

IRREDUCIBLE MINIMUM

Overview Statement:

All of God's commands can be summarized by this: we are to love God and our neighbor. The principle way we demonstrate our love for God is by loving the "neighbors" He places in our lives. If we neglect this love for others, the love of God is not in us.

Main Ideas:

1. The greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves; however, the Law is ultimately summarized in scripture as the love of neighbor.
2. Our love for God is demonstrated in our obedience which is doing the will of the Father.
3. If we neglect the needs of others, the love of God is not in us.
4. The irreducible nature of God's image in us is love acted out toward others.

Outcomes:

1. Now:
 - a. To grasp and express the main ideas of the lesson in their own words.
 - b. To plan and carry out one new act of loving service that can be done as a response to the irreducible minimum of God's Law in the next 24 hours.
2. Beyond:
 - a. To recognize which ways they are neglecting the needs of others, repent, and commit to advance His whole agenda from what has been newly understood.
 - b. To work as leaders to equip other believers for loving service, as part of their discipleship process, to fulfill the command to love God and our neighbor.

The Evangelist

Narrator's Introduction: Christians sometimes have what we call a “narrow view of the Gospel.” They understand that accepting Jesus is a life-and-death decision. But they don't understand something else. When they are blind to their neighbor's other needs, their message is actually lost. . . . Today, we'll visit a very poor home. The only resident is quite ill in bed. A visitor, a Christian evangelist on a door-to-door campaign, has just arrived.

- EV:** Hello, hello! Anyone home? May I come in? (Enters)
- PSP:** (Weakly) In here . . .
- EV:** Hi. I'm _____ from _____ Church. I just came today to invite everyone to our church. The Lord has been blessing us with a powerful revival. You won't want to miss it.
- PSP:** (Groans, speaks haltingly) Can't come . . . can't get out of bed . . . too sick to move . . . lost my job . . . no money for medicine . . . or food . . . or rent . . .
- EV:** Those are big problems, but I know Someone who has the answer to all of life's problems. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?
- PSP:** (Weakly) My family and friends left me when I got sick and lost my job . . . Could anyone from your church help me? Please? . . .
- EV:** The best help you could get is found right here in this little tract. It explains God's plan for your life. You know, it isn't His will that you're lying here! Take this, read it, pray the sinner's prayer, and believe!
- PSP:** (Weaker) Can't . . . too weak. . . (Stops talking, lies motionless.)
- EV:** (Checks pulse) Still alive! Praise God, I got here in time to witness! I'll leave the tract. I'd better get going so I can minister to other lost souls. (Talks loudly in PSP's ear) We'll pray for you. Remember, Jesus is the answer. (Leaves)
- PSP:** (Watches him leave, groans) Ohhhhhhhhhhhh . . .
(Do nothing else—or whatever seems appropriate)

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Participant Outline

I. Review

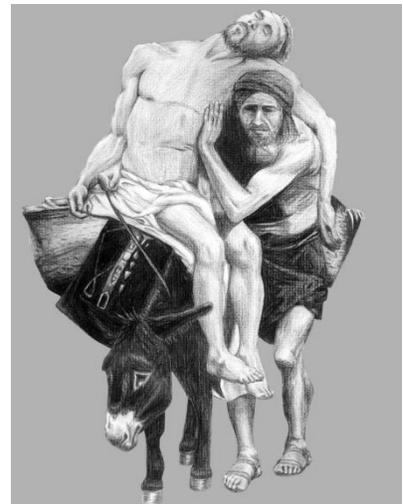
II. Introduction

III. Key Verse: I John 3:17

- A. What is the relationship between loving God and loving people?
- B. Can you be a disciple if you care about the spiritual but not the physical and social needs of others?

IV. The Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37

- A. What two questions does Jesus answer?
- B. What is our common answer to these questions?
- C. What is Jesus' answer to the first question?
- D. What is his answer to the second question?



V. What terms are used for these laws of love?

- A. John 15:12
- B. Galatians 6:2
- C. James 2:8
- D. Matthew 22:36-40
- E. Luke 6:31

VI. What is the summary of the Law and Prophets?

- A. Matthew 22:36-40
- B. Mark 12:28-31,33
- C. Luke 10:27
- D. Matthew 7:12
- E. Romans 13:9-10
- F. Galatians 5:13-14

VII. What is the “Irreducible Minimum” of God’s Law?

VIII. Understanding the “Irreducible Minimum”

How do these passages illustrate why the commandment to love our neighbor summarizes “the Law and the Prophets”?

James 1:27

I John 4:20-21

What does Jesus expect of His followers? What virtue is most needed for service? Is this characteristic a feeling, an obligation or a decision? What makes the difference between blind obedience to law – and service that springs from a loving heart?

Matthew 5:43-45

Colossians 3:12-14

I John 4:16

IX. Key Ideas Reinforcement

X. Application Plan

- A. Reflection - What can you do to express God's love to a "neighbor" in a new way today?

- B. Specific - 4 W's
 - What –
 - Who –
 - When –
 - Where –

- C. Share your plan with someone else and pray for each other

THE IRREDUCIBLE MINIMUM

Narrative

The Bible, in 1 John 3:17, asks, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” There is a strong relationship between loving God and loving people. If the love of God is in us, we serve our brother—our neighbor—who is in need. We not only serve him from a sense of obligation, but we serve him because the compassionate love of God compels us. This verse, in fact, questions that we could be disciples of Jesus if we do not have compassion and if we do not demonstrate God’s concerns for the physical and social needs of broken people. Conversely, when we *do* serve our neighbor who is in need, it is the love of God in us that overflows to that person. Jesus affirmed that a disciple is known by love! Love is the identifier of a disciple of Jesus Christ. Look at His words, recorded in John 13:34-35.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Love! It is by this profound reflection of God’s character that people will know us as disciples of Jesus. We are to love—to be like Christ—in our families, offices, businesses, and marketplaces. We are to resemble Him in our love and through it represent His Kingdom in our lives.

The Good Samaritan

An expert of Jewish law once asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” With wisdom, Jesus in turn asked him, “What is written in the Law?” The lawyer replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus affirmed the man had answered correctly and said, “Do this, and you will live!” Wanting to justify himself, the lawyer then asked Jesus a second question: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered by telling him the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable Jesus told is one of the most well known parables in all of scripture. It is the story of a man who was walking from one city to another. The man was robbed, beaten, and left to die. A priest saw the beaten man, but did not stop to help. A Levite also walked past the injured man. Maybe they were hurrying, maybe they were frightened of robbers, or maybe they did not want to be ceremonially unclean if the man was dead. We do not know their reasons, but we do know that they did not help. Then, along came a Samaritan—a despised unbeliever, with the wrong theology! Though he had the wrong theology according to scripture, he had the right action, according to Jesus. He stopped, dressed the man’s wounds, took him to an inn, and picked up his expenses.

Jesus was using the parable to answer the lawyer’s second question—and his first question, as well. Both answers were related to love—and both are different from our expected answers. If someone asks us, “What must I do to be saved?” we commonly show them Bible passages and lead them in a prayer of repentance. But Luke 10:27 says, “Love God and love your neighbor!” and now “go and do likewise”. The parable illustrates, “Do more than talk! Demonstrate God’s love. Show His compassion and care for broken people.” In the same way, if someone asks us, “Who is my neighbor?” we commonly reply that a “neighbor” is someone who lives near us. “Neighbors” belong to the same neighborhood, do things for each others, and have some similarities to each other. But the answer in Luke 10:37 does not mention ethnic or economic sameness or geographical proximity. A “neighbor” is a person God places in our path who is in need of our practical acts of mercy or love. And *we* are “neighbors” when we do practical acts of mercy.

Does this sound like something that could start a theological debate? We are saved by grace, not works! But if our faith is real, we will demonstrate the reality of our relationship with God by the way we show our love to our neighbors. (If we distract ourselves with a theological debate, we may do what the rich young ruler did in Mark 10:17-23. We may get our theology correct, but we may resist the very thing God wants us to do—show His love and compassion to others.) Jesus specifically used this parable of sacrificial love as part of his answer to the question of how to inherit eternal life.

The Terms Used for the Law of Love

The command to love is seen many times in Scripture. If we look at five New Testament passages about this “law of love” and we can discover different ways Scripture refers to each of them. In John 15:12, Jesus refers to “My command” as He tells His disciples to love each other as He has loved them. Galatians 6:2 tells us to fulfill the “law of Christ” as we bear each other’s burdens. The command to love our neighbors as ourselves as termed the “royal law” in James 2:8. The “greatest commandment” is to love God and the second is to love our neighbors as ourselves, according to Matthew 22:36-40. Luke 6:31 admonishes us to treat others as we would want them to treat us. In many parts of the world, this has become known as the “Golden Rule.” Of these five passages, four command us to love other people, while one commands us to love God and neighbor.

There are six New Testament passages where all of God’s commandments are summarized. They are called the summary of the “Law and the Prophets.” Three of these say that the summary is to love God and love our neighbor. In fact, Mark 12:29 says that the “most important commandment” is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” and the second is to love our neighbor. But three *other* New Testament passages say that the summary of Scripture is to love our neighbor but leaves out what Jesus called the most important of the two. Why the difference?

Love God and Neighbor

- Matthew 22:36-40
- Mark 12:28-31, 33
- Luke 10:27

Love Neighbor

- Matthew 7:12
- Romans 13:9
- Galatians 5:14

Why? Perhaps God understands we will think we have fulfilled the whole Law when we love Him—and that loving God will cause everything else to work out, including loving our neighbor. I believe God wants to get our attention—to emphasize that we *cannot* really love Him without loving our neighbor. Loving our neighbor is the principal way God desires for us to express our love for Him. Loving God is the greatest command—and loving our neighbor is its greatest expression. Thus, loving our neighbor is the simplest summary of all of God’s commands. It is, in effect, the summary of the summary!

The Irreducible Minimum

In this summary command to love our neighbor, God has given us the irreducible minimum of all of His commands. An irreducible minimum is the most basic summary of something. It is the simplest summary of summaries. In this case, it means that the one summary—loving God and neighbor—has been further “squeezed down,” or reduced, to its smallest expression—loving neighbor. (For those who want to understand more about irreducible minimums, other examples are given at the end of this narrative.)

Other passages of Scripture confirm this irreducible minimum of God’s commands. James 1:27 says that pure and faultless religion is caring for orphans and widows in distress. 1 John 3:17 implies that we do not have the love of God in us if we do not do what we can to meet a brother’s need. 1 John 5:3 defines love as obeying God’s commands—we demonstrate our love for our Father by *doing* His will.

We love others because that is what God commands us to do—but love is more than blind obedience to law. It is more than an obligation, feeling, or decision. Our service and love for our neighbor should spring from the loving heart that God develops in us. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that—without love—*nothing* is gained from our great spiritual gifts, great faith, great deeds, great generosity, and even martyrdom. Loving acts of mercy are done by disciples of Jesus, with hearts that reflect the compassion of Christ. This kind of love is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, and not aware of wrongs. It rejoices with truth, protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Love, summarized Paul, is the greatest. It is the irreducible minimum!

Clearly, God intends for us to demonstrate His love with the same kind of purity and motivation that we see in throughout New Testament. Loving the people God brings into our lives is the essential, practical way we show our love for God. We cannot, in fact, love God without loving our neighbor. To love God is the greatest commandment, and to love our neighbor is its greatest expression. Thus, loving our neighbor is the most basic summary—the irreducible minimum—of all of God’s commands.

How important is this? Look at Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 7:21-23.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

We need to understand the Father’s will! Could we miss the crux of what He really wants? Is it possible we could do great things in Jesus’ name—but He would not know us? The words of Jesus which precede this passage, Matthew 7:12, provide some clarification: “Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.” There it is again—the summary of God’s commands. The Father’s will is that we obey His law, and His law is that we treat others as we would want to be treated.

In conclusion, John 13:34-35 clearly brings this point across with Christ’s command to love one another as He has loved us and by this one thing (The Irreducible Minimum), all men will know that we are His disciples!! Someone once said that the Great Commission hinges on the Great Commandment. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus’ Great Commission, Jesus authorizes His followers to disciple all nations, teaching them to obey all of His commands. The Great Commandment exhorts us to love God and our neighbor. Love is single distinguishing characteristic—and it must be central in our teaching, as it was to Jesus. It is basic and essential. It is the irreducible minimum!

To summarize:

- God is concerned about physical needs, and He wants His disciples to be concerned about them, also.
- Loving our neighbor is related to our salvation. We are not saved by our works. But, if the love of God is in us, there will be evidence of God’s love as we love our neighbor. If we neglect the needs of others, the love of God is not in us.
- Our neighbor is someone we encounter whose needs we can serve, and in another way, we are being *neighbors* towards others, as we serve them.
- There are different terms for this law of love—My commandment, the law of Christ, the royal law, the Great Commandment, and the Golden Rule. These different terms complement each other and help us have a broader idea of what the Scripture teaches about the law of love.
- The most basic summary—the irreducible minimum of God’s law—is that we demonstrate the love for God that dwells in us by loving our neighbor.

This lesson is not only to be studied. It must be applied! We can take small steps to obey the most basic summary of God’s commands, loving our neighbor. We can first ask God who He is placing in our lives for us to love—and what we can do for them that is new and realistic. What can we do to minister to a physical or social need of one of our neighbors? It is helpful to write down this idea, tell someone about it, and pray together.

Lord, we believe that doing your will and being known by You is much more closely related to “loving our neighbor as ourselves” than we exhibit in our lives. Help us, please, to understand how we should follow Your intentions. Help us, please, to love and treat others as we want to be loved and treated. Help us to stop, see and help the broken people you have put in our paths—because of Your compassion and love. Amen.

A Note about Irreducible Minimums

For those who want to explain irreducible minimums, here are some day-to-day examples offered by experienced trainers.

- **Responsibilities**: Consider what employees need to do to fulfill their contracts, maintain good relationships at work, and receive their salaries. Or consider what people need to do at home so their households run well and everyone is pleased. Or consider the minimum that is needed to be a good citizen. This list of minimum responsibilities is a list of “irreducible minimums” for good employees, family members, or citizens.
- **Mathematics**: Consider mathematical equations or fractions. For example, to reduce $4/6$, divide both numbers by 2. The result is $2/3$, which is mathematically the same as $4/6$ —but reduced. Participants cannot further reduce $2/3$ by the same method, so $2/3$ is an “irreducible minimum.”
- **Biology**: An argument against evolution is called “irreducible complexity.” A living organism needs a *minimum* number of functions to survive—breathing, eating, etc. It also needs a *minimum* structure—a cell wall, chromosomes, etc. Each of these minimum functions and minimum structures is so *complex* that science cannot understand them, but they are basic and essential.

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Suggested Resources:

Moffitt, Bob, Tesch, Karla. *If Jesus Were Mayor: How Your Local Church Can Transform Your Community*. Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2006, pp. 87-97.

Moffitt, Bob. *What kind of churches and What Kind of Disciples?* A background paper.

Oliveira, Eli. *Irreducible Minimum.* An article.

Harvest Foundation. *Leadership Development Training Program.* www.harvestfoundation.org. Section: Materials, pp. 26-39.

Disciple Nations Alliance online course. www.disciplenations.org/resources/course. Section: *Wholistic Ministry.*