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Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2011

Sermon Texts: Ruth 2: 1-13
Matthew 22: 34-40
I Thessalonians 2: 1-8
I Corinthians 13: 1-13

Sermon Title: "The Love Line"

Sermon Topic: The greatest commandment for the Church

Sermon Purpose: To teach the church how to live and to respond to the commandment of Jesus Christ: to love one another as ourselves.

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Sermon Prayer: Creator and Providing God, You have given us life with which to worship, Your beauty with which we are to adore Your world, Your Son Who made it possible for us to be redeemed from sin, and His ministry with which to bring glory to Your name and understanding of Your love. Now, we pray, bless the words of my lips and the meditation on my heart; that both may be pleasing to Your sight and faithful to the Christ we proclaim. In His name, we ask it. Amen.

We live in a time of alphabet illnesses. Everyone is afflicted with initials: CHF (congestive heart failure), COPD (congestive obstructive pulmonary disease), GRD (gastric reflux disease), MI (myocardial infarction - a form of heart attack), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), and so on.

Actually, the only difference between our modern world and the days of Jesus is **that** society didn't use initials. They may not have had the same names for the problems, but the problems were there, nonetheless. For example: We could probably characterize the **Pharisees** as being OCD. They were so obsessed with keeping every tiny detail of the law that they lost track of how the law was to help people peacefully relate to one another.

Last week, we heard about the Pharisees' attempt to trap Jesus with the question about paying taxes. Caesar **claimed** to be God, so if Jesus answered "Yes," they would charge Him with **idolatry!** **But**, if Jesus answered "No," they would accuse Him of promoting **tax evasion**; a crime against the state - punishable by death.

Then came the **Sadducees** who asked Jesus who would be the woman's husband in **Heaven** if she had been widowed **seven** times on **earth**.

As the Israelites practiced their faith, there was no way they could believe in the resurrection of the body, and they were trying to present a problem so sticky and tangled that even **God** could not undo it.

The "faith" of the Sadducees was based on all the fine points of the law. They had a fondness for "keeping the rules." However, a true, **selfless love** had **little** to do with their **faith**.

They were so **passionate** about the **law** that they had expanded the original **Ten** Commandments into **613** commandments!! There were 365 negatives and 248 positives.

Now, before we come down so hard on the Sadducees, we must remember that there **was**



some merit in the questions posed to Jesus about which was the greatest commandment, because there **was a real need** for Jewish law to be summarized into something **workable** and **practical** -- something you could "get a **handle** on." In these verses of today's lesson our Lord **supplied** that **handle** to the Law!!

You know, we're still called upon to use that "handle," today. How often have you heard it said that the church is the greatest **manipulator** of **guilt** known to society? Sadly enough, that's the tactic used by **many** congregations. But, that's **not** what Jesus taught! That's **not** the message we were commissioned to carry into the world. That's **man's** law, not **God's**!

Jesus said the bottom line of the law, that part without which **nothing** else **mattered**, was to "Love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... and to love your **neighbor** as **yourself**." Notice: he says **nothing** about **guilt**.

The Great Commandment urges us to maintain **balance** and a **healthy** spirit in our keeping of the law. Yet, there is that **legalist** in all of us who would like to restrict and **regulate** our Christianity; to shrink it down to nothing but a list of do's and don'ts that you can get a **handle** on.

That legalist shows itself every time we ask **another** Christian, "Does your church allow ...?" Those of you who are over forty may remember the days when it was commonplace for people to ask one another: "Does your church allow ...

dancing?"

drinking?"

smoking?"

gambling (bingo, poker, trips to the casinos, etc.)?"

God forbid someone should answer "yes" to any of those questions! That would trigger a **tirade** about how "**un-Christian**" that church was being, about how those people were being taught **heresy**, and how they were going to **Hell**!

You see, it's the Pharisee and the Sadducee in **all** of us that makes us ask, "Does your church allow...?" Wouldn't it be better to ask **God**, "Does God's Holy Spirit give me the **freedom** to do any of these things **without** violating the first and greatest commandment: Love? **Love of God and love of Neighbor!!!**

It's the **Pharisee** in all of us who gets **so** upset over whether a church group should sell **raffle** tickets for foreign **missions** or to feed the **hungry**, and then that same person turns right around and thinks **nothing whatever** of buying a **Lottery** ticket, or taking a bus trip to the **Casinos**, or entering a magazine **sweepstakes** -- all **to raise money for me!** If old number **one** is the charity, the question **ceases** to be a question.

"DON'T USE A DOUBLE STANDARD! If you're using **one** yardstick to measure the church, your neighbors, and the person down the street; use the **same** yardstick to measure yourself! If it's good for **you**, why should it **not** be good for someone **else**? My friends, we **all** have our "glass houses" and we've **all** thrown our share of **bricks**.

You see, the bottom line of being a Christian is **not** how you **fine tune** or **apply** the commandments. But, rather, as Jesus said, that bottom line is how you are doing at **keeping** the first and **greatest** commandment - love for the **Lord** and for the person sitting **next** to you, and in **front** of you, and **behind** you, this morning?

Love is the bottom line. **Jesus** said it. Strange, isn't it, that He would say, "love your neighbor as you **love** yourself"? Jesus did **not** say "...as you **like** yourself." There is some point in **all** our lives when do **not like** ourselves. We look into the mirror and we don't **always like** what we see. We see the telltale signs of aging, the faults and blemishes in our skin, our hairline, **and** even in our character. Sometimes we see **through** our own **phoniness, stubbornness, pride**, and even our **selfishness**, and we **just don't like what we see!**

But, boy do we **love** ourselves when it comes to putting the best possible spin on our motives! You would be surprised at how **anyone** could **possibly** question someone with motives so pure and noble! We give ourselves **plenty** of "elbow room" when it comes to making mistakes! And, when it comes to watching out for **ourselves**, look at the **latitude** we take! If we should have three items as our



rightful portion, we may even take **five**; just to be sure that no one cheats us out of anything. Oh yes! We **love** ourselves, even if we don't always **like** ourselves.

If only we could **believe** and **accept** God's unconditional love **for** us: His **acceptance** of us, **just** as we are. We could learn to **laugh** at ourselves and even **like** ourselves.

Friends, be certain of **one** thing. Not because **Bill Weaver** says it, but because **Jesus** said it. The love cycle **always** begins with **God** -- with the Good News of His mercy, and grace, and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. The Gospel is the living **reality**, the constant **reminder** that God **loves me** with boundless grace and mercy. If we **really** believe that, we can be freed to **rejoice** in God's love rather than try to **earn** it by our behavior. I am **all** of the things I **cannot** love in my neighbor, and **then** some. And yet, God has found it possible to **love** me. He loves me way out of proportion to my **worth** and my **real** value. The price God paid to redeem me was incredible! It cost His Son's very **life**. But in laying down His life in love for me, Jesus freed me to go out in His name and **love** on His behalf.

When the **reality** of God's love **fills** us and **surrounds** us, He frees us to serve Him **willingly** and **joyfully**. The bottom line of the Christian faith is to **know** that God **loves** you.

Let us pray:

Living and loving God, captivate our emotions as we worship You, integrate our personhood in communion with You, and make us wise in the knowledge of You; that we may love ourselves truly and our neighbors in the same way, like our loving Brother, Jesus Christ. Amen.

