

Others Second, Ourselves Last

Romans 13:09

Sermon Transcript By Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Would you take a Bible, please, and turn to Romans 13:9, "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet and any other commandments are summed up in this sentence, you shall love your neighbor as yourself'."

Why do so many of us turn from side to side in bed at night, just before we go to sleep? Because we remember the guy in the movie who asks, "Who loves you baby?" And we think, "Well, I don't think anybody really does."

Now why do so many of us have that experience? We probably are all much the same: we'll say, "Well, my husband cares for me and my parents feel responsible for me and my colleagues respect me and my children trust me and my friends like me -- but I'm not too sure that anybody really loves me."

Many of us are probably sitting there thinking, "Oh, I thought I was the only one who thought that." But it's strange that so many of us feel that way in a society that is filled with the word "love" -- "what the world needs now is love, sweet love!" And then we hear "I love New York", "I love my Honda", "I love my BSA"! It's all over the place. We're all saying, "Love -- that's the meaning of everything." So that means that the social workers have to have love, and the teachers have to have love, and the parents need more love and we're all talking love, love, love.

Yet so many of us still feel that we need love. We need to love and we need to be loved, but we don't experience much of it. And isn't it true that most of us would say, "Well, all those things you talked about, all that kind of love, I feel they don't know what they're talking about. They just use the word superficially or they use it in a shallow way. I don't know what they're talking about when they talk about love like that. That's not the love that I feel I need, I can tell you that. I feel when they talk about their love, they're talking about something shallow and superficial compared with what I feel love is." Many of us would say that. Many of us would say, "I know they talk about love in our society but I don't think they know what they're talking about. I think they've made up a word and given their own shallow meaning to it."

And that's what we talked about earlier: what love really is. And we quoted the well known verse in John 3:16 because love is mentioned in that verse. Whether you believe the Bible or believe the Gospel or not, it states it so clearly: "God so loved the world that he gave." So love is giving. At least you can say that. Love is giving.

Then you remember we said, "But it's not just giving -- because lots of parents give all kinds of presents to their children, but they spend no time with their children so their children don't feel that they're loved at all, even though the parents are giving." And the verse goes on to say "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son." Love is giving something valuable, and indeed we said it's giving the most precious thing you have. Love is really giving yourself. It's giving yourself to other people for their benefit. Many of us ask, "What do you mean by that? Do you mean put yourself on a plate and say 'Here I am -- see what a wonderful gift I am giving you' and the other person is supposed to be overwhelmed by our generosity? Is that what the giving of yourself is?"

No. We said it's giving the things that you are: your talents, your abilities, your insights, your aptitudes, your intelligence, and your awareness of what's happening in the world -- all the things that are your advantages -- giving all those to another person for their benefit. That's what love is.

It's giving all those things to another person for their benefit. It's laying them at their feet and saying, "These things I give to you. All that I am, I give to you. I lay them all down before you for your use, to benefit your life."

But you remember we said that even that doesn't go deep enough. In fact there's a vital element in love that is lacking even in that big definition. And it's the lack of this vital element that makes us all feel, so often, that we're not really loved. Truly, it's the lack of this vital element that makes us all feel, even after somebody has said "I love you", that they don't really love us.

What is the element? It's the vicarious element -- that's the way the theologians describe it -- the vicarious element. How do we explain the vicarious element? It's giving all those things to the other person even if it's at the expense of your own welfare -- that's it. It's laying all that you are at the disposal of other people for their use even at your own expense. And that is what you find in that definition in John 15:13.

"Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends." That's the vicarious element. That's what real love is. It's giving all that you are to another person for their benefit -- even to your own loss and to your own damage -- even at your own expense. That's what that says, you see, "A man has no greater love than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." In other words, he is laying down his life and they're getting their lives, that's what it means. -- doing all that for the other person even at your own expense and loss.

Now one of the difficulties you and I have with that belief is because of a great misinterpretation that is so popular in these days of Romans 13:9, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There's a well known heresy that misinterprets that by saying "You love your neighbors by loving yourself; you see that's what God's command is, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'. It means love your neighbor the way you love yourself, that's what it means."

So -- how are you loving yourself -- pretty good? Okay, better get that "loving yourself" going otherwise you won't be able to love your neighbor! So let's start loving ourselves first -- let's concentrate on that. The problem is, none of us get any further than that -- we never get past that. We say, "That commandment means love yourself first and then you'll know how to love your neighbor." So there we all are, hugging ourselves like mad, year after year after year and as somebody says, "How about your neighbors?" We answer "Well, I'm getting around to it. I'm just learning how to really love myself."

And it's amazing loved ones, with that misinterpretation we've taken the commandment of God that says plainly "You should love your neighbor" and we've turned it right around and said, "You should love yourself."

If you say to me, "Oh brother, that's not right, that's not" -- yes it is, loved ones. That's the way it ends up. You may play around with the definition or the logic of it but that's the way it

ends up. It ends up with a whole society that loves itself to pieces and has no love left over for anything.

Of course, the truth is that that isn't the meaning of that phrase "Love your neighbor as yourself." The meaning of that phrase is clearly indicated by Jesus in his statement, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

"Love your neighbor as yourself" means love your neighbor the way you used to love yourself. Love your neighbor the way you used to concentrate on yourself in your egocentricity – now concentrate on your neighbor. The way you used to devote all your talents and abilities to yourself, devote them to your neighbor. It means you should lay down your life for your neighbor.

That's what we mean when we say that about our boys that have died in wars, isn't it? When we apply it to those crosses that you see in our cemeteries -- those rows and rows of crosses of loved ones who have died in war, we say "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." We mean those boys laid down their lives so that we would be able to live ours. That is the vicarious element.

They laid down their lives so that we would not be defeated and taken as prisoners in war. They laid down their lives so that we could have our lives. If they had loved themselves, we'd have been in trouble. If at that vital moment -- when they could die if they went over the top of the ditch or flew forward in a plane – if at that moment they chose to love themselves and decided, "I am going to love myself and preserve myself first, because if I don't love myself properly, I won't be able to love the people back home" there would have been no America.

It's because they laid themselves down in place of us that we have what we have. That's what love is and that's why so many of us don't feel loved. We feel that our parents, or husbands, wives or friends give themselves to us from time-to-time; they lend us their abilities or talents. They sometimes lay their time at our disposal. They sometimes give their attention and interest. But in the back of our minds we feel that if it comes to them putting themselves last and putting us first, we're not so sure it would happen. We think they'll give and they'll love as long as it's convenient and as long as they can preserve their own lives. But if it came to a choice between their life and ours we're pretty sure which way it would go. And it's because that element isn't in our love that we don't feel love.

I agree with you, we don't need to lay down our lives for each other all the time. But we human beings know when the other guy would do that if he had to -- we know. In other words, real love is giving your abilities, your interests, your attention, your time, your awareness, your intellect to other people for their best. You want the best for them and you give all those things to them to bring about that best even at the expense of yourself.

In other words, all the abilities that we human beings normally use for self-preservation and for self-improvement, we lay at the feet of other people. That's what love is. Then comes the obvious question: "Wait a minute, you mean I am going to take my abilities, my IQ, my skills, my talents, my aptitudes, my interests, my awareness, and I am going to lay those at the feet of everybody else to preserve their lives and to forward them? What is going to happen to me?"

You know that there is no answer to that except disaster and death -- unless there is someone else who loves you the same way. Unless there is someone else who is willing to lay down his abilities

and his talents and his time and his powers and his understanding of the world at your feet for your prosperity. Unless he wants the best for you and so is going to lay all his abilities at your disposal to bring about that best.

Of course you know where we ended last Sunday. The very One who said that "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends", is the one that loves you like that. Your Maker and his dear son have already proven to you and me their readiness to lay down their very own life for you and for me. And they're prepared to do it on a daily basis to meet your financial needs, to meet your material needs, to meet your career needs, and your professional needs -- to meet all the personal needs that you have. They are willing to lay down themselves before you for that purpose -- even to their own loss. That's what the meaning of this word "love" is.

That is the very nature of our God, that's the very nature of our Creator. That's his nature. That's what he does. That's his whole attitude to you. That's why your life and my life come free when we begin to live the same way. When we refuse to live the same way and we cuddle ourselves up, we shrink and wither and grow small and die in our own selfishness like Howard Hughes.

But when you move out into the middle of God's nature and you begin to lay your abilities and your talents out for other people and for their best benefits even at the expense of your own, you find miracles begin to happen in your life. Bills begin to come at the right time, money comes in to pay them at the right time, automobiles run longer than you thought they would, sicknesses are healed. You begin to see your life breaking out into openness instead of shriveling into narrowness.

Some of you may remember Richard Buckminster Fuller. I don't know exactly where he stood spiritually, but he deliberately set out on an experiment. He said, "I am going, for the next 20 years, to lay myself out at the disposal of the world to improve mankind's lot. And I am going to do it with thought only of them in mind, and not of myself at all."

Then he kept intricate day-by-day diaries and he says, "I have 20 years of diaries to prove that that works: that I have not suffered by doing that. That in so far as I have given myself more and more to others, I have found my own life growing and developing and expanding and having all that it needed."

Loved ones, it's the very law of our lives. It's the way the world works. And if you say to me that it's not the way Vegas works or the Mafia works --that's the fallen world. But inside that world there is this other world that works constantly the way God originally intended it, and he is able to make it work for you.

You may say, "Oh well, it's very beautiful and I have had that feeling, at times, that you described about love. And I've had that kind of feeling of faith that God would supply all that I needed and that therefore I was free to love other people. I've had that feeling at times."

It's not a feeling. Love isn't a feeling. Faith isn't a feeling. Both faith and love are actions. And if you continue to live in that unreality of so many Christians, where you think you have notions of love, or beliefs, or faith and your mind and your life are filled up with notions and feelings, loved ones, you'll never see God's miracle in your life. You'll live in that unreal fantasy world where you're devoid of God's miracles. You'll never see anything happening that happened in the Old Testament or the New Testament. But when faith and love become the normal every day action of your life -- in other words, when faith and love describe your everyday behavior --

then you'll begin to see God's miracles taking place because faith and love are actions.

Love doesn't commit adultery -- either in physical intercourse with another person who is married to someone else -- or where you're married, and you commit adultery and physical intercourse with someone else. Love doesn't commit adultery in your heart by looking at a woman or a man to lust after. Love does not do that. It does not commit adultery.

Love treasures the wife or husband and does not commit adultery. Or, if you're single, you do not commit fornication -- that's the version of it for a single person. But love treasures the wife and treasures the husband. Love lays itself out for the wife's benefit. Love wants the wife or husband in the situation to be happy more than the person themselves wants to be happy. You want your partner to be happy. You want them to be satisfied. You want her best. You want his best.

You give yourself to her and lay your talents and your abilities at her disposal or at his disposal and say, "Love, this is for you. I want you to use these things for yourself to make you as happy as I can possibly imagine God wanting you to be. This is all I live for: that you would be happy. I am willing never to have intercourse if that makes you feel that I love you for yourself and that I don't want to use you. I want whatever will make you happy and whatever will prosper you." Love gives to the other person; gives to the woman or gives to the husband, thinking only of their happiness and their well being.

Adultery is the very opposite. Adultery puts you first. It puts your needs first. Adultery is an insult to your partner. It's a betrayal of the intimacy that you have had with your partner. It's making a mockery out of your friendship, let alone your love. Adultery is putting you first and saying, "I need this. I want satisfaction and she (or he) isn't giving me it. I can get it from this girl or from this guy." Adultery is putting you first. It's not putting you last. It's saying, "I want and I need this and I don't care who I hurt. I don't care at whose expense I get this." It's the very opposite of love. Love is saying, "I want you to be happy, above everything else, at my expense. I don't care if I am happy or not. I want you to be happy." Adultery is, "I want you to be miserable. I want to be happy whatever it costs you."

Love does not commit adultery. That's why this verse (Romans 13:09) says, "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery' are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'." So loved ones, adultery is not love. Loving another person is saying, "I trust God to fulfill my emotional needs and my physical needs. I trust him to give me as much happiness as I ought to have and as much satisfaction as I ought to have, and I put you first, whatever."

Adultery is saying, "I can't trust God to do that. I know how to get a bit of exhilaration here. I know how to get a bit of security or satisfaction here and I am going to get it." Adultery is unbelief in God; distrust of God. It's grabbing at a thing because you're not sure God will give you enough of himself. But love can only take place if you have faith in God that he will supply all your needs.

So loved ones, love is not committing adultery, not committing fornication. Love is what we were brought up to believe it is at school -- we were all taught it. I don't know if you belonged to clubs or Boy Scouts or something like that, but we were all taught the same thing: it's God first, others second, yourself last. That's the simple thing -- nothing sophisticated about it, nothing subtle, nothing psychological -- just God first, others second, yourself last. That's what love is.

That's why love is not killing other people -- because love is based on faith. It's based on absolute faith that God has your life in his hands, that he loves you, wants the very best for you. And he is laying himself out at your disposal to bring about that very best. It's based on absolute faith that he has your whole life planned and he is going to take care of you as the days go by.

So no man can destroy your life or harm it in any way. No man or woman can cause your life to be less than what God wants it to be. That takes away all fear of man and takes away all desire to kill man or to liquidate this guy or to blow this guy away or to wish he wasn't alive or to hate him or to be angry with him. When you have faith in God's provision for you, you're free to love other people, even those who were out to harm you -- you don't want to kill them. Love is not killing a person, not wanting them dead, not wanting them out of the picture.

Love actually is based on absolute faith that God will do what he said. Remember how he put it in Jesus' words in Matthew 6:25-26, 28, 32, 33. "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." Our God said, "I'll supply every need of yours from my riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19) Our God said, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6) And he says "and the peace that I have will fill your heart and keep it in Christ Jesus."

So faith has that absolute confidence. And anybody that tries to hurt you or harm you is like a little fly trying to get at you. They're nothing compared with the Almighty companion that you trust. So you don't need to kill the little flies -- you have an opportunity to want the best for them because you know they cannot hurt you. So love is not killing.

It's the same way with our possessions. Love is not stealing or coveting. It does not want something from somebody else. It's wanting the very best for them because you know your God will supply every need you have; he'll provide for you. If you lay yourself out for others, he'll lay himself out for you. And because you know that, you don't want to steal; you don't want to take things from other people. No. You want them to have more than you. You want them to be happier than you. You want them to have more food than you, more clothing, more possessions than you because you know you have a Banker here who will supply you with ten million times what you could get by your own right arm.

So, real love, loved ones, is not committing adultery, it's not killing, it's not stealing, it's not coveting because it's based on absolute faith that your Creator loves you far more than you will ever actually love other people. And he has laid himself at your disposal to bring about the best things in your life and he will not fail you if you will do the same thing for other people.

So love is action. It's not a notion, it's not a feeling, it's not even an attitude. It's action. So change today. Change today. Please, start today. Why not look around today and say, "Who could I make happy today?" Start. Act. The moment you act, you will find it's like Moses. The moment he acted when God told him to strike the rock with his staff, that moment the water poured miraculously out of the rock. That's what it will be like in your life.

If you'll begin to act in faith and in love, you will begin to experience God's miraculous answering of your needs. So I would encourage you. Some of us need to start. If we're going to keep on walking in this bluff love and this protection of ourselves, we're not going to see anything happen in our own lives or in each other's lives and we're all going to be deprived of love, continually. So start now, loved ones. We don't know how long we have -- let's start loving today. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we know it is right, we feel it in our hearts. It's certainly, Lord, what we need ourselves; we know that. We know it would make all the difference to our fears and our distrust if somebody loved us like that. Father, we see now that the only way we're going to realize that you love us this way and the only way we're going to experience your love in actual action in our lives, supplying our needs, is if we actually act this way, from this day on, to others.

So dear Father, we believe that you are God and that you have already supplied all that we see around us. And that you, in a miraculous way, by a million different permutations of all the circumstances and all the events that take place in our lives, are able to meet all our needs, if we will stop looking after them ourselves and will start doing our jobs because you've given us them to do.

Then, from that moment on, we'll give ourselves, as you guide us, to others for their benefit; forgetting about ourselves at last, so that you can remember us. Because we are always remembering ourselves, you cannot remember us. Father, thank you that if we forget about ourselves, you will remember us. Thank you that you are love, yourself, and you're always giving. Thank you, Lord.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.