

BEDWELL GLOBAL MINISTRIES

EXPOSITORY SERMON

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THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Scripture Reading - Matthew 22:35-40.

Introduction

The final hours of the life of Jesus and ministry on earth were rapidly approaching. His enemies were closing in on Him. What Jesus called the hour and the power of darkness were advancing. This particular day in the life of Jesus had been long and difficult. It had been a day of testing questions. They were devoid of sincerity, for His enemies were baiting Him as they tried to entrap Him. Yet through it all, He remained calm and undisturbed brilliantly turning aside the attempts of His enemies to trap Him. He knew what they were about. First they tried to get Him on a sensitive political issue. Tell us they asked, "What is your opinion. Is it right to pay tax to Caesar or not? But Jesus knew what they were up to. "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax. Whose portrait is on the coin and whose inscription is on it. It is Caesar." They replied, and he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." When heard this they were amazed and left Him alone. Then the rationalistic Sadducees came to Him with there foolish questions about marriage and the resurrection. Jesus replied that they were in error because they did not know the scriptures or the power of God. "At the resurrection people will neither marry or be given in marriage they will be like the

angels in heaven, and the people were astonished at His teaching." In that moment Jesus silenced the Sadducees, literally silenced meant that the Sadducees were gagged and they asked Him no more questions.

Now when the Pharisees had learned that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they sent one who was expert in the law to test Him with this question. "Teacher which is the greatest commandment in the law? And Jesus came up with an answer which gets right to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. "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. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' The law and all the prophets hang on these two commandments." Matthew 22:37-40. It was a brilliant reply so much so, that the expert in Law sent to test Jesus, as recorded by Mark in his gospel said, "You are right." And Jesus replied, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." Mark 12:34. Since these two commandments were the summation of the law, it is vital that we understand what is required for in the life with God. In these words Jesus is saying,

1. SOMETHING FUNDAMENTAL AND IMPERATIVE. Matthew 22:37.

Something basic and necessary. This challenge is not something we can avoid as Christians. It is something with which we have deal, if we are concerned about having a relationship with God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is not only where we start out on the Christian journey, it is set down by Jesus as of first importance. It is of top priority. We don't grow spiritually until this issue is settled. This command sets aside the incidentals of Christianity. So often man has tended to make the incidentals of Christianity central in their minds, and pushed the priorities of Christianity to the circumference. But the issue of our love for God must be settled once and for all before we can claim that we are Christian. This command gets to the core of Christian commitment; to bypass it or minimize it is to miss the genuineness and glory of the Christian walk. If we do not love God with all of our being we remove the heart from Christianity, indeed we destroy Christianity itself.

This is not a new commandment. The Jews were aware of it for they were expected to daily repeat what is known as the Shema. And these two commandments found in Deuteronomy was an integral part of the Shema. The Jews were aware of the commandment, but it is one thing to recite it, and entirely different thing to realize it experientially in the heart. The command itself is characterized by,

a. Distinct Priority. Matthew 22:37. "Love the Lord your God....." It is the very main thing of all. It is put in simple terms so that there may be no misunderstanding of what God wants of us. Its simplicity does not minimize its priority in our relationship with God. The Rabbis taught that the law contained 613 commandments, of these 365 were prohibitions and 248 were positive commands. These commands were divided into heavy and light. The heavy laws were binding, whereas the light laws were less binding. The problem was that there was never agreement on which were heavy and which were light. The Rabbis and the scribes spent countless hours debating this. And with this in mind we can understand why this Lawyer came to Jesus, and asked "Teacher which is the greatest commandment in the law." It is significant that Jesus had no hesitation in replying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 22:37-39. Jesus cuts out all the pork, or the trappings of Judaism, and rips out the veneer of religion and gets to the heart of reality. It is the reality of what genuine religion is - a relationship with God. Religion and certainly Christianity is not centered in a system of law, or which law is the greatest, except as that law it relates to man's relationship with God. The law which Jesus brings to the attention to the Lawyer is dynamic, because it has to do with a personal relationship with God. It is a relationship based on love for Him. James Stewart wrote **that "that which the gospel gives us is not a problem but a person."** So often the church has complicated this thing called Christianity, so as to confuse the sincere seeker of God. But the priority set down by God is clear and simple. "Love the Lord your God. There is nothing simpler or clearer to

understand than this directive. A child can understand it. The more difficult thing is to carry it out. This command is a distinct command which is simple and understandable. Furthermore, this command is based on,

b. A Durable Principle. Matthew 22:37. This principle is summed up in one word. "LOVE." Love implies a relationship. It is the enduring principle of a strong stable relationship with a holy God. Love implies a relationship. Loving God means an intimate living relationship with Him. It is the heartbeat of any relationship. There can never be a relationship with God unless it is rooted in love. It follows then, that this is the enduring principle of a stable strong relationship. Loving God means an intimate living relationship with Him. Love gives reality, meaning and depth to that relationship. Now because God is holy, this relationship must essentially be a holy relationship. This is fundamental and indispensable to a dynamic healthy relationship with a holy God.

It is both amazing and incredible that God should seek a relationship with men and women at all. Why should He? Mankind has never given Him any reason to seek us out in love. The answer that is profound yet simple is that "God is love." The amazing discovery of the Bible, is that God is always seeking for men and women. One has said that "God wanders through the Bible's sacred histories, inviting mere mortals to a relationship with Him. His voice echoes through the corridors of those ancient centuries calling the lost, the bruised, the sin sick and even the defiant rebels who want nothing to do with Him, He calls them to a saving relationship with the God of all the earth." He came to seek and to save that which is lost. He came to restore a relationship with Himself. His holy love seeks a relationship with poor, weak, faltering sinners. The fact that God loves us is non debatable. There is no question that He does. But any relationship is dependent upon a responsive love on the part of the one who is loved. A four year old girl hugging a doll in her pudgy little arms, looking up at her mother said "Mama I love them, and love them, and love them but they never love me back." I wonder if God ever feels this way. God freely gives us His unconditional love and looks for us to return it. Not simply in word but in deed

and action. It is on this mutual love that an intimate relationship be established and developed. Love is the fertile soil in which this intimacy can be developed. Not like the man who commented, some people ask the secret of our long marriage. We take time to go to a restaurant two times a week. A little candlelight, dinner, soft music, and slow walk home is also helpful. She goes Tuesdays; and I go Fridays. I would suggest that the relationship has lost the intimate touch. Love is obviously lacking. Love is the pre-condition of an intimate relationship with God. It is the durable principle in our relationship with God. "Love the Lord your God..." This is something fundamental and imperative. The question is, "Do you love Him?" This is basic. This is of first importance. In this challenge there is also,

2. SOMETHING TOTAL AND INTENSIVE. Matthew 22:37.

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

That little word "all" speaks of how to inclusive our love for God is to be. It leaves nothing out. It is complete total and an intensive love for God. He does not ask you to love Him as someone else does. He asks you to love Him with your whole heart, soul and mind. It is of first importance. Because this love is total and intensive it is,

a. A Command to be Obeyed. Matthew 22:37. "Love the Lord your God." The key word here is obedience. The mind set of the pop culture does not respond easily to commands. It tends to resist authority. And so the common re-action is not surprising. It is embodied in the phrase "Nobody is going to tell me what to do." The difficulty with that stupid stubbornness is that not only are great and rich blessings are forfeited and lost but eternal realities are disregarded. Love the Lord your God. This is a firm command. It is a non – negotiable directive, which necessitates a deliberate decision on man's part. This love is not a fuzzy feeling or an emotional moment. It is a deliberate act of the will, made in the act of total commitment to God. Tozer tells us that, "love for Christ is a love of willing as well as of feeling, and it is psychologically impossible to love Him adequately, unless we obey His commands. God will not accept praying in lieu of obeying. We only

deceive ourselves when we try to make the substitution." The place to begin in a relationship with is the response of obedience. Jesus said "if you love me, you will obey what I command." John 14:9. The Apostle John in 1 John 2:3-6. We know that we have come to know Him if we obey His commands. The man who says, "I know Him," but does not do what He commands is a liar, the truth is not in Him. But if anyone obeys His word, God's love is truly made complete in Him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did." The old Divine instruction that Samuel gave to King Saul still applies "To obey is better than sacrifice." This has not changed. A business man who was well known for his ruthless behavior once told Mark Twain "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the holy Land. I will climb Mt Sinai and read all the Ten Commandments at the top. Mark Twain said, "I have a better idea. You could stay in Boston and keep them." Reciting the commandments on Mt Sinai is not what God wants. It is obedience to them where we are, that is of first importance to Him. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you soul, and with all your mind and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This a command to obey but it also a,

b. A Commitment to be Made. Matthew 22:37. Jesus said that this commitment must be total and complete. It is with all of our hearts, and all of our souls and with all of our minds, that we are to love God. This means that when we surrender to ourselves to God we are to hold nothing back. We are to love God with all that we are. King Louis 14 of France, when he was young married Princess Margaret of Province. On his wedding ring was engraved "**God! France! Margaret!** I have no love outside of that ring. This was the secret of his being known as Saint Louis. Thomas Chalmers once preached a sermon entitled "The expulsive power of a new affection." Now that is not as complicated as it may sound at first reading. What it simply means that a new love, a new affection for something or someone can bring about a dramatic change in the life. The new love expels the baggage and incidentals that hold our attention and affection. Falling in love is an example. The person becomes focused on

another individual. The object of this new love becomes the center of life. Habits change priorities are adjusted. The individual becomes focused in the way he does things. What he says and does is tied together with his love for the person. His love is the force, or power that expels those things irrelevant, incompatible and unacceptable to that love. The object of his love becomes his life. This new affection had expelled the incidentals to focus on the priority of commitment to the individual. Everything is viewed and adjusted in relation to this love. This is what is meant by the expulsive power of a new affection. Someone is reported to have asked a concert violinist in New York's Carnegie Hall how she became so skilled. She said it was due to "a planned neglect." She explained that she planned to neglect everything that was not related to her goal. Her love for that goal expelled that which would hinder from reaching it. The writer to the Hebrews said, "Let us throw off everything that hinders...Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is command to be obeyed and involves a commitment to be made. It is something total and intensive. Finally this challenge reflects,

3. SOMETHING THOUGHTFUL AND RESPONSIVE. Matthew 22:40.

Jesus said "Love your neighbor as yourself." Here is,

a. Startling Principle. Matthew 22:40. "Love your neighbor as yourself." As I have studied this principle, at first it seemed to contradict the scriptural view that self love is sin. Paul warns against selfishness and self-centeredness. John Stott points out that, self love is synonym for sin and does lead to the pathway to freedom. This pop culture is obsessed with self realization. It is the rage of the age. Self realization or self actualization is to achieve one's full potential. It may sound harmless, but when it has the idea of being obsessed with the self and the development of its potential, generally to the exclusion of everything else, then it has is dominated by the flesh. God is not factored into the equation and it results in an unbalanced regard or love of self. Everything in life becomes subservient to the self. Life revolves around the self and others are not included in the mindset, let alone the heart set. Christian message is not self realization but self

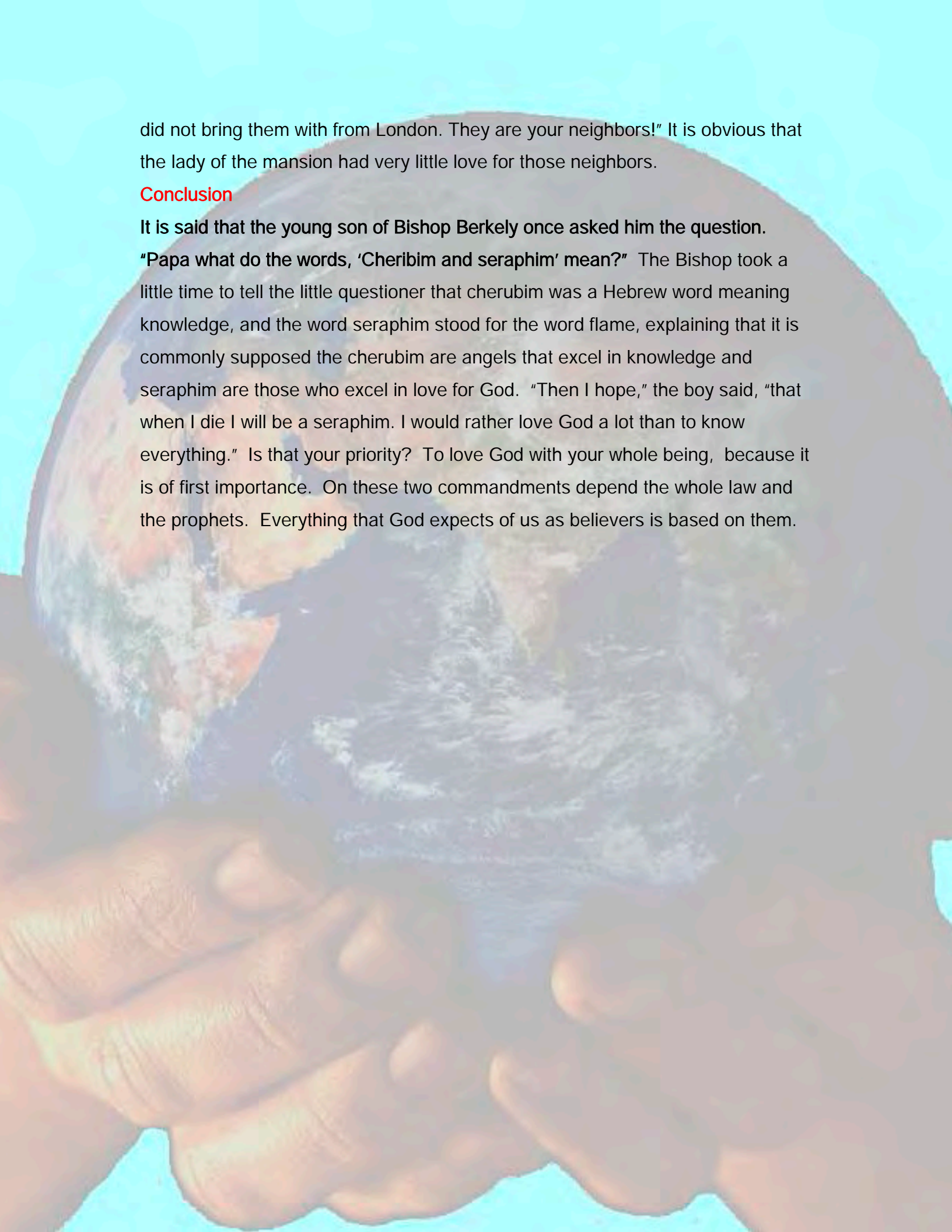
crucifixion. The way of Jesus is opposite to that of our society. It is countercultural. "Jesus said it is when we lose ourselves that we find ourselves and it is when we forget ourselves that we fulfill ourselves. It is when we die to our self-centeredness that we begin to live. When we serve in love we are free." (Stott) It is in the death to sinful self, that the life's potential is realized or actualized. To love your neighbor is agape. The word love (agape) used here, is distinctive or unique, for it means to sacrifice yourself to serve another whether it be God or others." This is the scriptural concept of what self-love should be. Campbell Morgan calls on us to remember that this challenge is conditioned by the first commandment. It is determined by the first commandment. The love of self is not concerned what the self wants, but what God desires for the self. My love of self in the love of God becomes a passionate desire that I may be what God would have me be. It means to allow the love of God to make me what He wants me to be, and not to gratify selfishness. This is the true love of self according to the scriptures. It is only God who inspires love to my neighbor. When the love for God possesses the self, then that self will seek to concentrate on that which God loves. When I see that my neighbor is as precious and dear to that heart of God as I am, then, if God's love to me has won my love to Him, my love inevitably goes out to my neighbor. It is determined by the love of God. And so basically, my love of self in the love of God becomes a passionate desire that I may be what God would have me be. This is the true scriptural love of self. It follows that to love our neighbor as ourselves is passionately desiring that he be what God would have Him be. To put in different light, it is your passionate desire that God would do for him what He has done for you. This is the true love of our neighbor. But the love of myself does not make me blind to my failings and weaknesses. Love of my neighbor does not make me blind to his shortcomings. True love of myself makes me the enemy of the things that spoil and degrade me because that is not what is God's will and best for me. Love of my neighbor makes me, the enemy of the things that spoil him, or those things that hinder him from discovering God's best for him. " Furthermore, "Loving your neighbor,"

continued Morgan, "is not singing hymns about your neighbor, not holding religious sentiments toward your neighbor, not merely hoping that some day your neighbor will go through the pearly gates into heaven. Loving your neighbor is to pour out your life in sacrificial attempt to heal his wounds, rest his weariness, and help him rise to the level on which God would have him live." Loving your neighbor is helping him to find God and in finding God, appropriate God's best because you have. This is loving your neighbor as you love yourself. In our world which is in love with itself, this is a startling principle and a foreign mindset.. It is also

b. A Sensitive Principle. Matthew 22:40.

Jesus expanded the idea of a neighbor as simply the person next door to anyone. John Wesley said "The World is my Parish." Any man is my neighbor is the teaching of Jesus. But Jesus even went beyond that to include loving our enemies. "Pray for them even if they spitefully use you." Stanley Jones, the great Methodist missionary wrote, that the world is crying out for a society unlimited caring." Stanley Jones went on to say, "As I rose from knees, I felt I wanted to put my arms around the world and share this gospel with everybody. Little did I know at that moment that I would spend the rest of my Life literally trying to put my arms around the world to share this with everybody? Catherine Booth was the "mother" of the Salvation Army. "Where ever Catherine Booth went," said Campbell Morgan, "humanity went to hear her. Princes and royalty merged together the poor and the prostitutes.

One night Morgan shared a meeting with Mrs. Booth; and a great crowd of "publicans and sinners" were there. Her message brought many to Christ. After the service, Morgan and Mrs. Booth went to be entertained at a fine home. The Lady of the mansion said, "My Dear Mrs. Booth, that service was dreadful." "What do mean?" asked Mrs. Booth. "Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite me. Their faces were so terrible many of them. I don't think that I shall sleep tonight!" Don't you know them, Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, "certainly not!" "Well that's very interesting," Mrs. Booth said. "I



did not bring them with from London. They are your neighbors!" It is obvious that the lady of the mansion had very little love for those neighbors.

Conclusion

It is said that the young son of Bishop Berkely once asked him the question.

"Papa what do the words, 'Cheribim and seraphim' mean?" The Bishop took a little time to tell the little questioner that cherubim was a Hebrew word meaning knowledge, and the word seraphim stood for the word flame, explaining that it is commonly supposed the cherubim are angels that excel in knowledge and seraphim are those who excel in love for God. "Then I hope," the boy said, "that when I die I will be a seraphim. I would rather love God a lot than to know everything." Is that your priority? To love God with your whole being, because it is of first importance. On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets. Everything that God expects of us as believers is based on them.