



Teaching Notes

Content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

Key Passage: Matthew 22:34-40

'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 neighbour as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'

Introduction

One of the most important parts of any contract is the 'terms of reference'. This section ensures that both parties are fully aware of the commitment they are taking on. In the 'terms of reference' critical words and phrases are defined so that there can be no room for confusion. Our covenant with God is not a contract between equal partners. However, this sacred commitment motivated by divine love and sustained by grace, can in its most basic form seem like a contract, and so like any other contract a clear 'terms of reference' is essential.

- What are the key words in the passage we read earlier that might feature if we were to write a 'terms of reference' for our covenant with God?

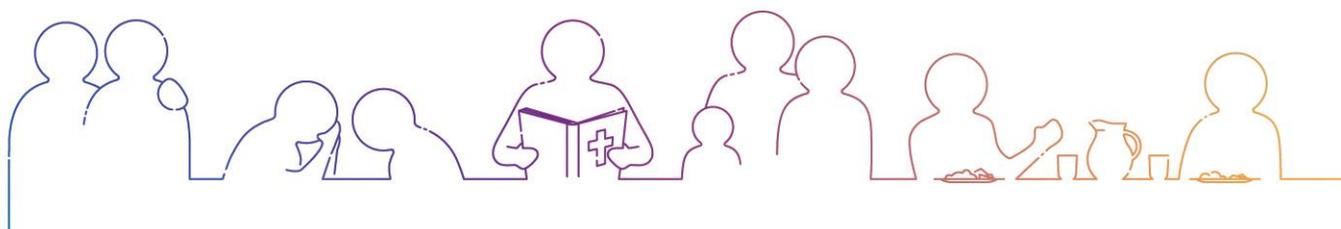
Exploration

1. **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**
 - God's love is the fuel of Christian faith. Salvation and holiness are empowered and sustained by God's love. *'Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love'* (1 John 4:8). The only power strong enough to motivate and sustain the devotion of all we are to God is divine love.
 - JB Phillips expresses this perfectly in his paraphrase of Romans 12:1 where he says: *'With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him.'*
 - Notice that Paul says, *'With eyes wide open to the mercies of God ... give him your bodies.'* It is only when our hearts and minds are focused on God's love that such a surrender becomes possible.
 - Contracts are often determined by either their input or output. Imagine a company bidding for a contract to sweep the roads where you live. They can approach the task in two ways. They can ask the question *'What resources can I afford to put into this contract?'* Or they can ask *'What are the standards of cleanliness I have to achieve?'*



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BEING together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant

- Too often when we think of our relationship with God we think of the cost - *'What must I put in?'* This approach will always fail, because even if we could parcel up the whole of creation and present it to God as a gift, it would still be *'an offering far too small'*. This contract requires our all - *'all our heart ... all our soul ... all our mind ...'*. This 'living sacrifice' can only ever happen as a natural response to God's love.
- The rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-30 could not give up his wealth and follow Jesus because his relationship with God was based on a cold legal contract, rather than a covenant inspired and sustained by divine love.
- It is our experience of God's love that both demands and makes possible such a sacrifice. We are able to give ourselves completely to God only because he has given himself completely to us - *'We love because he first loved us'* (1 John 4:19).

2. Love your neighbour - who is my neighbour?

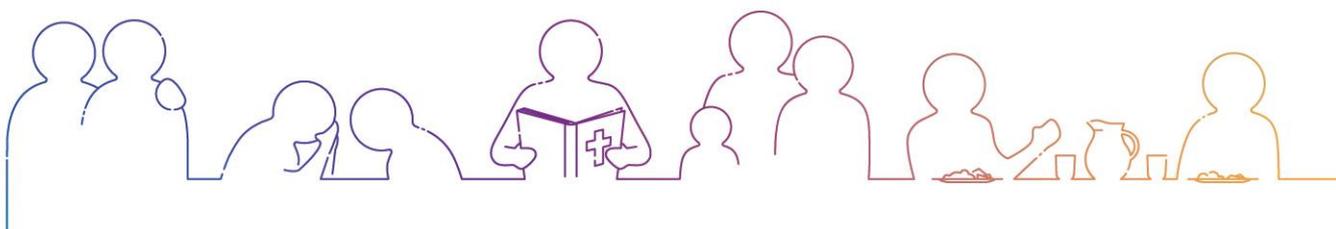
- In addition to 'terms of reference', good contracts have performance indicators. These are benchmarks that allow us to measure how well the contract is being fulfilled.
- If God's love for us initiates and sustains our covenant, then the love we have for our neighbour is the performance indicator that shows that our part of the contract is being fulfilled.
- Who is my neighbour? Jesus defines this 'term of reference' for us in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Often when we hear this parable preached on, the emphasis is on the words of Jesus in verse 37: *'Go and do likewise'*; but this parable isn't primarily about carrying out acts of kindness.
- Jesus told this story in answer to a question set by a legal expert who wanted *'to justify himself'* (v29). The heart of this story isn't the acts of kindness and mercy carried out by the good Samaritan, but the cultural identity of this angel of mercy.
- Jews and Samaritans had been enemies for hundreds of years. They did not agree about where God's people should worship. They hated each other. The quickest route from the north - let's say, Nazareth to Jerusalem - in the south, was through Samaria. But Jews would go many miles out of their way to avoid entering Samaritan territory and thereby minimise the chance of any contact with Samaritans.
- According to Jesus, our neighbour - the main object of our love after God, the subject of the second greatest commandment - is our natural enemy. Who are we most suspicious of? Who are we most frightened of? Who would we cross the road to avoid? The level of love we have for *that* person is the performance indicator that measures the effectiveness of our covenant with God. Love for God alone, though supremely important, is not enough:

'Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.'

1 John 4:7-8

'Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.'

1 John 4:20





- Whatever their faith, their race, their politics, their sexuality, the colour of their skin, their culture – if it provokes within us prejudice and suspicion, then they must be the objects of our love. Who are they? Well, if we read *The Guardian*, then they almost certainly read the *Daily Mail*; if we voted remain, then they certainly voted leave; the refugees and immigrants they welcome, we are probably wary of - and so on.

3. As yourself

- Our final term of reference is the two words '*as yourself*'. If Jesus had wanted to find a character despised even more than a Samaritan, then his parable would have ventured into the realm of science fiction; for he would have had the man who 'fell among thieves' being rescued and cared for by himself!
- In ministry, one of the most common stumbling blocks on the path that leads to 'perfect love' is us! We might think loving the 'Samaritan' is enough of a challenge, but we are to love the 'Samaritan' *as we love ourselves*.
- Nobody, other than God, knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. We are overly familiar with all the secret acts and desires we successfully hide from others. We see our moral ugliness and recoil in shame, but God sees our moral ugliness and loves us just the same - '*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*' (Romans 5:8).
- It is this love, this amazing grace, this undeserved mercy that Paul urges us to see with '*eyes wide open*'. John Gowans sums it up beautifully in song number 490:
*'For his love remains the same,
He knows you by your name,
Don't think because you failed him he despairs;
For he gives to those who ask
His grace for every task,
God plans for you in love for he still cares.'*
- God doesn't start to do all of this once we are perfect. He loves us as we are, and it is receiving that love and responding to that love that starts and sustains the process of transformation we call holiness. As the Psalmist reminds us in Psalm 130:3-4:
'If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.'

And in Psalm 65:3:

'When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.'

Isaiah, the prophet who, more than any other, saw the love and mercy that God would one day wrap up in Christ, declares in Isaiah 43:25:

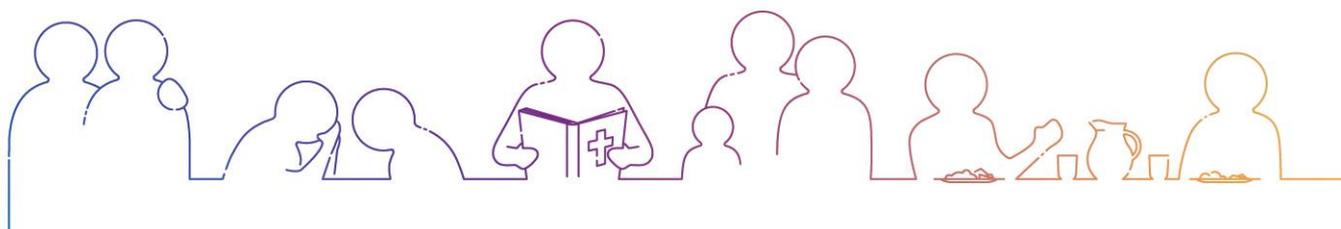
'I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.'

- In Acts 10:15, when God extends the reach of his mercy beyond the Israelites and out into the whole world, he tells Peter, '*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*' God is talking about unsaved Gentiles who have yet to hear the gospel, but in God's eyes they are already objects of his love!



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Conclusion

- Early Methodists and primitive Salvationists used to refer to holiness as ‘perfect love’. This is God’s perfect love for us, birthing within us a love which, over time, perfected by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, overflows in a tidal wave of unconditional love for others.
- King David’s understanding of salvation and transformation expressed in Psalm 51 is almost Christian in its appreciation of this process we call holiness:

*‘Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.’*

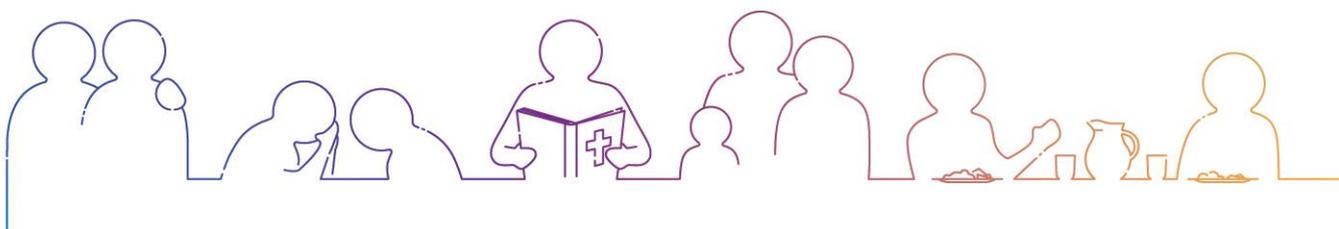
Psalm 51:10-12

- David, at his lowest point, at the moment in his life when self-loathing is dominant, at a time when Nathan has publicly exposed his hypocrisy and selfishness, recognises that there still might be hope. Perhaps God can still use him to teach transgressors God’s ways, so that sinners will turn back to him (v13).
- Our covenant demands that we love our enemies as ourselves, a seemingly impossible task. With the crowd who overheard Christ’s conversation with the rich young ruler, we say in exasperation, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Christ’s response will always be: *‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’*
- Do we find it difficult to love those we have always been suspicious of? Do we find it hard to love ourselves? Well, that’s OK, because the ‘terms of reference’ as defined by the passage we read earlier make only one demand upon us - and that is to allow ourselves to be loved by God, to bathe in his love, to become lost in the depth of his mercy and then allow his love to do the rest!

*‘Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of Heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every longing heart.*

*Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in Heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.’*

Charles Wesley, SASB 262





Reflect

Questions for discussion/small groups

- 'Who is my neighbour?' If Jesus visited our town, who would he identify as the 'Samaritan'? Who are the people or individuals we are wary of and seek to avoid?
- How much does our church reflect the community in which it serves? Does the demographic of our fellowship match that of our community? What can we as a fellowship do to break down the barriers of prejudice that all too often divide us?
- We can't love others until we love ourselves. 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him' (John 3:17). What can we practically do to become aware of God's love?
- What are the hallmarks of Christianity? What are the benchmarks of holiness? (Colossians 3:12-17; Galatians 5:22-26.) How easily can these be identified in our fellowship or in us as individuals?
- As we consider these points, what are our main worries or fears? Holiness exposes believers to risk because when we 'love our neighbour as ourselves' we become vulnerable in so many ways. 1 John 4:18 says that '*perfect love drives out all fear*'. What do we need to do as a fellowship to create a safe space where members can become vulnerable as we seek 'to love God and love others?'

