

# How to Use Life and Family Issues in Observing a Mission Festival, Outreach Sunday, Evangelism Sunday, or Witness Sunday

The heart of Lutheran theology is that we are saved by grace and not by works. Our focus is on justification – God’s declaratory act predicated on the merits of Jesus Christ, credited to our accounts. Sanctification is not the precursor to justification but the response to it. Our emphasis on morality is what we refer to as the third use of the law – a guide to show us what lifestyle (in actions and in motive) is pleasing to God, as we speak of these things to God’s people.

Preaching/teaching on social maladies such as sexual sins, life and death sins, lifestyle sins, etc. helps listeners know themselves (the law serving as a mirror) and to coerce the sinful nature by threats and punishment (the law serving as a curb). Ultimately, we point to the perfect love-act of God in the sacrifice of his Son for our sins, to be the ultimate motivator for God’s children, living in a manner that pleases him (the law serving as a guide).

Even when using the law as a mirror and a curb, correction is to occur with a blend of patience and careful instruction. Our preaching and teaching, therefore, are always done either to restore the wandering or to gather in the lost. In this sense the moral issues of our times are not the focus of our preaching and teaching but the bridges we use to connect people with their God through the Savior. In condemning sins like abortion and homosexuality, as examples, we seek to lead the erring to repentance and restoration through the merits of Christ.

Experience has shown us that the current and often volatile issues of our time prove to be excellent bridges to help us connect with others. In the true mission spirit we reach out to the wandering and the lost who have tried to find their moorings in life through all that sin has to offer. These issues, therefore, create the scaffolding for our relationship to talk to people about sin and salvation, condemnation, and deliverance through Christ.

**Readings:** Surely any particular sin could serve as a permeating theme throughout a worship service. The intent of this document is to show that the focus can rest on outreach (i.e., missions and evangelism) using select or general life and family issues as bridges for that effort. Any combination of the follow readings should help create a cohesive theme for the worship service that is fundamentally directed towards outreach. In time, through the input of many others, this list of readings should grow. As preachers and teachers see new insights in the pages of Scripture they are encouraged to submit those insights along with a paragraph describing why a particular reading is good for a Celebration of Life worship service that serves as a mission emphasis or outreach event.

## Old Testament Readings

In addition to passages from the Old Testament which directly address life and family issues (i.e., Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13; Psalm 51:5; Psalm 139: 13-16; etc.) the

follow references provide a clean tie to the theme of outreach and witnessing to the faith in which life and family issues provide a natural bridge.

### **Psalm 8:1–9**

The author of this psalm is identified as King David. He is struck by the attention the omnipotent God has for humankind. Such attention was ultimately testified in the gift of the Savior – God made man – to be sacrificed for our sins. It is a message of hope and salvation for the world.

*LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens. Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

### **Psalm 91:1–16**

This psalm focuses on God’s blessing of protection. It provides comfort in a world that seems overwhelming. In the final verse (16) God promises the ultimate deliverance, salvation.

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, “The LORD is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. “Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”*

### **Psalm 106:34–48**

The author of this psalm is not identified. His message is one recalling the apostasy of people from their Creator and Redeemer. Their disrespect of God was demonstrated by their allegiance to false gods of their time, including the sacrificing of children. Today the counterfeit gods remain in different forms and the sacrificing of children continues. Though lacking the formalism of religious practice such termination of life reflects the continuing error of such false worship of self. The plea is for restoration of faith to the people that they might serve God in heart and practice.

*They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to false gods. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves. Therefore the LORD was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance. He gave them into the hands of the nations, and their foes ruled over them. Their enemies oppressed them and subjected them to their power. Many times he delivered them, but they were bent on rebellion and they wasted away in their sin. Yet he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented. He caused all who held them captive to show them mercy. Save us, LORD our God, and gather us from the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, "Amen!" Praise the LORD.*

### **Psalm 127:1–5**

This is considered a song of Solomon that focuses on home and family. It points to the providential love of God who blesses us with security, safety, prosperity, and children. In any of these issues we have the opportunity to consider the origin of all that is good.

*Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves. Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court.*

### **Proverbs 31:8–9**

The author is called "King Lemuel," who is presumed to have been King Solomon. What is especially interesting is that Proverbs 31 represents the wise counsel of a concerned mother to her son. In it she admonishes him to refrain from the temptations of sexual wanderings and drunkenness. Rather, she wants her son to devote his time to defending the needy and serving as a voice for those who have no voice. These verses are often a rallying cry for God's people to become involved in the protection of life and the pursuit of social justice. In doing so, believers have a forum or bridge by which they can talk about God's gift of eternal life through Christ.

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

### **Ecclesiastes 12:1–7**

The implied author of Ecclesiastes is King Solomon. Ecclesiastes looks at life from the futile perspective of humanity. The word "meaningless" is used 39 times in the Bible with 35 of those references occurring in the book of Ecclesiastes. In this portion the author uses aging as a metaphor for the declining effects of sin in our lives. Aging and death, of course, are the consequences of the fall into sin (Genesis 3:19).

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them”—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

### **Isaiah 49:1–7**

Isaiah served as the Lord’s prophet after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrian empire. This portion foreshadows the Savior who beckons all people to salvation. His work began in the mind of God, continues in the womb of his mother, and is carried out in his life on earth. The continuity of human life from within to outside of the womb is worthy of emphasis. The goal is to reach the distant nations with salvation.

*Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother’s womb he has spoken my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.” But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” This is what the LORD says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel— to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

### **Jeremiah 1:1–10**

The Israelites had settled into their Promised Land, but problems began almost immediately. Soon the nations split (around 930 B.C.), forming the Northern Kingdom, which retained the name “Israel,” and the Southern Kingdom, generally known as “Judah.” The record of Scripture shows that the Northern Kingdom (Israel) never had a God-fearing king. After about 200 years, in 722 B.C., the Northern Kingdom were overrun by the Assyrian army – which in turn would succumb to the Babylonians.

Jeremiah, a prophet of God, lived after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and warned the Southern Kingdom of a similar fate for its apostasy. In this reading we are reminded that Jeremiah’s existence began in the mind of God, continued through his prenatal development in the womb, and on through

birth until death and eternity. As a child of God he served as God's messenger to his people. In his work as a prophet we see a foreshadow of our own work as God's messengers to a world of sin. Our goals are the same: proclaim the truth, bring repentance, and restore the lost in faith to their Creator and Redeemer.

*The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile. The word of the LORD came to me, saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." "Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD. Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."*

### **Joel 2:15–17**

Little is known about Joel, the author of this book. He seems to favor discussion of Judah and Jerusalem, which suggests he was from the Southern Kingdom and may have lived after the fall of the Northern Kingdom, although that is not certain. What is clear is that Joel worried about the waywardness of his people who brought shame to their blessing as God's chosen people through whom the Savior would come. This message reminds us of the treasure we have in God's message of salvation and how we are called upon to cherish it, live it, and share it and not to squander it to the detriment of souls.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, "Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"*

## Epistle Readings

### **Galatians 6:1–10**

The Apostle Paul points out that the task of calling out sin begins with a spirit of gentleness. The goal is restoration. Our susceptibility to sin is a humbling reminder that we have no cause for arrogance. Rather, we should search our hearts and consider our motives in correcting error. It is never a self-righteous activity. It is an act of love. We demonstrate such love for others both in concern for their bodies and their souls. We are given the opportunity to practice this within our families, within the wider Christian family (the church), and ultimately to the world.

*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's*

*burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load. Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

### **Philippians 2:3–5**

This letter of the Apostle Paul is rich in its concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of others. It begins with humility, a sound and reflective self-examination of unworthiness because of sin. It looks to others as a primary concern, that their interests are taken care of. This concern for others (in body and soul) is what Jesus called the second great commandment (Matthew 22:39).

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.*

### **Colossians 3:1–17**

Living as a child of God is a fact and a process. By Christ's sacrifice and Spirit-given faith we are children of God. It is a fact. The process is the transformation of our lives to reflect this reality. It begins with a heaven-mindedness that looks at life from an eternal worldview. Sinful actions belong to the old life – to the life outside of God's family. Yet, even children of God fall prey to these sins. Sometimes as we reach out, we reach out to do so our Christian brothers and sisters who have fallen into sin and have begun to live enslaved to the things of this world. As we look to all the people of the world, we see those who God wishes to save (1 Timothy 2:4), and often it is manifested sin which provides the forum for us to begin a conversation. And as we interact with them they should see, in us, our heavenly Father. They should see his compassion, gentleness, and self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. They should see in us such a genuine concern for the welfare of others (bodily and spiritually) that as our conversation becomes more focused they understand that you are simply thanking God who found us, though we were lost, who sacrificed for us, when we could do nothing to save ourselves.

*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and*

*is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

### **James 1:19–27**

Dealing with moral issues from the pulpit or in a Bible class fosters a spirit of self-righteousness if we are not careful. Experience shows us that while all people wrestle with sin, some are more vulnerable to some sins than others. To get self-righteous in condemning homosexuality, abortion, or euthanasia ignores this reality and has us fretting over the speck in our brother's eye while ignoring the plank in our own eye. James reminds us that that spiritual growth begins with listening, and it results in cleansing and action. We love not to be loved by God but in response to the love we have from God. We show this love as we intersect with other lives.

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

### **1 Peter 3:13–18**

Sometimes it feels like doing the right thing is most unrewarding. It does not make the right thing wrong. It may, however, reveal a selfishness on our part to be rewarded with at least appreciation for doing the right thing. Rather, we love as we know love for God, who sacrificed his son “while we were still sinners.” As we mature in our faith and come to grips with our own personal unworthiness and God's deep commitment to us despite our failings, we accept suffering – even for doing good. It is in how we do good, how we face suffering, and how we demonstrate persistence that prompts others to sooner or later ask us, “Why do you keep at it?” In their own words they are asking you the reason for the hope that you have. With their inquiry God opens a door for us to talk about being the object of God's sacrificial love. As our own faith grows we increasingly realize, “How can I possibly be any less loving, less patient, less sacrificial than the love God showed to me in Christ?” Yes, it might come with inconvenience. Yes, it may not always be appreciated. But remember this: for the sake of others even Jesus suffered for doing the right thing.

*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit.*

### **1 John 3:11–18**

John is often referred to as the Apostle of love. In this portion of his first letter he talks about this love shown to others. What is important to remember, however, is that this love is learned from the Master of love – God himself (see 1 John 3:1). We are concerned about all people because of God’s demonstrated concern for us in the gift of his Son as our Savior.

*For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

## Gospel Readings

### **Matthew 5:43–48**

It is much easier to talk about the dangers of contemporary moral sins. With a quick dispensing of a label we can clearly identify sins like abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality as “sin” and then feel our work is done – but it is not. Our assignment to share the Gospel calls us to go to all people with that good news. We are not to pick and choose those whom we like best, or are most comfortable with. It is in our nature to associate primarily with people who think like us and share our values. Yet, the mission field presumably does not include people like us – people like us who go to church and hear the Word. As we begin to talk about controversial social issues we find that some people label us as enemies and act accordingly. Yet, they are the mission field. They will require an extra measure of love and commitment from us. As imitators of God we practice his selfless love in our dealings with those who both agree and disagree with us.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are*

*you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

### **Matthew 6:19–24**

The greatest obstacle in spreading the message of the Gospel is not political, social, or racial. It is often a problem rooted in those assigned to do the spreading. Even as children of God we get caught up in the things of this world. We catch ourselves building up worldly treasures that deteriorate and disappear. We find ourselves indoctrinated to think like the world so we cling to money with a firm fist. We selfishly protect our schedule. We defend our need for convenience, comfort, ease, and rest. In the process, however, we reveal that our hearts have been captured by the ways of the world so Jesus reminds us that our Master resides in heaven and not in the “things” of this world. We use the things of this world in service to our Lord and the spreading of his kingdom.

*“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”*

### **Matthew 19:16–24**

One chapter earlier Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven. Throughout his ministry, Jesus used parables and with teaching he spoke of a life that never ends: with God in heaven. It is no wonder that human beings seemed hard-wired to want to live forever. Yet, because of sin in the world we think eternal life as something earned. As Jesus responds to the rich man’s inquiry about earning eternal life he points out that we can never do enough. We are never moral enough, kind enough, generous enough. There is always more to do. This man desired better (eternal life) but did not want to let go of the values of this world (his riches). As we reach out to the world with the message of eternal life in Christ it is important for us to remember how the world thinks and the things the world values. Christ, however, promises a treasure that never spoils, fades, or rusts. It is the free gift of salvation. As we address the controversial issues of life and family, at its core is man’s desire to “have it all” based on the world’s standards. In the end the world leads only to death and destruction. A rich man may be able to purchase all that life can offer, but this worldly life cannot offer immortality in heaven with God. That is the treasure we share in the Gospel.

*Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “ ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’” “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples,*

*“Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

### **Matthew 22:34–40**

Clearly, the heart of the expert in the law was not in the right place. The default presumption of sin is that we earn our way to heaven by performance. It is a game of comparative righteousness that enabled the Pharisees to thank God that they were not like others who were seen as more sinful. Jesus, however, summarizes all of the commandments as two core principles: *Love God* and *Love Others*. Our love for God compels us to love others as we have been loved. We love others because God loves others.

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘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.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

### **Matthew 25:31–46**

When Jesus described Judgment Day he seems to suggest we are saved by performance. That misses the point. Remember, the religious experts and the wealthy were looking for ways to save themselves. When asked point-blank how to do it, Jesus illustrated time and time again that salvation based on performance is always out of reach. So what do we make of this section of Scripture? It is here that Jesus illustrates that as our faith in Christ as our Savior grows deeper and we feel a growing sense of God’s sacrificial love, it becomes a part of our nature to reflect that love. Our actions become a testimony of where our heart is. In fact, we become so driven by our faith that we no longer think about the love we show others – we just do it. We do it not because we have to but because we keenly realize how it is to be the object of perfect love as we have seen in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did*

*not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

### **Luke 6:27–36**

Luke’s account of Christ’s directive for us to love our enemies contains a lot of additional detail. He points out the illogic of loving only those who love you back. That can be selfish or self-serving. Rather, he describes the nature of sacrificing for the sake of others. Such sacrifice is often required as we help people wrestle with contemporary life and family issues. We often take on matters that are unpleasant, and our message is not always appreciated. But our goal remains the same – the salvation of everyone. For that reason we persevere.

*“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”*

### **John 13:34–35**

The command to love others is not new in the sense of having never been spoken before. Even in the Old Testament the instruction was to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). Rather, with the new covenant brought by Christ, we love not to earn salvation but to reflect the salvation Christ earned for us. As he prepares for his own sacrifice the concept of love takes on a strong selflessness. It is a commitment even when people are not loving. It is a devotion to others even above ourselves (Philippians 2:3-5). We may talk about the social ills of our time, yet our goal is to be there for people with such incredible displays of devotion, commitment, and love that they see we are disciples of the Master who demonstrated love perfectly.

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

### **John 15:9–14**

It would appear people have not changed drastically over the years. They tend to hedge their bets and interpret things as they wish. Jesus, however, leaves little room for doubt. The command to “love each other” is not just suggesting a “feel good” feeling towards others. He goes one step further and defines the kind of love he is talking about – sacrificial love. As we look to reach into the world with the Gospel and to do it using life and family issues as bridges to connect with

people, we realize God wants us to be sacrificial in our commitment to them. He just doesn't want "mission concern" for the lost. He wants us to sacrifice to reach them. Rarely does that require sacrificing a life. It does, however, look for a sacrifice of convenience, time, and resources.

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command."*

**Hymn Selections:** Any hymn under the sections of Christian Love, Evangelism or Missions (CW 490-499; 556-566; 567-579) in Christian Worship should work well. The Christian Worship Supplement included two hymns that should work well (CWS 777 & 778). In "Let All the People Praise You" (LAPPY), the hymns are ordered alphabetically rather topically, but the topical index in the back of the book (p. 339ff) suggests that hymns listed under "Christian Love," "Evangelism," and "Social Concern" should all work well. In addition, "Borning Cry" (p. 34) and "What Does the Lord Require" (p. 326) might be worthy considerations. On the Christian Life Resources website there are additional suggestions for original compositions that would be suitable for a Celebration of Life worship service.<sup>1</sup>

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