

Loving God's Image in Our Neighbors

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When some Pharisees put Jesus to the test concerning the greatest of all God's commandments, He answered with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

"This is the first and great commandment," He told them. "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:38-39).

What did He mean when He said the two commandments are *alike*? Well, obviously, they both deal with love. The first calls for wholehearted love toward God—a love that consumes every human faculty. The second calls for charitable love toward one's neighbor—a humble, sacrificial, serving love. Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on those two commandments, so the whole law is summed up in the principle of love. "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). Both commandments make that point.

But there's another sense in which the second great commandment is just like the first. Loving one's neighbor is simply the natural and necessary extension of true, wholehearted love for God, because your neighbor is made in the image of God.

Made in the image of God

God's image in every person is the moral and ethical foundation for every commandment that governs how we ought to treat our fellow humans. Scripture repeatedly makes this clear. Why is murder deemed such an especially heinous sin? Because killing a fellow human being is the ultimate desecration of God's image (Genesis 9:6).

In the New Testament, James points to the image of God in men and women as an argument for allowing even our speech to be seasoned with grace and kindness. It is utterly irrational, he says, to bless God while cursing people who are made in God's own likeness (James 3:9-12).

That same principle is an effective argument against every kind of disrespect or unkindness one person might show to another. For example, to ignore the needs of suffering people is to treat the image of God in them with outright contempt. Proverbs 17:5 says, "He who mocks the poor

reproaches his Maker.” Neglecting the needs of a person who is “hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison” is tantamount to scorning the Lord Himself. That’s exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 25:44-45: “Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.”

Neighbor? Who’s that?

Who is our neighbor? That’s the question a lawyer asked Jesus when He affirmed the priority of the first and second commandments (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, poignantly making the point that anyone and everyone who crosses our path is our neighbor—and *truly* loving them as ourselves means seeking to meet whatever needs they might have.

One of Jesus’ main points in that parable was this: we’re not to love our own brethren and fellow believers to the exclusion of strangers and unbelievers. God’s image was placed in humanity at creation, not redemption. Although the image of God was seriously marred by Adam’s fall, it was not utterly obliterated. The divine likeness is still part of fallen humanity; in fact, it is essential to the very definition of humanity. Therefore every human being, whether a derelict in the gutter or a deacon in the church, ought to be treated with dignity and compassionate love, out of respect for the image of God in him.

The image restored

The restoration of God’s image in fallen humanity is one of the ultimate goals of redemption, of course. God’s paramount purpose for every Christian involves perfect Christlikeness (Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:2). That will consummate the complete restoration and utter perfection of God’s image in all believers, because Christ himself *is* the supreme flesh-and-blood image of God (Colossians 1:15).

But if you’re a believer, your conformation to Christ’s likeness is gradually being accomplished even now by the process of your sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18). In the meantime, Jesus taught that one of the best ways to be like God is to love even your enemies. Not only do *they* bear God’s image, but (more to Jesus’ point), loving them is the best way for us to be like God, because God Himself loves even those who hate Him.

Loving even our enemies

Of course, the prevailing rabbinical tradition in Jesus’ day claimed that “enemies” are not really “neighbors.” In effect, that nullified the second great commandment. It was like saying you don’t really have to love anyone whom you hate. All kinds of disrespect and unkindness became impervious to the law’s correction.

Jesus confronted the error head on:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Your enemy is made in God’s image and therefore deserving of your respect and kindness. More important, Jesus said, if you want to be more like God—if you want the image of God to shine more visibly in your life and behavior—here’s the way to do it: love even your enemies.

Remember, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). Such love—expressed even toward our enemies—is the mark of the true Christian, because it is the most vivid expression of God’s image in His own people. “As He is, so are we in this world” (v. 17).

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