

**Living In The Crucible:
THE ONE THING**

Matthew 22:34-40

The most radical and crucial thing is love.

A sermon preached by
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We have been talking about “Living In The Crucible” this month, but we haven’t really talked about crucibles. I want you to get this. Crucibles are containers made of metal or ceramic material, sometimes graphite, porcelain, or silicon, that are used in chemistry and metallurgy when a substance is heated to a high temperature. The crucible takes the heat without breaking down, but the metal melts. Then it can be purified or refined or molded into something useful.

Crucibles have been around since prehistoric times. The first refiners of metal were in the Chalcolithic or Copper age 5,000 years before Christ. There is even a reference in the Bible to refining metal, in the prophet Malachi. Speaking of the one who is coming with the word of the Lord, Malachi says, “he is like a refiner’s fire... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.”¹

It is said that a silversmith can tell that the silver is refined in the crucible when he can see his image in the molten silver. God, like a silversmith, wants to refine us and purify us until God’s image can be seen in us. So crucibles use the heat of the moment to refine and purify the substance into the image it was created to be. Do you see the connection yet?

We are living in a crucible time. What hasn’t happened to make 2020 a difficult year? We’ve had a worldwide coronavirus pandemic, now reaching unprecedented proportions, causing the worst economic depression in 70 years, highlighting and exacerbating tensions around racial injustice. Businesses and churches have had to operate at a fraction of their capacity. Throw in natural disasters like wildfires and hurricanes. And Apple TV hijacked the Charlie Brown holiday specials!

So-called corona-fatigue has also reached epidemic proportions. Anxiety and mental health issues affect all of us. Abuse of family members and violent crime is rising. And experts say that the new wave of viral infections is due to people who are just exhausted with the restrictions and are throwing caution to the wind.

How are we supposed to cope with all of this? How do we live in the crucible? I remember a conversation out of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Frodo, the hobbit who was given the responsibility to challenge the evil

Lord Sauron and deliver the ring of power to Mount Doom for destruction, was complaining to the wise wizard Gandalf, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.”

Gandalf replied, “So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”² We can decide what to do with the time that is given to us. We can learn to live in the crucible.

So we have been looking at the teaching of Jesus during the last week of his life as recorded in the 22nd chapter of Matthew. This was his crucible time. He had journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem. He had entered the city in triumph and immediately met the opposition of the religious leaders. He knew that in a few short days he would hang on a cross and suffer and die for the sins of the world. He had met every challenge they threw at him—what authority he claimed, whether to pay taxes to the emperor, how to understand the resurrection. Finally, they asked him to tell them the greatest of the commandments in the Law of Moses. There were 613 to choose from. Surely whatever he chose to answer they could pick apart and cause a controversy that would damage him.

But Jesus knew exactly what to say: “*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. And a second is like it: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”³ We call this the Great Commandment. The first part is from Deuteronomy 6; the second is from Leviticus 19. These are the traditional words of faith from the Hebrew Scriptures. It sounds like two, but it’s really just one. We love God by loving our neighbor because our neighbors are God’s children; we can’t do one without the other.

Jesus was not the first or the only rabbi to put these two commandments together, but this combination is the sum total of all 613 commandments. As pastor James Howell says, “Not that the others don’t matter. Rather, all of God’s will, everything God has ever said (or will ever say) to us is Love.”⁴

Yet in its context, this is a radical statement by Jesus. Not radical in the sense of extreme or outlandish, but radical in the sense of getting to the root

of the matter. In Matthew's version you really get the sense of the tension in the air as the Pharisees challenge Jesus. In Mark's version, the dialog with the Pharisee is much more pleasant. In Luke, it is the Pharisee who actually gives the Great Commandment, and he is setting Jesus up to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. They are nowhere near Jerusalem. But in Matthew, you get the sense of the conflict and a glimpse of the radical nature of love. In the face of opposition and threats and death, what do you do? Just love. Love God. Love your neighbor. You won't find anything more important in the Law or the Prophets.

That's how Jesus lived in the crucible. And that's the key to our living in the crucible today. Love God, and love your neighbor. But what does that look like? It's not as simple as you might think.

Love requires the deep humility of servanthood. Love puts God first, others second, and self last. Love sacrifices self for the good of the other. We see love best in Jesus. As Paul wrote, "*though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*"⁵ Jesus didn't have to come down from heaven; he didn't have to give his life; it was his love that made him do it.

So when he was telling the disciples how to live, he mentioned the humility of the servant: "*whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*"⁶

Daniel Harrell, editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote this week: "The most significant work of the gospel happens when the church refuses to seek celebrity limelight and political power, when it takes counter-cultural risks, when it refuses to buy into the things that can be bought. God goes so far as to make himself a humble and impoverished working-class carpenter, crucified on a cross in order to save the world. The church, as the embodiment of Jesus, must abide according to the cross-shaped, Christian pattern of humility and failure, ironic power and radical grace, subversive

righteousness and justice with love. The church makes a difference in the world when we are different from the world.”⁷

Love also requires a wide openness to people. People are a hot mess. They are all over the place, good and bad, mean and sweet, high and low, angry, sad, crazy, and every other descriptor—and I’m talking about “us,” not “them.” But if we want to love people—our neighbors—we have to be wide open to all sorts of humanity—all races, nationalities, genders, wealth, poverty, education, politics, and religion. If we want to walk with someone on the journey of life, we can’t start somewhere they are not. We have to meet people where they are and accept who they are before we can be in a relationship of love. That does not mean that we give up our values or what we believe. But it does mean that we approach people with openness and without judgment.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “*Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*”⁸

One who gave the love of Jesus without judgment was Jozef de Veuster, also known as Father Damien, a Catholic priest from Belgium. In 1873 he moved to the island of Molokai in the Hawaiian Islands to live and work among a colony of lepers. Even in the 19th century, lepers were considered unclean and quarantined apart from society. For 16 years, Father Damien lived in their midst. He learned to speak their language. He bandaged their wounds, embraced the bodies no one else would touch, preached to hearts that would otherwise have been left alone. He organized schools, bands, and choirs. He built homes so that the lepers could have shelter. He built 2,000 coffins by hand so that, when they died, they could be buried with dignity. Slowly, it was said, the leper colony became a place to live rather than a place to die. Father Damien offered hope.

Father Damien was not careful about keeping his distance. He did nothing to separate himself from his people. He dipped his fingers in the food bowl along with the lepers. He shared his pipe. He did not always wash his hands after bandaging open sores. He got close. For this, the people loved him back.

Then one day Father Damien stood up and began his sermon with two words: "We lepers...." He had contracted the disease. Now he wasn't just helping them. He was one of them. From that day forward, he wasn't just on their island; he was in their skin. First he had chosen to live as they lived; now he would die as they died. Now they were in it together.⁹

Love shows the deep humility of servanthood. Love is widely open to people. And if we want to love as Jesus loved, we will stay connected to the cross. This is where we see the love of God in Christ Jesus come to fruition. This is the Servant serving. This is the openness of God opening our hearts. The cross is love in big letters for all to see.

I heard a pastor this week describe this year as an extended Lent. We were in Lent when the pandemic hit the United States, and it just seems like we never got out of it. The themes of Lent are the suffering, passion, and death of Jesus. But this is where we see his love most fully, most completely, most *radically* present with us. This is his crucible. This is his crucial ministry, the *crux*, the cross.

If we live in love, our lives are shaped every day by the cross of Christ. Father Richard Rohr calls this a "cruciform life":

There is a cruciform pattern to reality. Life is filled with contradictions, tragedies, and paradoxes, and to reconcile them you invariably pay a big price. It eventually becomes evident that you're going to get nailed for any life of real depth or love, because this upsets the world's agenda of progress. This is not what the world wants, and not what the world understands. Any life of authenticity will lead to its own forms of crucifixion—from others, or, often, leading to various forms of self-denial. [The Gospel] constantly brings us back to the central importance of suffering. There's no other way we're going to break through to the ultimate reality that we call resurrection without going through the mystery of transformation, which is dramatically symbolized by the cross.¹⁰

Peter Storey is the South African Methodist preacher who gave me the idea for this series with his book of sermons called *With God In The Crucible*. Dr. Storey has been walking with us through Matthew 22. In his struggles for authentic Christian witness and transformation in South

Africa, he saw love eventually triumph over injustice. He preached these words at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina in 1989, about a year before the racist system of *apartheid* ended:

The Church must be different from, and often over against and in contradiction to, the ways of all nations. That alternative identity must be cherished and guarded as the most important characteristic of the church. *The richest gift the Church can give to the world is to be different from it.* It must be a constant irritant that the world doesn't want, but cannot do without.

In South Africa, other Christians have said no to the false gods of race and pride and placed the Church on a collision course with the state. We are now locked in the long and costly struggle, but in the midst of it we have been given a precious gift. When we were cast out of the corridors of power and disowned and vilified by the state, at first we saw it as a loss of influence. But in that loss we found our souls and rediscovered our identity. We were set free from the false patriotism that worships the nation's idols. We found instead a higher patriotism that determined to hold the nation accountable to the Kingdom of God and God's justice before everything else.¹¹

This is love, love with the humility of servanthood, love that is wide open to all people, love that is shaped by the cross. This kind of love is not soft or emotional or sentimental. Bible scholar Douglas Hare says biblical love is not about affection; it's about commitment—commitment to humility, to openness, to a cruciform life.¹² This love is radical, in that it gets to the root issues of life. This love is crucial, in that it is connected to the cross. This love is tough as nails, the nails of Calvary.

This is love in the crucible. It's the only thing that will take the heat, the only thing that will last through the crisis, the only thing that can overcome the trials and injustices of this world, the only thing that will emerge victorious—like a resurrection.

¹ Malachi 3:2-3.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, <https://www.tolkien.co.uk/quotes-fellowship-ring>.

³ Matthew 22:37-40.

⁴ James Howell, "Weekly Preaching October 25, 2020," *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10559/weekly-preaching-october-25-2020>.

⁵ Philippians 2:6-8.

⁶ Mark 10:43-45.

⁷ Daniel Harrell, Editor in Chief, Christianity Today, *CT Newsletter*, 10/20/2020.

⁸ Matthew 7:1-2.

⁹ John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 103-104.

¹⁰ Fr. Richard Rohr, *The Four Gospels*, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--The-Cruciform-Pattern-to-Reality.html>.

¹¹ Peter Storey, *With God In The Crucible: Preaching Costly Discipleship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 151.

¹² Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 260.