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Rick Myatt

TO AVOID THE FERRET ERROR Matthew 22

I recently read a story that was told by a pastor back in Texas. This was something that happened to him when he was in college. He lived in an apartment with some other guys. None of them had any money so the apartment had rather spartan furnishings. That would be a generous way to describe it. He was not very organized and somehow had misplaced a check he had gotten from his work. When he came across it he cashed it and found himself in an unusual situation. He had some money. What should he do with it? He looked around at that depressing apartment and decided he should use it to spruce the place up a bit. So he and his roommates spent some time discussing what might be the most helpful items they could buy.

The next day he had to work, so he gave his roommates the money to go and purchase the items they had discussed. This was in the era before cell phones so while he was at work he wondered how the shopping spree was going. When he got off work he went home and was surprised to find that his buddies weren't back yet. He didn't have that much money, so surely they couldn't have been shopping the entire day. Maybe, he thought, they were being diligent and trying to make sure they found the best deals possible so they got the most they could out of his windfall cash. Finally they arrived at the apartment and proudly showed him what they had bought. They had purchased a ferret!

God has given us our lives and entrusted us with resources along with them. But what does he want us to do with all that he is put in our care? What are we to do with our lives? How are we to live? These are questions that everyone who believes that God is our Creator must ask. Surely we don't want to make the mistake of doing the equivalent of using the lives God has given us to buy a ferret. Today as we look at Matthew 22 we will see some clear instruction on what God wants us to do with our lives. Let's pay attention so we can avoid making the ferret error.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

INVITATION AND SELECTION ARE NOT THE SAME

This chapter begins with another "the kingdom of heaven is like" parable. In this one a king invites the A list people to a wedding banquet for his son. Despite his

efforts to encourage them, they refuse to come. This is nothing less than a rebellion against him, so he sends his troops and wipes them out. Then, since there's no longer an A list, he invites everybody. Anyone who wants to come is welcome to the feast. But at the big party he sees a man who is inappropriately dressed. He came wearing board shorts, T-shirt and flip flops. So the king told his servants to tie the guy up and throw him outside. Yikes.

What does this all mean? Again this is a parable in which we make a mistake when we try to flesh out all its twists and turns and create our theology from them. Clearly it indicted Israel, who were invited to God's messianic party and refused to come. But beyond that we must not press it too far. It is intended to be a story about one principle. Many are invited, but few are chosen. Israel was invited, but mostly refused to come. Then everyone else was invited, the bad as well as the good. But only a few were chosen. God invites everyone to his eternal kingdom party, but not everyone who thinks they ought to be there will get in. Only a few, only those who believe in Jesus and trust in his grace, will get in.

GIVE CAESAR HIS DUE

Next there is yet another attempt by Jesus' opponents to trap him. First they try to butter him up with flattery. "We know that you are a man of integrity and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." If they believed that they wouldn't be trying to discredit him, so that is plain dishonesty. Then they ask if it is right to pay the tax the Romans levied on the Jews.

Once again they think they have him in a corner. If he says yes then the people will respect him less because they hated being taxed by Rome. But if he says no he can be charged with sedition by the Romans. Once again Jesus outfoxed them. He asked for a coin and said, "whose picture is on it?" Obviously it was Caesar's. So he said, "Give Caesar what is his and give God what is God's." Debate over.

I have no doubt religious people might criticize Jesus. Hey, by paying taxes to Caesar you are supporting a regime that is opposed to everything good and godly. So much of what you are paying for surely will violate conscience. What Jesus essentially said was, "Don't worry about Caesar. He seems like a big deal in this world, but he is a side show. Life is about God, who rules even over Caesar. Caesar only rules because God lets him. So give Caesar whatever the law requires you to, but give God what is due him, your worship and your obedience."

I wish Christians would pay attention to this. We buy into what Jacques Ellul called the political illusion. It is the fantasy that life is all about politics and that the answers to life are mostly political. The Bible says God is sovereign, he is the one who decides who is able to rule in this world. Daniel 2:21 says “He changes times and season, he deposes kings and raises up others.” Proverbs 21:1 says that the heart of the king is in the Lord’s hands. In other words, they can only do what the Lord allows them to do. This means politics is, in fact, a side show. It is not what life is all about, so don’t get fooled by it and caught up in it. Worship God and let him run history.

DON’T TRY TO PUT GOD IN YOUR BOX

Well that was an epic fail for Jesus’ opponents. But they couldn’t give up, so they try again. In this case the Sadducees take the lead. They didn’t believe in resurrection from the dead, but they knew Jesus did. They thought they had proof that he was wrong. They thought they could show him up and prove that he was an unsophisticated, uneducated rube. They pose him a classic rabbinic riddle. The law in that day was that if a married man died and left his widow with no sons, the man’s brother was to marry her and hopefully they would have a son who could inherit a share of the family land. Without that the woman would have no means of support. So the Sadducees pose a problem where a woman goes through 7 brothers, all of whom die. Uh huh. That could happen. Pretty sure after the third brother the others would be heading for the hills because you would only marry her if you had a death wish. So this is dumb and totally unrealistic. But their question is, after she dies and everybody rises from the dead, who is she married to?

Oh boy, that’s a real puzzler. Jesus simply says, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God.” Ouch. Then he essentially says that life after the resurrection will be different and she won’t be married to any of them, because marriage doesn’t happen in that future life. Actually I am not a fan of this passage. It bothers me. That is because the greatest joy of my life is being married to Laurie. She makes everything fun. If you asked me honestly which I would prefer, to go to a Super Bowl game without Laurie, or just be at home with Laurie, I wouldn’t even have to think twice. I’d rather be with Laurie. So the idea of not being married to Laurie for eternity doesn’t make me happy at all.

But it is easy for me to do what the Sadducees were doing. They were trying to put God in their box. They couldn’t see how the whole resurrection thing could work for a number of reasons. Therefore, since it didn’t make sense to them it couldn’t be true, and their little rabbinic scenario was proof of that. They insisted God had

to live by their rules. Jesus said their problem was they didn't know the power of God. God operates infinitely beyond our boxes. Any box humans can create is going to be exploded apart by the vastness and power of God. And that includes my box of what can make life truly full and joyful in eternity.

DO WHAT MATTERS

So another religious leader makes yet another stab at Jesus, although this one is less spurious than the others. He asked Jesus, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He was asking what is the most important thing we absolutely must do. I will return to look at Jesus' answer, because it is profound.

BELIEVE IN JESUS

At the end of the chapter Jesus, probably tired of all the silly debates, went on the attack. They've been trying to trap him with imponderables, so he turned the tables on them. He asks, "Whose son is Messiah?" They answer with what everyone knew to be true. He will be the son of David. He quoted a Psalm of David, Psalm 110:1. "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" This was known to be a messianic Psalm. Then he asked them the killer question. "If David calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" My son is way, way smarter than me. He is better than me at most everything. I can call him Doctor. But he's not my Lord. Jesus stumped them. He was making the point that Messiah was going to be far more than a mere human king, even the most powerful king ever. He was going to be someone David, Israel's greatest king, would call "Lord." He is divine.

Let's look for a few moments at the passage where Jesus answered the question about the most important commands. What did he tell the man they were?

LOVE GOD

This is consistent with the Old Testament. The great rallying cry of Israel was Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." What comes next in verse 5 is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The first of the Ten Commandments according to Exodus 20:3 was "You shall have no other gods before me." In other words, love God above all others, worship him above all others.

But that creates a bit of a question for us. What does it mean to love God? We have some trouble understanding what love is when it comes to humans. We say we love people but we're kind of fuzzy about exactly what that means. Given that we

struggle some with how to love people who are visible and very tangible, how do we love God, whom we cannot see or hear and who is very much intangible?

I remember when I was young feeling uncomfortable when people talked about loving God. I just had trouble wrapping my head around that idea. In fact, it seemed kind of strange to me. Perhaps you don't have that problem, but I suspect you might be a tad hazy on what it means to love God. John 14:15 seems to provide a simple, clear answer to that question. Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commands." So many pastors will say this is how we love God. We love him by obeying him, by following his commands.

That seems to make some sense. I remember an occasion some years ago when there was a lot going on for Laurie and me. We were stressed and tired. We started out this particular day that way. Laurie was going to make breakfast for us and she asked, "Which would you rather have this morning, eggs and toast or just some Raisin Bran cereal?" Deciding what to eat for breakfast is always something of a chore for me because I am not a morning person. I start slow and having to make a decision that early in the day is a bit challenging for me. But I focused, thought about it and said, "I think I'd like eggs and toast." A couple of minutes later Laurie put a bowl of Raisin Bran down in front of me. I said, "Uh, okay, I guess I'll have cereal instead."

I had to decide whether Laurie just didn't give a whit what I wanted for breakfast or whether she was just so stressed and distracted that she didn't actually even hear how I answered her. I decided it was the latter because it would be out of character for her to say she didn't care at all what I want. She truly loves, and because of that it matters to her what I want. She always seeks to do what I want.

Imagine that Laurie says to me, "Rick, could you please make sure to put the toilet seat back down after you have used the toilet? I hate it if you leave the seat up and in the middle of the night I come to use the toilet only to sit on it and find to my great dismay the seat is not there." Then imagine that I respond, "Why should I have to put the seat down? Why should it be down instead of up? You're not an invalid. You can put the seat down as well as I can. If you want it down, you put it down. I have to put the seat up, so you put it down." Would you say that I was loving her? By the way, I would never do that. You can ask her. That would not be loving. If I love her I will be eager to do what she asks of me.

So if we love God we will keep his commands. That's what it means to love him, right? Not so fast. Pay attention to what Jesus said. The grammar of that little sentence in John 14:15 is important. It is an "if, then" statement. If you love me, then keep my commands. Loving God is something that precedes keeping the commands. Keeping the commands is a result of loving God. So we love him first, and because of that we keep his commands. I love Laurie first, and because of that it matters to me what she wants me to do or not do. If she wants me to put the toilet seat down, then I will happily, eagerly do it, because I love her and want to express that love to her.

So yes, if we love God, we will express that love by obeying him. But the obeying itself is a result. It is not loving God in and of itself. It doesn't require a great deal of thought to understand this. We have a neighbor who is an okay guy, but he's mostly not friendly and kind of aloof. He's not a total jerk, but he is not warm and fuzzy either. One time little Ella was at our house. She and I were outside going to the little tot lot in our neighborhood. She was attracted by something on this guy's front lawn so she went over to look at it. He came out of his house and said, "Could you please not walk on our grass. We are trying to grow a nice lawn and we can't do that if people walk on it." He went on at some length. He wasn't belligerent or angry, but he wasn't patient, warm and friendly either. I retrieved Ella. I obeyed him. But honestly I didn't do it because I have so much love for the guy. I did it because I want to be a good neighbor and that's pretty much it.

In other words, it is entirely possible to obey someone without having any particular love for them. We went to Disneyland last month and when we arrived the parking attendants directed us where to park. We obeyed them, but love had nothing to do with it.

Revelation 2:2-3 is a message from the Lord Jesus to the early church at Ephesus. He said, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary." These were great people. They worked hard, they obeyed God, they were faithful and they persevered through all of it. But look at verse 4. "Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first." They were doing the right things. They were doing the works, but what was missing was their love for God!

In John 21:15-17 Jesus confronted Peter after the resurrection. There was an elephant on the beach where they met that day. It was Peter's epic failure the night Jesus was arrested. Despite his insistence that he would never fail Jesus, Peter, controlled by his fear, repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus. It was an ugly, ignominious, cowardly abandonment of the Lord at the most crucial moment. There was no excuse. Jesus had to deal with that disaster. What did he say to Peter? Did he ask him if he felt bad about it? Did he ask him if he was going to do better from here on out? No, three times he asked him, "Peter, do you love me?" That was the crucial point then. It is the crucial point now at all times. Jesus is still asking us, "Do you love me?"

Well then what does it mean to love God? In these verses Jesus said the command is that we should love God with all our heart, soul and mind. Pastors often parse that out, talking about what it means to love with our heart, how we love with our soul, and with our mind. The problem is, they don't agree on what each of those means. We should also note that Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 6:5 which tells us to love God with our heart, soul and strength. It was a little different from what Jesus said. I don't think the point is to determine how we love with each of those aspects of our being. I think both the Deuteronomy passage and these words of Jesus meant we are to love God with everything that is in us. What God wants us to give him is our self, and everything that is within us.

Because I officiate at weddings and do pre-marital counseling, I have gotten to spend a lot of time with couples who are about to get married. That means I get to think about and talk about love quite a bit. One thing that is very obvious to me is that no one wants to have a spouse who is mostly dutiful and feels obligated. Everyone wants a spouse who is passionate and utterly devoted. In his book *Loving Christ*, Joe Stowell recalls the time he asked a young woman who was a college student about her boyfriend. She didn't respond by talking about his grades, or his career goals, or what he does for her, or for gifts that he gives her or all the things he does right. She said, "He adores me."

Stowell went on to say that this is what God wants to know from us. Do we adore him? He wrote, "He wants to know where He stands among all the stuff of our lives. Is He the compelling priority, or just one thing among the many things that get a little attention here and a little attention there?"

For us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind is to have him as that which matters by far the most to us. He is the priority over everything else in our lives.

Love does not mean emotion, though a love that is devoid of emotion seems like it is not really passion at all. But at its core this love is a passion to put God before anything and everything else. The thing that drives everything we do in the end is to be loving him. If something does not fit with loving him, then it doesn't fit in our lives. Really, to sum it up, it means we have zeal, passion, for him more than anything else. We are more excited, thankful about him than anything else, and he is first before anything else.

LOVE PEOPLE

Jesus said the second most important command is that we should love our neighbor the same way we love ourselves. So we love God first, and the first result of that is we love other people.

When Toby was in college up in San Luis Obispo Laurie and I, of course, went to visit him on a number of occasions. One of those visits sticks out in my memory. He was living in a house with 4 other guys. This house had been rented for years by college students. In particular, by college young men. You know what that means. Let's just say the house was in something less than immaculate condition. I remember that in one room there was a shape of an iron on the carpet, where apparently someone had put a hot iron down and it burned the carpet. There was a poster hanging on the wall in one spot that we learned was important because it was covering a significant hole someone had knocked in the wall. The kitchen had been declared a toxic waste site by the EPA, but for all that it was better than the bathroom. When I walked into that room out of necessity I had that instant gag reflex. I was afraid I was going to throw up. Although throwing up in there actually might have improved the ambience. We both came away thinking, "Our son is living in squalor! How does that not bother him?" His place wasn't rat and roach infested, but it was pretty bad. But as I reflect on that I realize it wasn't all that different than some apartments I lived in when I was single, and it never bothered me. So why did it bother when we visited?

You might say, "because you've grown up." But it's more than that. A big part of the equation here is I love Laurie. She cares about how we live. She does not want to live in squalor. It matters to her. She sees the things that are bad or wrong in a house and it bothers her. She wants it better. What has happened to me is that if it bothers her, because I love her I care if something bothers her. So if it matters to her, it matters to me. I start becoming aware of some of these things. Just being around her and loving her causes me to notice things that previously were invisible

to me. I want to do something about them because I don't want her to be unhappy. When you love someone, you will care about things they care about.

We love God. What does he care about? John 3:16 tells us. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." God loved the world so much that he had his Son leave the beauty, the glory, the joy, the peace, the love that pervades heaven, to live amid the hatred, prejudice, evil, violence and ugliness of this world, and ultimately make the unimaginable sacrifice at the cross. Why did he do that? Because he loved people. Jesus didn't come into the world to save the whales. He didn't come here to fix the economy. He didn't come here and die to save the environment. He did it to save people. He did it to save us. How much do people matter to God? The measure of that is the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made, which is infinitely beyond my ability or any other human's for that matter, to sum.

If God loved people that much, more than we can ever comprehend, and we love God, what will that mean? That we love people. They should matter to us as much as they matter to God. In 1 John 4:8 the apostle wrote, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." At the core of God's character is love, especially love for people. If we know him, if we love him, we will also love people. ***There is absolutely no way to love God and not love people.***

Did Jesus come into this world and die for us because we were so deserving and so appealing? Romans 5:8 says while we were still sinners Christ died for us. In other words, we were deserving not of his love and sacrifice for us, but of his scorn, condemnation and rejection. So now we are to love people the way Jesus loved them, regardless of how odious they might be.

IMPLICATIONS

THE WAY OF CHRIST IS SIMPLE

Laurie and I really enjoy playing tennis, although we hardly ever do it except when we are on vacation. One thing I love about tennis is when you do everything right and you hit the ball perfectly, right on the sweet spot of the racket, and it just rockets off your racket. It feels so good. That happens for me about once a year. We don't play enough to have muscle memory. You need that muscle memory to continually repeat your swing properly, and we don't have it. So I am constantly thinking about things I have to do correctly. Move your feet and get them in proper position to hit, get your racket back early, swing from low to high, hit the ball early, out in front of you, keep your wrist firm and watch the ball. There are too

many things to think about, so while I am concentrating on doing one or two correctly, I mess up the other ones.

Some people want to do that to us when it comes to following Christ. They want to give us all these things we are supposed to do and not do. There are too many, so while we focus on one for a bit we mess up somewhere else. Jesus did the exact opposite. He made following him simple. Not easy, but simple. There are only 2 things we need to do. Love God, and love people. Just do those 2 things and you'll be fine. Jesus said if you do those 2 things you will fulfill the entire law. In other words, love God and love people and you will do God's will at all times. You will be doing everything God calls on us to do.

We have a neighbor that I pity. For many years he has not worked. His wife supports him. I suspect he fights a constant battle to not see the truth about himself. One way he tries to prop up his sense of his worth is by having a terrific lawn. He does have the best grass lawn on our street, although honestly it's not especially remarkable. But I was stunned once when I was going by his house and saw him in his yard cutting blades of grass with a pair of scissors. Can you imagine how tedious and time consuming it would be to try to cut every blade of grass in your yard with a pair of scissors? That is idiotic. I have no idea why he thought that was a good thing to do. I thought, "Dude, mow your lawn. Your life will be so much better." But as I was thinking about these verses that picture came into my mind. If we said we're going to go through life trying to keep every nuance of every law God gave it will be truly tedious, and we will fail. Mow the lawn. Just seek to love God and then love people, and you will do what is needed. And you won't end life having bought a ferret.

LOVE FOR GOD CAN GROW

Jesus said it is a command to love God with all that is within us. That means it is up to us to choose that. We think sometimes of love as a feeling that happens to us. But we don't control that. So loving God is not merely a feeling. It is great if we feel emotional affection for God just as it is if we feel emotional affection for people. But we are to love with or without it. We are to choose to love God, to be passionate about him, to make him the driving force behind everything we think, say and do.

The more we practice that the more we will have spiritual muscle memory and do it naturally. It will also tend to generate feelings about him. But there are also some things we can do to increase our love for God. The first is to ask him to give us

more love for him. This is a prayer that if we pray fervently in faith, he will answer.

But it will also increase our love for him if we increase our appreciation of him. When we were on vacation we were sitting at a table at the snack shack by the pool at our hotel eating lunch. While we were eating a man we'd never seen before came over and started talking to us. He seemed quite curious about us as though he couldn't quite figure us out. He saw by our rings that we were married. He wondered how long. We told him 38 years and he looked thunderstruck. He said something along the lines of "How is that possible?" He had Laurie figured for way younger than she is. Finally he said to me, "You, sir, are an extremely lucky man." I told him I don't forget that for even a minute. The next day he stopped us again and shaking his head said, "You are a really fortunate man." The fact that she chose me and loves me when I wasn't really deserving of that, makes me love her all the more. There has not been a single moment in the past 39 years when I thought, "Laurie is lucky to have me. Passing up on me would have been a huge mistake." Every day for almost 4 decades I have marveled. I have realized that her love for me is more about something inside her than anything in me. I don't understand why she loves me as she does. I don't deserve it. But I consider myself totally blessed and thankful because she loves me. The more I experience and enjoy her love, the more I love her.

God didn't choose us because we deserved it. He loves us not because of what is in us, but because of something in him. The more we recognize how profound his love is, how unconditional and unending it is, the more we are aware of how undeserving of it we are the more we will love him. So remember and reflect on what a gift, what a blessing, an utterly undeserved blessing, it is to be loved by God. Make praising and thanking him a priority. See that knowing God, being loved by him, is the most important thing that could ever happen to you.

THERE IS A WAY TO LOVE PEOPLE

The command to love our neighbors as ourselves is not easy to follow for several reasons. One is that it is not natural. It is natural for me to love myself as I love myself. Laurie and I have bought a house for ourselves. It literally has cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now we are paying money to maintain it. We also have bought ourselves a car. We provide food and clothes for ourselves. We aren't extravagant in any of these things. But while we give some money to help other people, I don't do those things for others. I don't buy them houses, cars, TVs, or maintain their homes.

We are not unusually selfish. But we take care of ourselves. It just comes natural to us and it is normal. To love other people the way I love myself is a big challenge. Does that mean I need to do everything for other people that I do for myself? That's not possible. I can't go around feeding everyone, brushing their teeth, shaving them. But this command does challenge me to ask if I am really willing to care for other people.

What does it mean to choose to love a person? It does not mean feel affection for them, admire them, feel attracted to them. It means to choose to do what is best for them, to choose to treat them with kindness and dignity and to seek to bless them. That means I can choose to love my neighbor that I mentioned earlier who is not a real warm and fuzzy guy. I don't have any particular good feelings for the guy, but I can still choose to relate to him with kindness and do my best to bless him in some way. That's loving him.

But that reminds us of the second thing that makes it hard to love people. Often they just are not easy to love. Laurie and I were in a shop that does tailoring because I had some pants that needed to be hemmed. It happened to be quite busy when we were there. Shortly after we got there a woman walked in with her young son. The boy was mostly out of control, running amok. The woman said she needed to pick up some jeans that her husband had dropped off several days earlier. The woman running the shop had several customers she was trying to help, but this woman demanded attention. She didn't have the claim ticket the shop had given her, so the employee told her she could look through the completed clothes for her item. She didn't find the jeans, so she got upset. She angrily said, "This doesn't mean anything to me. I can't find anything here" and demanded help. It was outright selfish and annoying. I was irked at the woman just from watching her rude behavior. We're supposed to love people like that?

So how are we to love them? We love them as a way of loving God. We care about them not because they deserve it, but because God cares about them, they matter to him, and we love him. We care about them as a way of expressing our love to God.

