

1“THE KINGDOM OF RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS”

Matthew 22:34-40

“But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

(Background)

Scan the entire chapter for a moment. Jesus is getting near the end of His ministry. The shadow of the Cross is already dark on the near horizon of His life. The redeeming Events are coming soon now.

Three great questions are asked of Jesus in Matthew 22. Verse 15 mentions the Pharisees, and verse 16 the Herodians. The Pharisees were religious fanatics who favored Israel. The Herodians were Jewish political fanatics who favored Rome. Normally, these two parties were bitter enemies, but it is incredible to see how a common enemy will make bitter enemies into uneasy friends. The Pharisees and Herodians united in this chapter against Jesus. Then the Sadducees are introduced in verse 23. The question of the Pharisees and the Herodians is recorded in verse 17: “Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” The nature of the question suggests that it originated with the Herodians, the political party. Jesus’ wisdom is on high profile as He answers the first question (verses 18-22).

The second question is recorded in verse 28. This question was asked by the Sadducees, who did not believe in a life after death. So their question was designed to trap Jesus into some inconsistency in His view of immortality. Jesus accuses them of an erroneous question because they did not know the Scriptures, “nor the power of God.” He disarmed their evil intent while dealing with their question. “And when the multitude heard this, they were astonished at his doctrine” (verse 33).

Verse 34 introduces the third question. The first question was *political*, the second was *theological*, and the third is a *legal* question. This question was asked by one of the Pharisees, one who apparently had been delegated to speak for the group. He is identified as “a lawyer” (verse 35). That is, he is an expert in the law, and he asked a question concerning the law. “Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” The word translated “which” in this question is not the word for *quantity* (which one law emerges from the many as the most dominant), but the word for *quality*. What is the quality of the greatest commandment in the law? That is, what kind of commandment do you think is the most important kind in the law?

Note the nature of these questions. All of them, though this may not have been recognized by the questioners, have to do with relationships. The first question has to do with

the relationship of *religion and the state* (we call it “church and state”). The second question has to do with the relationship between *this life and the next one*. The final question has to do with the relationship of *man and law*.

Note this principle: *Jesus’ answers are always bigger than our questions*. The lawyer asked for one commandment, and Jesus gave two. He asked a legal question, and Jesus gave a relational answer. Jesus disregarded the apparent intent of the question, and expressed the content of God’s revelation. *God’s revelation is always bigger than any question man may ask about it*. The answer to any such question is not in a stated answer. The “answer” is not in the “answer”! The “answer” is in a relationship!

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Christian theologian, and Abraham Heschel, the leading Jewish thinker, were engaged in conversation. Niebuhr asked Heschel, “Do you really try to obey all of those dietary laws of the book of Leviticus?” Heschel answered, “Yes, I do — every one of them.” “Why?” Niebuhr asked, “Why would you keep those old archaic laws today?” Heschel’s answer was a classic. It also constitutes a good example of faith. He replied, “My friend, you may not understand or appreciate my answer, but I try to keep all the dietary laws of the book of Leviticus *simply because I do not understand them!*” What an insight! What an example of faith! In other words, I have discovered that God is much, much smarter than I am, and when He speaks, He speaks out of His infinite intelligence and wisdom, and He speaks in the interest of my highest good. So though I do not always understand His reasons for the commands, I keep them anyway, in deference to a Higher Intelligence and a Higher Will. Friends, ponder this paragraph until it *reaches your heart!*

(Body)

Perhaps the most puzzling cartoonist on the current scene is an artist of paradox named Gary Larson, who created a one-frame cartoon called “The Far Side.” Larson confessed that it was a difficult task to regularly throw his mind into reverse to create the comic pictures in the cartoon. But sometimes he stays in the world where we live and creates comedy out of stretched situations there. In one of the easier pieces of hilarity, he pictured a very heavy lady buried in a puffy couch, hair in curlers, a broom in one hand, and a telephone in the other. She is surrounded by three large and looming fish bowls, and each bowl shows the exaggerated figures of several marine creatures. Apparently, the fish bowls have created a conversational idea for her. She says to her friend on the phone, “I kissed a frog, it turned into a prince, we got married — and wham! We’re stuck with a bunch of polliwogs!” Sooner or later, we all know how that woman felt. Even our best relationships may sometimes seem to be overpopulated with “polliwogs,” when all we ever wanted was to be related to handsome princes — and to play that same role to others. But our relationships sometimes become superficial and shallow and are often strained. It is not easy to maintain good relational skills and good relationships. The words of Jesus in our text will challenge and help us.

“Teacher, of what sort is the greatest commandment of the law?” “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart (qualitative, not quantitative), and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind. This is the foremost and greatest commandment. And the second is similar, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On *these two commandments* (this term bears

major emphasis in the text, and it is the only emphatic term in the entire passage) hang all the law and the prophets.”

The word “hang” means to “suspend” something. All the Old Testament revelation of the law and the prophets is suspended upon these two commandments, like a hat hung on a nail in the wall.

I. THE OBLIGATION

First, we note *the obligation* of these commandments. The common word in the two commandments is the word “love.”

This is striking, because it means, first, that love is commanded by God, and thus it is *controllable*. Can you imagine someone *commanding* love? And we are even told that not having this love is the greatest and worst sin that we are capable of committing.

You see the contrasting views of Christ and culture when you realize that the world tells us that you cannot legislate love. Why does the world say this? Because it has the wrong definition of love! To the world, love is an emotional experience which you can “fall into” uncontrollably, and *may* fall out of. It just makes common sense that if you can fall into something, you can also fall out of it. But if love is legitimately commanded, it is necessarily controllable. God expects you to control your love! So a different definition of love (the correct one) is necessary. Love is not primarily an *emotion*; it is essentially a *vocation*. True love involves *choice*, *commitment* and *continuation*. Our society is in trouble in its “love-life” today because commitment is an almost totally lost art among us.

Note also that the obligation is *positive*. This obligation takes us far beyond the ethic that merely says, “I’m OK, because I don’t harm anybody.” Many say, “I don’t do this, and I don’t do that — so I’m much better than many believers.” A first-grade teacher was asking the pupils’ names on the first day of class. One little boy said, “My name is ‘Johnny Don’t!’” It seemed that all he had ever heard his parents say to him was, “Johnny, Don’t”, and he thought that was his name! Many people live this way all the time. In their understanding, the whole Gospel is “Johnny, don’t.” But no life that is merely negative will please God. Negatives are necessary, to be sure, but the negatives of the Gospel merely “clear the decks” for Divine action. The Divine action is to be continual, while the negatives are to be performed in a moment (though they will need to be maintained by a regular discipline).

Again, note that the word for “love” here is *the distinctive Christian word*. The word is “agape” (in both cases). The love that is mandated toward God is *agape*, the love that is declared for self is *agape*, and the love that is mandated for your fellow man is *agape*. So a reasonable definition of *agape* is required. *Agape* is the kind of love which God has for man. *Agape* is self-disinterested, self-giving love. This kind of love has been defined as “the basic disposition of one’s whole being to relate to God for His glory and to man for his good.” It is *that distinctive love which desires only the highest good for its object* — whether the object be God, self, or others. The fact that God loves you is not a sentimental fact; it means that He desires only your highest good. So He cannot desire anything for you that will compromise holiness,

righteousness, or His best dreams for you. And this is the kind of love we are commanded to have for God and others, and it is the kind of love we are expected to have even for ourselves.

There are three kinds of love recognized (though *eros* is not mentioned by name) in the New Testament — *eros*, *philos*, and *agape*. The following simple chart may help us to see the differences in these three kinds of love:

<i>EROS</i>	<i>PHILOS</i>	<i>AGAPE</i>
Sensual, usually selfish	Social	Spiritual, sacrificial
When alone, it is <i>all take</i>	It is <i>give & take</i>	It is <i>all give</i> , though it does desire to possess its object
The subject loves because the object is desirable	Subject & object love because of mutual satisfaction	The subject loves only because of his own determination
“I love you <i>if you will satisfy me</i> ,” or, “ <i>I love me, and I want you</i> ”	“I love you <i>because we are happy together</i> ”	“I love you <i>in spite of every detriment to my love</i> ”
The object pleases the subject	Mutual pleasure between object and subject	The condition of the object does not matter
Earned by the object	Mutually earned	Not earned at all; indifferent to the merit of the object

Study the above chart thoughtfully and carefully. It is the nature of love to want to possess its object. Love is a combination of two impulses: to give itself for the other, and to have the other for itself. Perfect love is the proper balance between these two impulses: to give and to share for the other, and to have and to hold for oneself. That awful cross on Calvary stands forever as our proof that God was willing to go the full limit in giving Himself. Yet that willingness to give Himself is also coupled with the Divine desire to possess us, the objects of His love. The Son of Man came to seek, and the purpose of that seeking is that He might find, and bring back His people to God; for it is the nature of love to long to possess its object. So the whole point of the Gospel is that God is looking for you, and that He jealously wants to possess and use you.

A fourth idea about this obligation. *The total personhood of each individual is to be involved in the fulfilment of this obligation.* This requires the cooperation and submission of all faculties that each individual has — heart, soul, mind and strength. Man’s response to God’s love is to be a total response.

A Dutchman named Jacob Boehmke gave his personal testimony in these words. “I seemed to be like a battalion of soldiers when at ease, marching off in different directions. I was divided within, and a civil war seemed to be always occurring. There was nothing in me to

cement me together. The centrifugal force of sin seemed to be hurtling the divided parts away from any integrating center. But God was at work. One night, when conviction had reached its height, I went into a room alone, got down on my knees, and *accepted Christ unanimously*. At that moment, Jesus Christ made me ‘whole.’” And his whole heart, mind, soul and strength were then required to be involved in this mandate to love. Note the threefold occurrence of the word “all” in this commandment. This isolates each category and maximizes the total obligation.

The word “heart” is normally used in the Bible as the driving mainspring of a person’s life (just like his physical heart is the mainspring of his material life). The word “soul” is the seat of your emotions. The word is “*psuche*”; we get our words “psychology” and “psychiatry” from this word. The soul is apparently an individual’s mind, emotions and will acting within. Your soul is your psychological life. The word “mind” isolates your mental faculty, your ability to think reasonably. It is interesting that Jesus apparently added the mind to the list. This command quotes the Jewish “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, but Jesus adds the word “mind” to the list stated there. Why? Let me venture an interpretation. Jesus adds the word “mind” because the heart of a man will not long pursue a course which the mind of that man disagrees with. Furthermore, the very strategy of Jesus, that of “making disciples,” requires the continual use of a developing and growing mind. If the Gospel is not presentable and persuasive to the best thinking of a man’s mind, it should not invite the devotion of his heart. Your “strength” is the total strength of your life — strength of personality, of energy, and of will.

Think of the practical, personal applications of this obligation. Our *emotions* are to be *dominated* by love; our *thoughts* are to be *directed* by love; our *actions* are to be *determined* by love; and our *words* are to be *dictated* by love. These, and many more, are the implications of this command.

II. THE OBJECT

Second, we notice the primary *object* of the command. “You shall love *the Lord your God*.” We have some tremendous advantages in helping us to understand this command because this is a direct quote from two Old Testament passages. We must simply go to the Old Testament and check the exact words, find their Hebrew meanings, and we may understand the object we are to love. The first command in our text is recorded in Deuteronomy 6:5, and the second is recorded in Leviticus 19:18.

Note in particular the Person who is identified as the object of our commanded love. “The Lord your God.” The word “Lord” is the word “Jehovah,” or “Yahweh,” the covenant-making God of the Old Testament. The word itself is a compound word comprised of the past, present and future tenses of the Hebrew verb, “I am.” So this is the foundation for the revelation of the great “I Am” God who revealed Himself as such to Moses (see Exodus 3). The word indicates that God is always in the Eternal Now, the Eternal Present. Though this includes all tenses to us — past, present, and future — there is only an Eternal Present to God. Isaiah 57 says that God “inhabits eternity.” Time is His accommodation of our finiteness, but He inhabits eternity. So the Hebrew word translated “LORD” indicates that He is the great self-consistent, self-sufficient, self-continuous God. He needs not anything from anybody outside Himself — unless He chooses to.

The word “God” (“thy God”) is another gigantic word. In the Hebrew, it is the word “Elohim.” This is a plural word (!), which certainly accommodates the Christian doctrine of the Divine Trinity. The plural form also compounds the regular meaning of the word. The word means, “powerful,” and the plural form elevates it into “Mighty, All-powerful, All-capable, Omni-competent.” So the object of our love is to be the One who loves us enough to enter into covenant with us for our good, and is capable of fully carrying out His purposes. He is certainly worthy of our highest and best love. *His* love for *us* was not half-hearted, and He doesn’t expect *our* love for *Him* to be half-hearted. *His* love for *us* was whole-hearted, and He expects *our* love for *Him* to be whole-hearted. God left nothing of Himself out of the relationship, and God expects us to leave nothing of ourselves out of the relationship. As He has loved us with His whole Being, we are to “love the Lord our God” with the devotion of *our* whole being.

III. THE ORDER

Thirdly, we note the *order* of these commands. “You shall love ... God ... and your neighbor as yourself.” The order of the stated objects is very important. It is the invariable order of Scripture -- God first, then man. For example, reexamine the Ten Commandments, and you will see this order. The first four are an echo of the first commandment stated here, and the last six are an echo of the second commandment stated here. We are to love God first, then our fellow man.

The order helps us to examine ourselves, for it tells us that where there has been no *expression* of the love of God through you *toward others*, there has actually been no *experience* of the love of God *in your own heart*. Linger here and meditate on this truth. ***No expression of the love of God toward others means no experience of the love of God in you.*** To put it positively, the experience of God’s love by you and in you will lead to the expression of God’s love through you.

You see, *the concept of relationship* precedes time. Before the world was created, before man was made, God was (always is) a trinity of persons. He has three ways of being God. He is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As a Trinity, God has always modeled the meaning of love. He has always provided the perfect model for a society of beings. He has continuously demonstrated relational existence. So relationships have been topmost in God’s priorities for all eternity. If there is anything any higher than right relational living, God has not revealed it to us.

Someone said, “Success is 15% product knowledge and 85% people knowledge.” It will not make any difference how well we as Christians master our message if we do not love people. “They won’t care how much we know until they first know how much we care.” The disarming aspect of all spiritual initiative, whether from God to us, or from us to others, is in the love that is shown.

Recently, I heard this sad statistic with regard to the Christian foreign missionary force. When Christian missionaries have returned early from the foreign field, three times as many came back because of problems in relating to other missionaries than those who came back because of problems of culture, learning the language, or adaptation. The lesson? All Christians, however committed they may be, have trouble in relationships. Where is the deficiency? The deficiency usually stems from the sad fact that most Christians have never been truly discipled in

building relational skills and in building and maintaining positive, loving, supportive, productive relationships. The Christian community has been fairly efficient in teaching *revelational* theology, but not nearly so effective in understanding and applying *relational* theology.

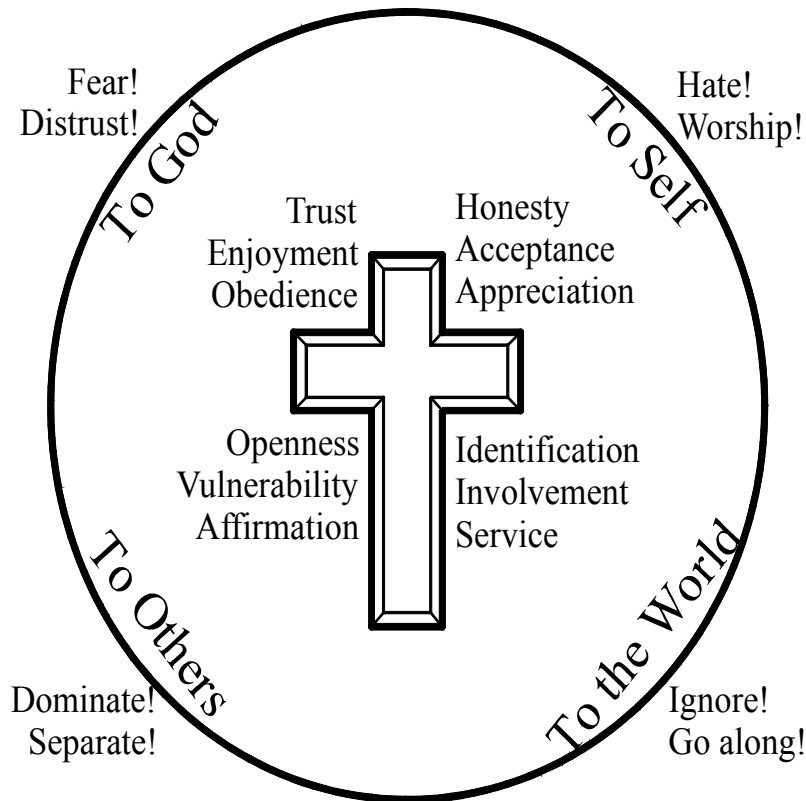
In a crowd of people, is there usually more *companionship* or more *competition*? I'm sure we would admit that the answer might largely depend on the nature of the crowd and the reason for its assembly. But tragically, many crowds today are conspicuously full of an adversarial attitude. It seems that there is potential violence at every street corner and in every shopping center today. Every person is either a potential friend or a potential foe. If I see people as my adversaries or competitors, I will spar with them mentally and practically. If, on the other hand, I see people as true spiritual assets, I will identify with them, assist in their development, and help them to see and realize their potential. Perhaps the word "assets" is too mercenary, but it is meant in the very best sense.

Years ago, Billy Graham said, "Our alternatives today are few and simple. It is either 'back to the Bible' or 'back to the jungle.' There is no third possibility." No Christian should ever allow an adversarial attitude to prevail within him toward any other human being. However, we must face the fact that this adversarial attitude is natural to the flesh, and that only by the aid of God and His Love can we win over it.

Before we go to the diagram which attends this study, let me note that the two relationships commanded in our text might be viewed in the figure of a cross — vertical, then horizontal. Just as with a cross, the vertical shaft (our relationship with God) carries all the weight, and the horizontal arm (true *agape* relationships with our fellow men) stands only because the vertical supports it. Ponder this paragraph carefully, even drawing a cross and labeling its two shafts if necessary. At the top of the vertical shaft, put the words, "God's Love For Man," and draw an arrow pointing down the upper part of that vertical arm. At the bottom of the vertical shaft, put the words, "Man's Love For God," and draw an arrow pointing up the lower part of that vertical arm. On the left side of the horizontal arm of the cross, put the words, "Love For Fellow Believers," and draw an arrow pointing outward away from the center shaft. On the right side of the horizontal arm, put the words, "Love For All Men," and again draw an arrow pointing outward away from the center shaft.

Here we see the four basic relationships of life. They are: (1) The *indispensable* relationship — my relationship with the *Saviour*. (2) The *internal* relationship — my relationship with *self*. (3) The *interpersonal* relationship -- my relationship with the *significant other people* in my life. (4) The *involvement* relationship — my relationship with *society*. We can see by looking at the accompanying diagram (on the next page) that all these relationships are sanctified and made most useful by the placing of the Cross in the center of them. The explanation of the four relationships as seen in the diagram will be made on the following pages.

The Kingdom of Right Relationships



The four basic relationships in life for any human being are recorded inside the circle moving clockwise from the upper left. The four relationships are your relationship *to God*, your relationship to *your own self*, your relationship to *the significant other people in your life*, and your relationship to *the world* or society at large.

In the diagram, you will note that there are certain things *inside* the circle with regard to each of these relationships, and there are also certain things *outside* the circle at the point of each relationships. The diagram shows us *God's* plan, or Heaven's ideal, for each of these relationships, and then it shows us *Satan's* alternate plan, or Hell's ideal, for each of them. God's plan for each relationship is represented inside the circle, and Satan's alternate plan is represented outside the circle.

The most important relationship in the life of any human being is his *relationship with God*, which is represented in the upper left part of the circle. God's plan is defined inside the circle. First, it is God's plan that every human being live in total *trust* of Him for his entire life. This life then becomes a life of full and perfect *enjoyment*. And each one of us as dependent creatures should live a life of happy *obedience* to God, where both *our* pleasure and *His* are found. Each of these areas might be explored in limitless ways.

Outside the circle, Satan's alternate plan for man's relationship with God may be seen. Since every human being is related to God every moment of every day, either in a good way or a bad way, Satan's plan is to turn man's relationship with God totally sour. He seeks to get man to inordinately *fear* God and to suspiciously *distrust* Him. Every Christian should study this relationship in these areas carefully, because he will see examples of both God's plan in action and Satan's plan in action every day of his life. Indeed, he will know the struggles between the two plans in his own life, also.

The second important relationship in the life of any human being is his *relationship to himself*. God's plan for him is that he live a life of openness, transparency, and total *honesty* in all relational matters in his life. It is God's will that he *accept* himself as God made him, and even that he be honest about himself as he has distorted himself in sin and selfishness — in order that he might present all that he is, good or bad, to God for His purposes to be fulfilled in his life. God expects him to have full *appreciation* of the unique and distinctive way he is made, and that he realize that it is through his unique personhood that God wants to reveal himself to the world.

However, we must remember that there is an alternate plan of Satan for this relationship as well. And we must frankly admit that Satan is a master of distortion in our inner lives. If unchecked, he will twist our view of ourselves and our self-worth until it does not match God's intention or God's revelation. It is Satan's design, first, that we *hate* ourselves. After all, he tells us, you are worthless and wicked, and the problems will never be solved. So he tempts you to hate yourself. Or he reverses the plan and seeks to get you to *worship* yourself. This is Satan's lifestyle — that of self-aggrandizement and self-exaltation. And he longs to have you made in his image, after his likeness.

The third important relationship in the life of any human being is his *relationship to the significant other people in his life*. God's plan is that he live a life of *openness* with each of these people. It is also God's purpose that he make himself *vulnerable* to them. Vulnerability may be popularly defined as getting out on a limb — and putting the saw in someone else's hands. This does not mean that we court our own disadvantage. It does mean that we would rather allow our own disadvantage than to take selfish or sinful advantage of the others. We would rather suffer hurt from others than inflict hurt on them (see I Peter 2:21-24 for the example of Jesus). Furthermore, God desires that we honestly *affirm* one another in all possible ways. This means that we seek the best, the Christ-like, in the people who are near to us, and that we vocally affirm what we find.

Again, Satan has an alternate plan for our relationships with the significant other people in our lives. If we are alert each day, we will see clear evidence within ourselves and around us in others of Satan's plan. It is Satan's plan that we seek to *dominate* all of those who are near us. He wants us to selfishly control and intimidate as many people as we can. Or he wants us to altogether *separate* ourselves from them. He is in the separation business, and if he can create malicious or suspicious divisions between us, his plan is fulfilled.

The fourth important relationship in the life of every human being is his *relationship to the world*. God's plan for each of us is that we *identify* with the people of society for the sake of representing and serving Christ. Jesus prayed that we would be “in the world but not of it.” This means that we are to be totally *involved* in the world, but only for redemptive purposes. We are not to draw our beliefs or attitudes from the world, but we are to become active in it to reach people for Christ's sake. We are to live in the world as Jesus did, as the *servant* of both God and man.

Here also, Satan offers an alternate plan. It is Satan's desire that we *ignore* the world with its massive needs, and be indifferent to it. He offers enough selfish concerns to us to keep us preoccupied with ourselves and our interests so that the needs of the world will go unnoticed and unmet. Or Satan entices us to *go along* with the moral drift and godlessness of a sinful society.

Each believer should do his own lengthy meditating on these four relationships and the two plans for them. He will easily see both God's strategy and Satan's substitute plan in each area. And he must keep himself in the light of God's truth so that he can be a credit to Christ in the Kingdom of Right Relationships.

If God is properly and accurately understood, it should not be at all difficult to trust, obey, and enjoy Him. However, we may need to give disciplined care to the other three relationships. It is very

easy for most people, even believers, to be wrongly adjusted to themselves, the significant others in their lives, and the world.

An old and well-known child's fantasy story may help us to understand our vocation in the last three relationships. It is the story of the handsome prince who fell under the spell and the curse of a wicked witch. The witch turned the handsome prince into an ugly frog. The story declared that the frog would remain low and ugly unless a beautiful maiden came along and kissed him. But everyone knows that beautiful maidens just do not go around kissing ugly frogs! But wonder of wonders, one day that is exactly what happened. A beautiful maiden came along, noticed the ugly frog, and planted a big kiss on his ugly lips. When she did so, the ugly frog was instantly transformed into a prince more handsome than he had been before. And of course, in the way of all good, innocent child's stories, the beautiful maiden and the handsome prince fell in love, got married, and "lived happily ever after." Good, happy story!

But most people never detect the meaning of the story. It is actually an illustration of Biblical truth. The handsome prince represents Adam as God created him. The wicked witch represents the devil. The transformation of the prince to a low and ugly frog represents the Fall of man into sin and under the spell of Satan. The beautiful maiden represents Jesus Christ. The kiss represents His embrace of love and grace, and His communication of life to low and fallen men. The restored prince represents the redeemed saint. The marriage reminds us that we are "married unto Another, even unto Him who is raised from the dead" (Romans 7:4). And *we will "live happily ever after"!*

The punch line? What is our relational vocation as Christians living in this fallen world? We are to *go around kissing ugly frogs* — whether the frog be ourselves, a person near and dear to us, or one of the needy sinners-at-large in the world!