

THE GREATEST

Matthew 22:34-46 [MW17-32]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 29 October 2017

Who or what is the greatest?

- in the universe
- in the world
- in your life ...?

The answer to the question: “who or what is the greatest?”

- we might think should be “God” or “Jesus”
- the real question is: “is this so?!”

May be sometimes it is ... and sometimes it isn't!

How did Jesus put it?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind

- is God the greatest in your life?
- no? buzz! wrong!

However to apply this in ordinary, everyday life

- we need some idea of what it is to love God, some practical application ...

The Pharisees often seem to get a bad press and be shown in a negative light

- however they were definitely up with the play here
- if God is indeed the greatest
- and loving God is to be the greatest priority
- the practical application is not exactly easily and immediately apparent

The Pharisees were on to this so they had 613, yes count them (well, may be not!?)

- 613 commands ... the intention was to steer people in the right direction
- following these commands would ensure a person lived as a faithful follower
- upholding and demonstrating the “greatestness” of God
- following these commands proved you loved God

Only one wee flaw, one problem with this ...

- anybody spot it?
- memorising 613 commands would be no easy feat
- who could do that? who had time to do that?
- and if you couldn't memorise them
- who had time to scan through them all before doing something
- to make sure it was the right thing to do, or not to do

So maybe it wasn't a silly idea to ask Jesus which commandment was the greatest

- then at least people could get that much right
- so Jesus reminded those gathered of the command to love God
- which along with the confession of the oneness of God
- is the closest thing to a universal creed in Judaism

Good answer then, but does it help?

- love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind ... still leaves people with an overwhelming sense of yeah, sounds great: but *how do I do it?!*

Well, the good news is it's much easier than that

- Matthew, God bless him, made it very practical for Matthew records Jesus continuing with: *love your neighbour as yourself*

Love God with all your heart, soul and mind

- and, love your neighbour as yourself that could sound like two separate commandments
- and indeed it looks like that in our translations of the Bible however for Matthew these are not two different commandments they are in fact two halves of one whole

For Matthew, you can't love God without loving your neighbour

- which also means you can't love your neighbour without loving God which means loving your neighbour *is* loving God
- did you catch that: loving your neighbour is loving God!

Jesus tells us to love our neighbour as we love ourselves

- now, I can't answer for you but it seems that most people know quite a lot about themselves
- most people love themselves and are at least somewhat self-centred knowing what they like and don't like doing things that make them feel good and by and large avoiding things that make them feel bad

It's worth reflecting on how much of our activity

- centres on the care and comfort of ourselves imagine what it would be like if we showered that on our neighbours!

And just who is our neighbour anyway?

- for Matthew our neighbour is everyone fellow church members, fellow citizens of our town, our nation, the whole world
- even our enemies ... everyone!

If we say "God is the greatest" and "loving God is the greatest commandment"

- it is possible to kind of hide behind the words because it can be a private, spiritual thing if we say "loving our neighbour is the greatest" that earths our words
- and brings it right into every moment of everyday, right into ordinary daily life

Then 'the greatest commandment' could be something like

- loving God means having as much care and concern for our enemies as for ourselves
- that's easy to remember, if not exactly straight forward! and it is good news

Good news because it's the only thing that works

- that makes a difference for good
- that makes the world a better place
- more like the kingdom of God

How might it work?

- in a simple, beginning kind of way it might work something like this ...

“The Good Neighbour” [read]

Let us take a moment to reflect for ourselves on what is the greatest ... then I'll pray

[time of silence and allowing the Holy Spirit to 'move', then ...]

*Almighty God, in your Son you have taught us
that love is the fulfilment of your law:
stir up within us the fire of your Holy Spirit,
and pour into our hearts your greatest gift of love,
so that we may love you with our whole being,
and our neighbours as ourselves;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

The Good Neighbour

We didn't know the neighbour on that side at all. Knew he was an older bloke who lived alone and didn't have any pets. Didn't seem to do any gardening. Hardly ever noticed him outside. So we just kind of ignored him. It wasn't hard to do as we barely saw the bloke.

My sons, Brandon and Paul, were big into ball sports. Something they got from their Mum, Patti, who was a keen softball player. She bought them a ball and bat and gave them a few tips. They picked it up real quick. Especially Brandon who had a good eye and a fierce swing.

We were all out in the backyard. Patti was pitching, Brandon batting, Paul fielding and me trying to catch. It might not have been first grade, but we were having a lot of fun. Then it happened. Brandon really connected. The ball smacked into the top rail of the fence. For a moment it looked like it would bounce straight back. Instead it spun over to the neighbour's place. That neighbour.

Brandon said, "Throw me over Dad. I'll get it."

I didn't even need to catch Patti's disapproving look. It was as if I could hear the Lord's voice saying, "That's not the way to do it is it? It's not a good example to your boys. Besides, what a great opportunity to finally meet your neighbour."

Yeah right, I thought. However what I said was: "Okay. I'll go and knock on the front door and ask for our ball back."

"Hang on," said Patti. "Take some of those scones I've made for afternoon tea."

Carefully carrying a plate of warm scones covered with a tea-towel I walked up to the neighbour's front door. I knocked. Nothing. I knocked again, louder. Still no answer.

So balancing the plate of scones I tiptoed into the back lawn. The softball was just sitting there in the unkempt grass. As I reached to pick it up a voice thundered from

inside the house: "What the _____ do you think you're doing!"

I nearly dropped the scones there and then. I apologised and explained I hadn't meant to disturb him; just get our ball back.

The neighbour seemed unmoved and let me know with a few choice words that made my ears burn. I left the scones at the front door and scooted home. At least I had the ball.

I complained to Patti and said we had probably lost the plate and the tea towel. She just said, "Never mind."

Which is exactly what the Lord said when I complained to him. I told the Lord good and proper. "It's just not on," I said. "You don't do the easy thing. You try to do the right thing; the neighbourly thing – and people go right off. It's not supposed to be like that!"

"Funny thing you should say that," the Lord replied in that tone he has.

"Well? What's a bloke supposed to do? What do you do?"

"Keep on being gracious of course," said the Lord.

Easy for him to say. He's had heaps more practice!

"It will be good for you," said the Lord. I swear he was suppressing a chuckle. "Develop your character."

"My character's not in need of development thank you very much," I replied.

"That's a matter of opinion," the Lord responded. "However in this case it's up to you to be the good neighbour."

"Up to me to be the good neighbour," I spluttered. "The guy won't even acknowledge my existence, so how the heck am I supposed to be a good neighbour?"

"Treat him with respect. You don't know what's happened in his life to make him like that. You don't know him at all ..."

"Don't want to either," I muttered, very, very quietly under my breath – didn't want to upset the Lord in full flight.

"... underneath you may find he's a good bloke ..."

"Yeah right!" I muttered again.

The Lord, graciously, pretended not to notice. "Always treat him with courtesy and kindness, as a person of worth. After all, your neighbour is made in my image too."

That was a punch in the stomach. I hadn't thought of it like that. The Lord had done it again. Given me more to reflect on than I wanted!

A couple of days later the boys hit the ball over the fence again. I walked round to the front door, knocked politely, asked civilly; and was told bluntly to go away.

Softballs don't grow on trees so the next day I went to see the neighbour again, the Lord talking to me all the way about being gracious. I knocked, extremely politely, on the front door. No answer. The guy wouldn't even come to the door. But he was there I know, because I saw the curtain move. I went round the back as graciously as I could. No sign of the ball anywhere.

"Ah well," I said to no one in particular. "Chalk it up to experience. We'll just have to buy another softball."

Brandon and Paul, occasionally helped by Patti and me, were really enjoying playing softball. We'd encouraged them to face the other way so that the garage was behind them; and to save the big hits for the park. The new ball had lasted a week so far but boys will be boys, and it wasn't long before Brandon tried to hit the ball as hard as he could. A superb hit which easily cleared the fence and landed right in the middle of that neighbour's back yard.

Off I went to retrieve the ball. Before I was even up the path I received a thundering "Go away!" There was no answer to my knocking. The curtain didn't even move. And of course there was no ball in the back yard.

I was fair fuming as I walked back home.

"Some folks are just like that," said the Lord gently. "Try not to worry. Keep at it."

"Yeah. I'll just ignore him."

"I'm afraid that won't do," said the Lord. "You have to treat him with respect; courtesy; kindness. You have to treat him as a person of worth, made in my image."

"Okay. Okay. I get it!" I said, resigned to my fate.

We lost quite a few balls over the fence. I wore a track to the neighbour's front door.

One day the Lord suggested I take some of Patti's scones. "In case you've forgotten," I reminded the Lord, "we've already lost one of our good plates and a tea towel."

The Lord was unmoved. "Use a plastic barbeque plate and a paper towel."

Off I went yet again. This time with a plate of Patti's fresh scones, spread with homemade raspberry jam and cream – whipped by Paul no less. All covered with a paper towel. I had wanted to use a plain white one. Patti insisted on one covered with colourful bows. It didn't seem to make any difference, but at least we always had yummy scones!

"See. There's always an upside," said the Lord.

"Maybe. But we're still losing softballs and nothing has changed," I shot back.

"Have a look on your back lawn," suggested the Lord.

So I did. There it was – a softball – Brandon's; it had his initials on it. "Well I'll be ...!" I exclaimed. "Do you know how that got there?"

"Yes," said the Lord.

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