

Do you have what it takes?

Have you ever written an NSF check?

Maybe you thought there was money in the account. Maybe - dare I say - you knew there wasn't, but wanted to keep someone off your back. At any rate, your check was returned to you marked "Not Sufficient Funds." With an extra fee, too.

It can happen in life, and it's tough enough to deal with. But here's a more troubling thought: it could happen spiritually, too. Where more, far more, is at stake. We all like to think we have something in our spiritual bank account. Something that will get us into heaven one day. But one day God will turn away what many offer him as "insufficient."

The rules of the game

What is the life God wants? In the Bible Jesus gives us a summary of God's law - the rules God has made for humanity to play by. The whole law, he says, can be captured in only two commands: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. And love your neighbour as yourself.

At the time Jesus gave this summary there were other ideas of what God wants. A lot of religious people put the emphasis on rituals - like hand-washing, observing special holy days, tithing, etc. But Jesus addresses much more. Our hearts, our lives, he says, must be given to God and to our neighbour, in love and devotion.

How do we measure up against those standards? We're quick to measure ourselves against other people, and of course we usually pick someone we think is far worse than we are. "I'm no Hitler, no Osama bin Laden." We're quick to measure ourselves by our own

standards. "Am I a nice, decent person?" It's much easier to answer "yes" to that kind of question. "I haven't murdered anyone or something like that." But Jesus tells us we were made for so much more. And so we need to be concerned with so much more.

Number One

First, humans are to love God with all their being. Do we do that? Isn't it true - even the very idea of this is foreign to us? Maybe even repellent? We hear this and think, "God sounds like some sort of tyrant - demanding we love him with everything we've got."

"Love" and "God" must be the two greatest things in the world. But yet we bristle at the command to put them together. I can think of famous philanthropic people - but very few of them, if any, talk about loving God. And if I can speak for myself - loving God is not my natural bent, either.

We need to further define this command as well. After all, there are lots of ideas about just what love is. What does Jesus mean? What is love? Something like what you see on "The Bachelor"?

Love in the Bible is a very rich thing. Let me try to capture it in a non-Webster kind of way: love is an act of surrender and commitment that binds itself to someone else, in delight and honour, and that seeks their joy and well-being. Love's first cousin is *loyalty*.

How do we do?

How do we fare against that standard? Love is more than feelings. Love delights to delight another. Is that how we wake up in the morning? Do we pray or think "How can I today, my God, bring you joy?" Love takes whatever the beloved loves and hallows it, prizes it. Are we busy loving the things that God loves? Is that our

concern, our passion? Love feels someone's pain and sorrow. Do we feel God's?

That kind of love is foreign to us, isn't it? Just look at the way we're born. I agree children are born innocent - in a way. They're innocent of "big" or mature sins. But what's their bent? By nature, they are self-willed, proud. Even more, they are bent on living apart from God. Isn't this the truth - that we think is so justifiable - but is really rather ugly: by nature, we want to live for ourselves? [HERE I CHANGED THINGS A BIT - MJ]Something like it may even be enshrined in founding documents as one of our rights. But real love would never take on that shape, real love would never permit that kind of lifestyle.

Will you be able to stand before the Lord one day, and say to God, "Lord, I truly loved you? I gave my life to you, in surrender, in honour? It was my joy to bring you joy?" None of us will ever be able to say that. By nature, we are prone to the exact opposite.

Number Two

Second, Jesus says we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Here, we might think, well, this I can do. We breathe a little easier.

But remember what love, true love, involves. Things like surrender, commitment, loyalty.

It's easy to help someone out, easy to get along with someone, with a bit of give and take. But real love is more than that. It acknowledges others have a claim upon you. It means you take responsibility for others, you bind yourself to them.

In the early chapters of the Bible, where we see the consequences of our rebellion against God, we hear of Cain, who killed his own brother, Abel. When God approaches him, he replies with some

disturbing words, "Am I my brother's keeper?" That is the opposite, the antonym of real love.

Are we each other's *keeper*? Is that how we lead our life?

Jesus tells us that we are to love our neighbour *as ourselves*. That's not a command to love yourself. We can do that quite well. What Jesus means is that we owe those around us the same level of care, the same kind of intensity, as we give to ourselves and our things.

How do we love ourselves?

We put up with quite a bit, so that things are good for us. We are pretty sensitive about what we need, what is owed us. When we are shortchanged, we're quick to speak out.

Towards ourselves, we have a love that weathers storms, that doesn't give up, that takes things very seriously, that even gets bothered and angry. We have a love that sacrifices all sorts of things.

Now - we are to have that same kind of love for others.

It doesn't mean that you are to be thinking about others always, and never yourself. This is about intensity, priority.

It means, when others are glad, we are to be glad. When they cry, we are to feel the pain. We are to be just as passionate that they find the good life as we want that for ourselves. If our needs in our minds rank as an A+, their needs can't be simply a C or even a B. The needs of others also ought to be an A+.

How do we do against that standard? Can you or I say that we truly love those around us? I'll confess it with you: even those I say I love, I don't love in this way.

The only way in

So those are the standards. This is the password to paradise. Will we be able to enter? God wants, God demands much more than we think. That is part of his own love and goodness of course. True love does not lower standards - for oneself and for others.

Not a single one of us can meet these standards. Not a single one of us can enter heaven on our own and walk with the God who is love. Our way of life is completely opposed to his.

But there was one! Jesus Christ! The loving God sent his son into this world to live the life that none of us can live in our own.

Look at the life of Jesus. He loved his God, he loved his fellow man, like no one else. He loved even when it meant his death. He bound himself so much to us, that he bound our sin, our hatred, upon himself, and carried it to a cross, where he endured Gods' wrath for it. And so he also bore God's grief, God's righteous anger over our sin.

So there is a way! You and I can enter heaven in him! We can trust in him, and trusting in him means being tied to him, his life becoming your life, his love becoming your love.

Declare bankruptcy!

Your life, my life - if we try to present that to God one day, he will reject it. NSF. "That's not what it means to be human. You were made to love, to give yourself away. But all I see," God will say, "is a life wrapped up in itself. Nothing but elaborately crafted *selfishness*. *Hatred*, in fact."

But Jesus has come into our world, a world filled with such hatred. To offer his love, to be put on our account, to be worked into our lives.

Believe in him! Declare you are bankrupt before God. Embrace

Christ as your life.

He came from heaven. And so he - and he only - can lead back to his world, to heaven.

He is the way to paradise - to that life where every bit of life again is love. Complete surrender, delight, joy! Towards God, towards others!

Thanks for reading,

Marc