished I grieved his ruined life, but I was also relieved that he would not trouble me any longer.

■² I knew First Corinthians 13:1 ~ {1 Co 13:1-3} **“If I speak in human or angelic tongues, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong.”** Yet my words to Frank were often merely dutiful.

■³ I knew First Corinthians 13:2 ~ **“If I have...all knowledge but do not have love, I am nothing.”** Well, I was aware of Frank's pain yet I acted more from obligation than compassion.

■⁴ I knew First Corinthians 13:3 ~ **“If I give all I possess to the poor ...but do not have love, I gain nothing.”** Even as I gave time and energy to Frank, I tended to think of him as a problem to be solved.

Frank needed the best love, and I did not give it. God would have been exalted had I taken charge of my selfish thoughts, but I did not do so.

For a while I tried to rationalize my ego-centrism, but the Holy Spirit kept hounding me until I confessed my sin and merciful God forgave me. I am not bound by guilt in this matter.

Better yet, the Lord has used this experience to purify and strengthen his love within me. Still, I wish the situation never existed for God to redeem!

Are you with me? Can you identify with me in this?

Think about your family members, friends, coworkers, acquaintances and strangers. Have you always loved them as yourself by what you thought or refused to think, said or left unsaid, did or left undone?

Haven't we all moderated the love command, particularly in regard to other people? Haven't we, at

one time or another, tried to de-radicalize it, softening its demands and making it easier to manage?

We want to make it all about feelings (“At least I’m not a *hater*”). We want to confine it to the realm of etiquette (“I always say ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’”). We want to set the bar pretty low (“It is not as if I *killed* the guy”).

‡ Does anyone find themselves wondering if maybe the preacher is not getting a little fanatical about the love command? Is it really that big of a deal?

□ The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46 breaks down into 3 scenes:

△¹ Vv 31-33 is Scene 1. At the Lord’s return “**All the [people] will be gathered... and he will separate [them] ...as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.**”

△² Vv 34-40 is Scene 2. It reports Christ’s interaction with the sheep on his right hand.

△³ Vv 41-46 is Scene 3. It describes Christ’s interaction with the goats on his left.

These scenes brush up against heavy questions about the relationship between deeds and salvation, the Second Coming, hell, heaven and eternal security – but they do not answer any of them. Those are secondary concerns in this parable.

⊗ Jesus’ focus here is our responsibility to exercise *αγαπε* love for the benefit of others.

⊕ His *implication* is that citizens of God’s kingdom confirm their identity with kingdom love.

⊖ Put in negative terms, our claim to kingdom citizenship is false if we do not substantiate it with words and deeds of kingdom love.

△² Take a closer look at Scene 2.

‡ How have the “sheep” exercised kingdom love in vv 35-36?

❖ They gave Jesus food and drink, and nursed him back to health. In other words, they have helped meet his physical needs.

❖ They invited Jesus into their homes when He needed a friend. They have helped meet his social needs.

❖ They gave Jesus garments. Except when it refers to marriage, nakedness is a sign of shame and humiliation in Scripture. They have helped meet his emotional needs.

❖ They visited him in prison.

This is where the historical data is enlightening. Criminal sentences in the Greco-Roman world included monetary fines, banishment, hard labor in remote colonies, mutilation, and execution.

Did you notice what was not on that list? Long-term incarceration. Professor Yizhar Hirschfield of Hebrew University in Jerusalem states that Jewish and Roman prisons had two major functions. They served as: ❶ holding cells for those awaiting trial; and ❷ death row for people convicted of a capital offense.

When Jesus says, “**I was in prison**” He speaks as a man waiting to be killed. They were with him as He grappled with death and eternity. They have helped meet his deepest spiritual needs.

Jesus of Nazareth conquered death and {Rom 6:9} “**cannot die again.**” He has no emotional, social, or physical needs for us to meet. Nevertheless, in v 40

He declares, **“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”**

? Who are **“the least of these brothers and sisters”**? Scholars have proposed several answers, but consider Christ’s direct statement that {Mk 3:35} **“whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister,”** and his promise that {Mk 10:29-30} **“no one who has left”** their biological **“brothers or sisters”** for him **“will fail to receive a hundred”** fold spiritual ones in his kingdom, and his assurance that {Mt 10:40} **“Anyone who welcomes”** the Twelve welcomes him. Jesus is probably speaking of his disciples, his followers, people who submit to him as king.

To those who exercise kingdom love toward his disciples by helping meet their physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs He will say, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”**

This in no way negates the call to love “outsiders” as well. Jesus also commands, {Mt 5:44} **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven”** – and that is exactly what He did.

△³ But if we do not love those who share allegiance to Christ with us, how can we love those who do not? Hence in Scene 3 Christ will say to those who have not exercised kingdom love, **“Depart from me, you who are cursed.”**

One thing that jumps out at me is the human response to Christ’s welcome and rejection. The sheep ask, “Did we do all those things?” while the goats ask,

“Didn’t we do all those things?” Both groups react with surprise, but for different reasons.

Why the difference?

Whether or not they are able to articulate it, the sheep know that love is the organizing principle of the kingdom. They realize that if they get everything else right but this wrong, it is all for naught. Knowing this, they evaluate their lives on the basis of obedience to the love command.

Clearly, they have loved their neighbors with commitment and consistency. But they are not perfect. They remember people whom they failed to love at all, and the “Franks” with whom they went through the motions.

The sheep are humble. Hence their surprise.

The goats would undoubtedly affirm the value of love, yet they tend to see it as one priority among many. They have lost sight of the truth that if they get everything else right but this wrong, it is all for naught.

For this reason, they evaluate their lives on the basis of love and ~ love and biblical knowledge, love and public morals, love and church involvement, love and the “correct” politics, and so forth.

It is not that they have not loved at all; but they have settled for exclusive, self-centered, defensive, merit-based love, the kind that asks, “Who is my neighbor?” instead of “How can I be a neighbor?”

Consequently, the goats are proud. Hence their surprise.

■¹ **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’**

And...‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

✪ Our love for God and for others cannot be separated. Either we love God and our neighbors, or we love neither God nor our neighbors.

✪ Love is the organizing principle of God’s kingdom. *Αγαπε* love is the standard by which those who live in it evaluate themselves, and are evaluated by God.

For these reasons, kingdom love really is that “big of a deal.” It is worth being “fanatical” about.

When all the nations are gathered before the King, and He separates the people “**as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,**” I do not want to be on his left!

I want to be on his right. I want to be among those who ask, “Did we do all those things?”

What about you?