

Text: Matt 22.

Jan 6/7 2007

St Stephen's

Sat/Sun

## "At the Heart of Everything: Great Love"

We are offering a **2 week message series** at the turn of the year called "Touchstone" to help you get focused on the year ahead. We are looking at the great Commission and the great Commandments – two of the most famous teachings of Jesus -to get you in position to have a great year.

Today we are looking at **Matt 22**. Jesus is in the last week of his life. There are teachings and questions, surges of opposition and plotting - and in the middle of it this **unshakable Jesus**. He is absolutely solid. Perfectly calm in the middle of the gathering storm. Rooted in his Father. Moving steadily towards the cross.

Isn't it startling every **New Year** how much of what happened last year was totally **unexpected**. When unexpected things happen, want to be able to be like Jesus, solid, unshakable. What impresses me is that he is rooted **in God**. God is the great reality of his life. Towering over every other reality, over every unseen circumstance. His anchor. His **touchstone**.

We see that in our passage today. As we open Matt 22 we see some religious experts **setting a trap** for Jesus

*"One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?'"*

Matthew 22:35-36 (NIV)

Which commandment was the greatest was a debate. There were 613 commands in the Law, and they were always talking about which were the most important.

Some of the experts thought **any answer would be wrong**, because **every law** from the mouth of God was great – because every word God speaks is equally great. So the trap was to catch Jesus putting one part of the law above another. They would pain him as **a liberal** if he did it.

But **Jesus saw it differently**, and in one brief paragraph gives us **his summary** of what the Bible teaches about God's commands, God's purposes for our lives.

**You were made to love God. You were made to love your neighbor.**

## You Were Made To Love God

*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.*

Matthew 22:37-38(NIV)

Jesus is saying that **you and I were created for a love relationship with the God** of the universe. That is the great purpose of your life. Of everyone's life. To be swept up into that love and to be immersed in it.

Your **'heart'** doesn't refer in the bible to your emotions, but to the center of who you are. It is what you and I would call your spirit, your will – your heart. Your **core**. Your **soul** is the eternal part of who you are. Your **mind** is how you think and dream and fanaticize and imagine. It is every thought inside you. Love God with all of this.

Did you notice that word **“all”**? Three times Jesus uses it. Love God not just occasionally, not just with part of you, but with every thought and every decision and every aspiration, and every dream, inside you to the depths of your being and outside you, day in, day out. This is what you were made for.

It is the purpose of this church to help you step into and flourish in that love relationship.

I spent 4 days this past week with 17 pastors in Fla on retreat. A few spouses were there, among them **Chris and Janet Leighton**, who serve at St Paul's Darien Ct. They have had more difficulty and opposition and hardship in that diocese over the past 5 years than almost anyone I know. Repeatedly publicly rebuked by their Bishop for their faith in the Lord and trust in the bible, they have been harassed, threatened with lawsuits and arbitrary discipline and the loss of their ministry. But they have this unfailing faith and good cheer. God is the great reality and love of their lives. Janet was praying recently and asking the Lord what he wanted her to do. She has this wonderful capacity to hear God with clarity some times, and she wrote down what he said to her.

*“I want you to keep coming to me, walking with me, keeping in step with me, abiding in me, being with me, talking with me... The rest just unfolds, doesn't it? As we come around a bend together, there is a new situation or*

*section of the road and ministry. But if you have noticed, the best things for you – the things that turn out to be the desires of your heart – are not the things that you’ve made happen. No, they are the things I have brought to you.*

*There’s much more road ahead. So much more will unfold. And it will all be good. Hasn’t it been good so far?*

*So all I want you to do is keep traveling with me. Day in, day out, up hill and down. Let’s savor one another’s company. Let’s really be with one another. Let’s notice the sights and be very alive to the present and point things out to one another.*

*I know the way – but haven’t been here with you before! So please do point things out to me. Tell me what you see. I love to hear you talk.*

God made you for a love relationship with him.

Jesus is saying also that **God is worth all your love**. Some of us don’t believe that – perhaps our greatest thoughts of God is how unapproachable he is or how he is to be feared – of how stern a taskmaster he is. Maybe you think like this because of the way you were raised, or because of how some people used Christianity to bully you and intimidate you – lots of us have had those experiences along the way.

But listen carefully to Jesus here. **God is worthy** of your love – with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. If you don’t think that is true – then I ask you to **look again at God**. To look more deeply **this year** at God. And see his goodness and his joy and his bursting compassion towards you and his total competence to manage this universe and shepherd your life and his unfailing trustworthiness and his friendship towards you. You were made to love him.

## **You Were Made To Love Your Neighbor**

*And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Matthew 22:39-40 (NIV)

When he says the second is **“like it”**, he means it is like it in importance. It is at **the top**. And they are both **about love**. They are linked. They go together.

Together they are **God's purpose** for your life, above every other purpose – infecting and transforming every other purpose.

*“Love your neighbor as yourself”* is **not a command to self love**. We think it is. But our deep anxiety about our value and our importance will never be solved by more self love. The bible never commands the love of self. Actually it warns against it. Our deep unrest about our lives will take stronger medicine than self love can ever provide. It will take God's love – far stronger stuff than self love.

In his words here, **Jesus assumes self love**. You do care for yourself. Do it for others. You do feed and clothe and nourish yourself. Do the same for people within your reach, your neighbors. This is just what he taught in the Golden Rule.

*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...*  
Matthew 7:12 (NIV)

Did you notice that Jesus is saying that **people are lovable**? Some of us don't believe that – perhaps our greatest thoughts of some people is how mean they are or how we can get even.

But listen carefully to Jesus here. **People are worthy** of your love. If you don't think that is true – then I ask you to **look again at people – and look at how God loves them**. That would be a good thing to do **this year**. Look long and deep and see God's care for people and his compassion for them and his willingness to lay down his own life for them – and **ask God to give you that kind of love** for people. You were made to love the people within your reach.

**You were made to love!**

Do you find yourself just shrinking from this? **How can you do it?** The most heartbreaking moments of my life are the **times when my love failed**. I have vivid memories that are like snapshots in a large album of moments when I was mean or hard or just self absorbed while others around me needed my love. Whose love has not failed?

That is why the old worship service puts Jesus' great commandments at the front of our worship. And immediately we follow with the **Kyrie**

*Lord have mercy*

*Christ have mercy*

*Lord have mercy*

**That's a good place to start.** Where to from there?

**We will not find our way into a life of love** by loving people **through gritted teeth** - becoming loving on the outside while remaining hard and self-centered and callous on the inside.

**Something greater needs to happen; we have to become the kind of people who love**, naturally and easily and deeply – inside and outside. That is what the gospel is all about, **making us this kind of men and women**. And here is how it happens.

### **To Give, You Must Receive**

You can't give away what you don't have. And we know we don't have this kind of love in ourselves by ourselves. The capacity to give love, to love God with all you are, is linked to your willingness to receive His love.

Look again at Jesus' words:

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

Matthew 22:37-38 (NIV)

Do you see him call God “*your God*”? In that **little phrase** is the good news that **God has already loved you, claimed you as His own, given himself to you as your own**, and he did this long before he ever asked you to love him back, long before you ever thought about loving him at all, or giving yourself to him. And his promise is that if you will open your heart to his son, he will **fill you** with this love, **flood you** with this love, fix you with this love, and flow through you with this love. He is “the Lord your God”!

Say “*the Lord, my God*”...

Again and again this theme is struck in the NT:

*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

Romans 5:8 (NLT)

He is “the Lord your God”!

*No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Romans 8:39 (NLT)

He is “the Lord your God”!

**I was with a friend this past week**, a pastor in one of our churches – let’s call him Jim – he told the story of his conversion. He grew up poor, barely educated, and tough. Into the Army at 18, barely scraping through college – except he was good at golf. By the time he was 28 he was into and out of one marriage, was on drugs, was into hard gambling – and was a militant agnostic. That’s when he met Joan. She walked into his store looking for a job, and he fell in love. On their first date he told her he would marry her – **and loved her, except she was a Christian.** Well, he bullied her out of her bible studies, out of church and into a marriage. He was a tough guy. Their **first child** came along and she wanted the baby baptized – but Jim would not come along.

She was just **slowly crushed** by all this – but she found a good church and a good pastor, who reached out to Jim, and asked to play golf with him. Jim said – “I know what he is up to - no dice.” Joan just **broke down** and said, Jim, you pulled me away from my faith, you won’t pray with me, I don’t read the bible any more, you ridicule me when I talk about God, and you won’t even play a round of golf with a pastor. I don’t know if we are going to make it. I think I **need to go home** to be with my Mom and Dad for a while. Well, that really rattled Jim & he played that game of golf, and on the 9<sup>th</sup> hole, the pastor asked him a **question**. “What is the problem Jim, is it the resurrection or something?” That question infuriated him? But he couldn’t shake it. It haunted him for weeks and then months. **What was his problem?** Why had he become so mean to his wife, so tough about life, so hostile to Christians? And was Jesus really alive? These questions all flowed together and haunted him.

Finally he was in NYC one week and wandering by St Patrick’s cathedral, and felt a desire to go in. He hadn’t been in a church in decades. And then, it was as if he was being pushed forward into the mostly empty church and then pushed down into a pew. And then, for the first time since he was a little boy, Jim prayed. “**All I want to know, God, is it ‘yes’ or ‘no’? Is he alive or dead?**” He

got up and went outside after a bit and called a cab to go back to his hotel. When he stepped into that cab **his heart exploded in the love of God**. Just exploded. “I was in love” Jim said, over and over again. Jim, in his own awkward way, had opened his heart to the risen Jesus, who was very much alive, and who just poured his love into Jim. And his life changed.

The most important thing you could do to make this a great year is to **come back to Jesus again and again and ask him for his love**. Ask him to **fill** you with it, overflow you with it, transform you with it, fix you with it. He will answer that prayer. And **then love God back**. Love him and trust him and stay close to him and follow him. **And love people within your reach**. And **when you need more, ask him for more**. **And bring people to church; bring them to Jesus and into this love**.

**It is going to be a great year.**