

Love Is Protecting Oneself

First Tea Time: Love

Scripture Matthew 22:34–40

Key Verse “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:39)

Objectives

- Recognize the common misconceptions Christians often have about love.
- Make a commitment to practice true, healthy love.



I. Sharing Thoughts

1. Why do you think love must be put into action?
2. What does “love your neighbor as yourself” mean?



II. Expanding Thoughts

1. Misunderstandings about Love

Love is the beginning and the completion of human existence. From the moment we are born until the day we die, there is not a single moment when we can live outside the time and space of love. Human beings rejoice because of love and despair because of love. Interestingly, the Korean words *saram* (person) and *sarang* (love) differ only by the last letters, which makes one think that these two words share the same chromosome. It seems that in ancient times, people believed that a person (*saram*) ought to be built upon love (*sarang*). God, who is love, created humankind in God’s image, so love must indeed be both the beginning and the completion of humanity.

During the time of Jesus’s earthly ministry, people emphasized the law and repeated discrimination. Perhaps for this reason, an expert in the law came to test Jesus. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Matt. 22:36). Jesus replied, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment” (vv. 37–38). The lawyer who was listening, along with the



approving Pharisees and Sadducees, would all have nodded their heads. They likely thought to themselves, “I’m doing that well already.” Sensing their inner thoughts, Jesus added a piercing statement: “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (v. 39).

Why did Jesus answer this way? Although God’s law had been passed down for generations, people had conveniently removed the part that commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” as if it had never existed. Why do people find this second commandment so difficult? Perhaps because they regard love as conditional or as a selective affection toward those they prefer. Or perhaps, they feel the burden of having to do something in order to love their neighbor. In truth, loving one’s neighbor requires crossing the boundaries within ourselves—for example, crossing the border of the assumption “I am right, and others are wrong.” If we were to name one of the most common obstacles in the journey of faith, it would likely be this second commandment.

Many Christians assume that “love your neighbor as yourself” means “you must be kind to everyone.” They think that living like Jesus means being friendly and perfect toward all people or that real love must always involve the kind of self-sacrificial giving that Jesus embodied. But we often forget a crucial truth: just as every face is different, so are personalities, roles, and personal limits. God did not create us as identical products from a factory assembly line. Thus, the range and expression of love will naturally differ from person to person. Even Jesus’s own disciples—whom he personally chose and mentored—had differing personalities, gifts, and ministries. Therefore, the belief that one must treat everyone equally is more likely to distort the true meaning of love.

Did God really command us to do something impossible? Is loving our neighbor as ourselves a painful and overwhelming task? Ask yourself honestly. People speak endlessly about love and make countless attempts to love, yet they still cry out, “Love is too hard.” Why is that? Perhaps the struggle does not stem from love itself but from our misunderstanding of love. Maybe we have trapped ourselves in an unrealistic ideal of “perfect love.”

2. Re-examining Love

In the book 황홀한 글 감옥 [Rapturous Prison of Writing], Cho Jeong-rae, the author of this book and the novel 태백산맥 [The Taebaek Mountains], recalls Shakespeare’s words: that no matter how great a writer may be, they cannot satisfy all readers in every work, and if even a small number of readers nod in understanding, that is enough. Thomas Carlyle said, “If asked which we would part with, the Indian Empire or Shakespeare, I would answer: the Indian Empire.”¹ If Shakespeare could

1. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (James Fraser, 1841), 40.



not satisfy every reader, then the belief that “I must treat everyone equally” is an idea that can only lead to frustration.

Jesus did not give his disciples the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” in order to force them to climb an impossible cliff or to make them feel defeated by repeated failures. Rather, he rebuked the formal, superficial religiosity of the people of his time. This is evident in his words: “But do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (23:3b). Jesus’s intention with the second commandment was not to make us feel guilty. He was pointing out that the direction of our love had gone astray. Therefore, instead of lowering our heads at the phrase “do not practice,” we need to pause and reconsider what it is that we are truly called to uphold.

Jesus did indeed emphasize the command to *do*. “But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile” (5:39–41). At first glance, these seem like commands to act, but they hold a deeper meaning. The preceding verses make it clearer: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer” (vv. 38–39). Jesus was confronting the ancient legal mindset trapped in retaliation and revenge.

When we look closely at his words about doing, the core is closer to concept of protecting rather than simply acting. Just as he said, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged” (7:1), love begins with guarding the words, attitudes, and heart within us before it is expressed outwardly. Jesus even said, “if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment” (5:22). As we meditate on these messages, we realize that love is less about doing (actions) and more about faithfully protecting the heart. True love does not demand grand sacrifices or flawless morality. Rather, it is the practice of refraining from criticism, withholding anger, and guarding the gentleness and mercy within. Love protects our hearts, preserves the worth of others, and keeps God’s love alive in us. This is the perspective through which we must view love.

3. Practicing Protecting Love

1 Corinthians 13:4–7 says: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” At first glance, love may seem like something primarily to *do*, but a closer look reveals that the meaning of *protecting* is deeply woven in. Love is not merely about outward actions; it is about guarding our inner heart and emotions, our words, and our attitudes.



So how, then, are we to practice a love that protects oneself? First, we must overcome the “good child syndrome.” Many Christians live under the pressure of “I must be kind” or “I must do well to be loved.” Such patterns often stem from insecure childhood attachments or emotional cutoff. They begin to treat love as conditional approval, excessive responsibility, or forced sacrifice. The remedy is intentional training in restoring self-love. Instead of obsessing over what we must do, we must learn to safeguard ourselves. Sometimes the courage to say no becomes the first step of love. Love that suppresses oneself eventually distorts relationships. To strengthen self-love, we must believe we are valuable—created in the image of God. Only when we treat ourselves with dignity can we learn true love. Remember Zephaniah 3:17b: “he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” Repeat this message daily. Let this simple, repeated affirmation help you discover your true self and free you from the pressure of meeting others’ views and expectations. You will become free from the burden of having to be a “good” person.

Second, we must establish healthy boundaries. People practice love every day, yet they often complain about how exhausting love is. The reason is that they fail to distinguish the objects of their love in a healthy way. The love required for family is devotion, while the love required for neighbors is respect and appropriate distance. Yet we often make the mistake of applying the same standard to both. As a result, love becomes a heavy burden, leading to spiritual and physical exhaustion. Healthy boundaries are not coldhearted; they are expressions of respect. They acknowledge the other without trying to change them. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” does not merely mean “Do good to others.” It means to respect others’ boundaries as you respect your own. Setting boundaries is not building walls; it is creating healthy pathways through which love can flow. Christ’s love is freedom that transcends prejudice, criticism, exclusion, and hatred. Perhaps it is a dignified respect that preserves sacred distance. Training in love includes learning and keeping these holy boundaries between family and others.

Third, we must restore intimacy with God because God is the source of love. When our relationship with God falters, our love becomes distorted. Then love becomes forced, relationships become tangled, and wounds can fail to heal. But when we are filled with God’s intimate love and grace, love flows naturally. It becomes a life force, not a duty. Through meditating on Scriptures and prayer, we must train ourselves to dwell in God’s presence. When intimacy with God is restored, love flows naturally as grace, rather than a strain or obligation. Silence becomes love. Restraint becomes love. Guarding one’s character becomes an expression of love. “Doing love” matters, but “keeping love” is just as essential. Keeping love is the path toward emulating Christ’s character and nature.





III. Living Thoughts

1. What habits or circumstances hinder you from loving yourself and others in a healthy way? What kinds of training or practices might be necessary to cultivate “a protecting love” while reducing these obstacles?
2. Is there someone around you who especially needs love and care? What are some ways that we can practice love while we protect ourselves?

