

We use the word “love” too much. I love my mother. I love my work. I love my piano. I love baseball. I love coffee. Jesus says I should love God and love my neighbor. Well, I love God, but do I love other drivers on the road? Do I love politicians I don’t vote for? Do I love those who scalp World Series tickets? Do I love people who send viruses to my computer? Do I love those waging war in Syria and Iraq? How do I love those neighbors? We often treat love as a feeling, rather than a responsibility. Many married couples say they love each other differently years after the wedding than they did on the day of. They have shared more experiences, and they determine to keep loving a person with whom they sometimes disagree.

A man approaches Jesus intending to trap him. Jesus has just trapped the Sadducees in a discussion about the resurrection. The Pharisees try to take further advantage. They send a scholar to test Jesus about the law. Which one is the greatest?

Later rabbis said there were 613 laws in the first five books of the bible. 248 of them are positive, such as, “You shall cheer for the Royals,” and 365 of them are negative, such as, “You shall not cheer for the Giants.” I think those are both in the bible. It was nearly impossible to know all the laws. This is true of the Constitution of the United States and the Canon Law of the Catholic Church. Who knows all the rules and how they rank? When Jesus answered with the greatest commandment, he knew the law well enough to cite Deuteronomy 6:5 - “You shall love the Lord, your God.” Then he did something no other rabbi had done; he paired that law with Leviticus 19:18 - “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Today we all know these two great commandments, but no one had ever put together those two isolated verses before Jesus did. He made a unique contribution to the study of the bible, religious practice, and social conventions. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus says that love of neighbor is secondary to love of God. But here in Matthew’s gospel he expresses it differently. He says the second command is like the first; that is, it’s equal to the first. You have to love God and you have to love your neighbor. Jesus delivered this message to people who were trying to trap him. They approached him without love, and he taught them love.

It is hard to show love to people who are not doing the same. We often withhold love from those who don’t offer it. That’s why it’s hard to think of enemies as neighbors. Loving our neighbor does not mean agreeing with our neighbors, but it can mean praying for them that they will change their hearts. They have a better chance of it if we live first by love.