

What's up, Mercy? How y'all doing this morning? Good. Good. What's up, Northeast?

Northeast? Stand up. Y'all know what it is. What's up, Union County? So good to be with you guys today.

My name is Joseph Anderson. I am married to my beautiful wife, Kaylon Anderson. She is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, rib of my rib. If she was here, I might make her stand up, and she would not be happy with that. We have four children, two biological, two adopted.

It is my pleasure to be here with you guys this morning. I've been at Mercy since about 2020, so it's been quite the ride. Most of those years, I have served as the campus pastor for Mercy Northeast, and now my family and I are going to plant a church in Atlanta. Come on, guys. We're so excited about this. But that's enough about me. Let's dive in, because I am here to preach this morning.

So, in 1998, Disney released their first movie featuring a princess of asian descent. You all know which one I'm talking about. Yeah. What do we want? A girl worth fighting for. You know what I'm talking about? Yeah. Mulan. Right. And in the movie, Mulan, we are invited into this struggle. Mulan is struggling for her identity. Will she bring her family honor? Will she be able to save her father? Will she be able to save China? And most importantly, when will her reflections show who she is inside?

Anyway, she has this sidekick. His name is Mushu. And what we experience is that Mushu is also experiencing the same struggle for identity. He's a guardian. But is he a real guardian? Can he make a difference? Can he even be helpful? And this struggle for identity is put on full display in the opening scene when Mulan and Mushu meet for the first time.

Mulan is looking over the hill. She's worried about the task in front of her. And Mushu, you know, he wants to make a good impression. So he starts a little fire. He gets his little cricket. Start waving the flames. He stands behind the flames, and his shadow is big. He presents as powerful and wise, and it works. Mulan is impressed. And she asks in awe, who are you?

I love Mushu's response. He says, who am I? Who am I? I am the powerful, the pleasurable, the indestructible mushu. And out from behind these rocks steps this little six inch lizard. Right? That's a big letdown.

But Mushu's insecurity around his identity caused him to over promise and under deliver. Get this. Because he was unsure of who he was. He presented himself in a way that he thought Mulan would want him to. Brothers and sisters, can I tell you that in our current climate, it is easy for the church to be insecure about her identity. It is easy for the church to over promise and under deliver. It is easy for the church to present ourselves in the way we think the world wants to see us. Brothers and sisters, we must be secure about who we are. We need to know who we are, because the question is being asked. Who are you? The world is asking us who we are. The culture is asking us who we are. Our children are asking us who we are. Who are we? This is an important question, and we need to answer it. But I have good news, brothers and sisters. The word of God has told us who we are. This book right here has been very clear. It has been a firm foundation. We don't need flames and posturing when we have the word of God.

As I have sat with the Lord, as I have pleaded with him, as I have studied this book, Matthew 22 has been a clear picture of who I believe the Lord is calling us to be and what he's calling us to do as we go down to Atlanta in our text today, God will reveal to us what he calls the greatest commandment. And he says, it's very simple. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. And so at Kingdom City, we say that our mission is to form disciples over time into greater love of God and neighbor. We want to form disciples.

We know that disciple making is messy, so we take our time with it. And what we want to do is we want to see them grow into a greater love of God and neighbor. And here's what we believe. We believe that if we are faithful to that mission, we will see our vision happen, which is to see the city of Atlanta transformed by distinct people with distinct love in every space we occupy.

So as we dive in today, here's the main idea, we'll be working with: distinct love forms distinct people. Y'all say it with me: Distinct love forms distinct people.

Perfect. I'm a pray, and then we'll dive in.

Oh, God, how needy I am before you now. How desperate I am for you to be with me now. How I long for your words to go forth and not mine. Now for you, o Lord, alone are worthy. I depend on you. I cling to you. I lean into you, o Holy Spirit. Would you do in hearts what mere mortal words cannot do? Would you move in power would you be exalted? For you alone are worthy, o God, we love you. We pray all this in your perfect name, Jesus. Amen.

As you make your way to the text, I just want to kind of let you behind the curtain on how we got to planting a church in Atlanta. See, our journey to plant a church has been a journey. Let's just call it that. And as we considered Atlanta, we started realizing that this massive city has 117 people moving into it every single day.

And there's this perimeter around the city, much like Charlotte. It's called 285. And inside the perimeter, churches are rarely planted and frequently closed. There is an increasing hostility towards the gospel, and it is left with a massive gospel need. And here's what we believe. We believe that God is worthy of worship, even in hard places. So there have been three things that have kind of been compelling our hearts toward the city of Atlanta. Number one, similar to mercy, we want to be a multicultural church. Now, we were pursuing what we called a developed urban context that gives us the opportunity to be socioeconomically diverse. All right, if that sounds like a bunch of words, just hear me.

We want rich people and poor people to be in the same place. All right? And this is the reason why. So we are sitting at this pizza spot in East Point, which is a neighborhood in Atlanta, and it looks like the neighborhood we'll be planting in. And we're sitting there, and there's a benz out in the back.

Now, I can't afford no benz, but there's a homeless guy in the front. He's walking around without a shirt on. He looks a little disheveled. And there's this blue car. And my wife and I are sitting here with all these young families, and we're observing people walk up to the blue car, and walk away from the blue car, and walk up to the blue car, and walk away from the blue car.

And for some reason, I was like, I think this is where we're supposed to be, because this is what the Lord said to me. He said, hey, am I not for both the dealer and the doctor? Can I not save both the housewife and the homeless? And when they are united in an identity surrounded by me, is that not a powerful gospel apologetic? So we go to Atlanta because we believe we could see Christ glorified there.

Number two, we wanted to see an opportunity for movement in downtown Atlanta. There are 250,000 college students in a five mile square radius. What happens if we see them? Reached for the gospel? Brothers and sisters, we are believing for revival in the next generation.

And so we go. We go, anticipating that the gospel will run on those college campuses and God will be glorified. And lastly, we wanted to be in a place where we could be on mission and proximity. As I was asking the question, Lord, where do you want us to plant a church? Please be Charlotte.

The Lord started to shift the question from where can we most conveniently or most strategically plant a church? To where is my kingdom least represented? When we look at downtown Atlanta, we see that homelessness is rampant. 3300 minors sleep on the street every single night. Family insecurity is an epidemic. And my generation are leaving the church by the thousands. So when my boy TJ told me he wanted to be a part of what we were doing, and I know that he hasn't darkened the doors of a church in decades, I knew we had to go because you know how many TJs, I know how many people who need the gospel. So we go to Atlanta. The Lord has called us to this place. And yes, we feel the weight of the dark forces. We feel the weight of the high walls. We feel the weight of the objection.

But the promised land had dark forces and high walls, too. So we believe that the God who sends us goes before us. And we believe that in this city we will experience gospel impact. We believe that in this city we will experience gospel community. And we believe that as we go to the promised land that the Lord has laid before us, we will know intimately the love of our father.

And so we go. And we go with great anticipation. Now, here's what we also believe. We believe that God has called people to be a part of this work. We have three ways, as Pastor Spence said, that we're calling people to be a part of this, right? We're calling people to pray for us. And if you commit to pray for us, listen to me. We need you to pray for us. Nothing happens unless God moves. Nothing happens unless God moves. We believe that God is going to move through this local body to plant a church through your generosity. So we are asking that people partner with us. And hear me, y'all. I know Charlotte's a nice city. I love Charlotte. But I believe that the Lord is calling some of you guys to pack. God is worthy of his glory in the city of Atlanta. So we go. If the Lord is tugging on your heart, if you're feeling compelled, please visit our website, kcityatl.com, or I think, a better option. I'm here all day. Come talk to me.

All right, y'all ready? For the text. All right, let's do it. Let's do it. Let's do it.

Matthew, chapter 22, verse 34. It says, when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the sadducees. They came together. And one of them, an expert in the law. Asked a question to test him. Teacher, which command in the law is greatest? And he said to him, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets depend on these two commands. If you would take a journey with me into first century Jerusalem. As we enter into the text, we stumble upon a conflict. This was the norm anytime the Pharisees, the sadducees and Jesus were in the same place. And if you're new to the Bible. The Pharisees and the Sadducees. They're basically just, at this point. Professional Jesus haters, right? Everywhere he goes, they follow him around, trying to trip him up, trying to jam him up. And this is the same thing that's happening here.

You see, before Jesus got on the scene, they had all the influence. They had all the clout. But now that Jesus is here, people are starting to follow him instead of them. This is not a new conflict, either. It has persisted for many chapters. Now. In chapter 17, they were pressing Jesus about taxes. In chapter 19, they were asking him questions about divorce. In chapter 21, they needed to know who gave him the authority to teach. And right before today's incident. Jesus has just shut down the sadducees. About their take on the resurrection. There has been a progressing tension growing between Jesus and these religious leaders. This extended game of 21 questions. Has resulted in the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Being silenced. And shut down with repetition.

The text says. When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced. Or it could literally be translated, muzzled. The sadducees, they came together. Can you see the huddle? Huddled up, whispering. First two, man, I can't stand Jesus. The second one, plotting. I know, man. How are we going to jam them up? This question stuff ain't working. The third one, it says an expert in the law comes up with this bright idea. Hey, man, we've been asking him too specific of a question. We got to get a little broader. And so they get in their huddle. Whisper, right? Teacher, teacher. Which command in the law is the greatest? They thought such an open ended question would surely cause him to stumble, to indict himself. They thought it would expose him. Surely this uneducated carpenter would struggle here. They anticipated a stutter. They thought he would sweat. Which of the commands, all the commands are the greatest, in your opinion, teacher? Can you see the crowds?

Ooh, that's a good one. In anticipation, sitting on the edge of their seat. You see, their assumption would be that Jesus really only had two ways to answer this question. How would he answer it? Would he have the orthodox jewish answer? Would he answer with the western philosophy of the Greeks? Would he be religious? Would he be secular?

If religious, then the Pharisees would have been like, finally we got him on our turf. Surely Jesus was not more religious than they were. And if secular, all the better. They could simply summarily dismiss him. Maybe they even hoped for the latter.

Like, can y'all imagine what would have happened if Jesus would have said, yeah, guys, the most important command is follow your heart? That would have been crazy, right? Like, what if he was like, yeah, the most important command is do what makes you happy. What if he said, love yourself or live your truth? Or do you boo? What if he said, taste your dreams or avoid suffering at all cost? That would have been weird, right? Yet don't we act as if that's what he said?

Don't we act like Jesus commanded us to love ourselves, and then we end up protecting ourselves at all cost, craving safety. So we show up guarded in every space. We tell ourselves that no one is trustworthy, even though we long for deep relationship, not seeing that the law that we've substituted for the words of Jesus promise security, but only deliver isolation. Or we act as if Jesus commanded in that moment us to chase our dreams. And so then we take permission and liberties to pursue our dreams of wealth. Y'all, some of us in here are pursuing the same dreams of wealth our father chased, working the same 60 to 70 hours a week our father worked, not realizing that our need for security was fueled by his absence. And we are perpetuating a cycle because some of us, all our kids want to do is spend time with us.

What false command hold you in bondage this morning? What have you substituted for the words of Jesus? And I just need to know, is it bringing you joy? Is it bringing you hope? Is it bringing you life?

If not, then I have good news. When Jesus was asked, what is the most important command? He did not respond with western philosophy. The commands of this world, they over promise and under deliver. They present with flame and shadow. But in reality, they're just little six inch lizards.

Look at this. This is really good because not only does he not respond with secular philosophy, he also doesn't respond with pious religion like they probably hoped for a secular answer but didn't expect one. Right, because they've been dealing with Jesus for a little bit. But surely they expected a religious one. They could have handled religious piety. After all, they had this conversation among themselves all the time. Which is the greatest command? They had answers and rebuttals. They were ready.

But Jesus' answer is something altogether different. It's a call to intimacy, a call to affection, a call to desire, a call to delight. He answers them. Get this a third way. Look at the text. Let it wash over you. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. And love your neighbor as yourself. By the way, Jesus is committed to scripture. God in the flesh stood before them. He could have answered the question any way he wanted. And he quotes Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Yet even more impressive, he quotes them and it's not religious. Notice that Jesus doesn't answer with one of the Ten Commandments, right, the commands written by the very finger of God. Jesus doesn't say that the most important command is that you do not kill or do not steal, or do not commit adultery.

As a matter of fact, the most important command in Jesus' mind is not a do not at all. Jesus does not give them an answer that enables them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps or get it out the mud. With this command, there was no opportunity for achievement or earning or displaying or posturing. When he asked them, when they asked him what was the most important command in their quest to be right with God, he does not respond with be more disciplined or do more good or learn more. God. His response is love. Love God. With every ounce of your desire, with every ounce of your emotion, with every ounce of your volition, with every ounce of your strength, with every ounce of your intellect. Wholehearted devotion is what our God asks of us. And we know this to be true. Right? Like, I have found this to be so true in my own life.

Here's what I know. I know that I am not who I once was. I know that I'm not who I want to be. But here's the thing. I know.

I know that I have been changed. We used to sing it in the black church. I know I've been changed. Here's the thing. The primary factor in my transformation has not been discipline. It has not been knowledge. It has been love. You see, religion tells us to self justify work to prove yourself worthy to God. Secularism tells us to self sustain work so that you don't need God. But Jesus reaches deep beyond our regular motivations and he pulls out our desire, our need to depend on him.

He calls us to look past ourselves, and he moves us away from our attempts to justify and satisfy and sustain in our own strength. He says the most important command is love.

Jesus our Lord requires only two things of us, love God and love neighbor at Kingdom city. Therefore, we're going to give ourselves to that. We're going to give ourselves to helping you love God and helping others love God. We will equip you to know him and love him through his word. We will surround you in environments of prayer and worship.

We will form you into progressive intimacy with our God. We will fight to cultivate gospel community. We will send you on mission compelled by the gospel. All that you may love him.

All that we may love him. Brothers and sisters, distinct love forms distinct people. When they ask us who we are, we will say, we are those pursuing loving God with all our heart and all our soul in all our mind. Because this is the kind of love that transforms right. Distinct love forms distinct people.

Our love enables us to do everything else. Our love for God enables us to love everything else. Loving him, it makes us more selfless, doesn't it? Doesn't loving him make us more compassionate, more kind, more distinct? See, Jesus is letting us in on a secret, that it's our affections that transform us.

He's going to tell us in John 1415, hey, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments. And then he goes on to say in John 15 that the commandment is really simple, love one another. Do you see that? If you love me, you will love one another.

These are the two most important commands, love God and love neighbor. And if we examine the text, we see something odd, right? Like they asked Jesus for how many commands, how many they asked him for? What's it saying in the text? What is the most important command?

One. And yet he gives them two. That's odd. He says in verse 37, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. And then he says, the second is like it, verse 38, love your neighbor as yourself. Why is that? The second is like it, paralleled on the same level of similar importance. He wants us to know that it is just as important for us to love God as it is for us to love people. They are on the same level do we think like that? As a matter of fact, he presses it even deeper. Or his apostle does. John. In one John 420, he says, if anyone says I love God and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister, who he has seen, cannot, cannot love God, who he has not seen. In other words, the commandment to love God and labor are inseparable. Not only is the command to love God with all our hearts good for us, get this, it does something in us, and it is good for those around us. It's as if God's love is infectious and will inevitably overflow. Therefore, the true way to love others is to love God first. And the true measure of loving God is how we love others. Do you see how they spiral into one another? How will we see the city of Atlanta transformed? Certainly it will be by loving God. But that's not all. We must also love our neighbor. That brings up a natural question, doesn't it?

The guy in Luke is going to say, well, then, who is my neighbor? Right? And you see, they would have heard neighbor. And in their mind, they would have immediately thought Jesus was talking about the Jews, right? The children of God, those who were like them, those they liked. And they were right, kind of. But you see, Jesus meant so much more. In the text or throughout the New Testament, especially in the gospels, Jesus will reveal neighbors as two people. They are the ones that we think of when he says neighbor, and they are the ones that we don't. And Jesus here unquestionably means both.

So let me bring it to us in our current context, because I think if we ask Jesus who is our neighbor, he might have to first say, your neighbor is one another. He's clear. We must love one another. Jesus says this in John 15 and 17, that when we love one another, we prove to the world that we are his disciples and that when we love one another, we prove to the world that Jesus is who he says he is. So Atlanta will be transformed if we love one another in front of them.

Why can't you see it? Offering a society, an alternative way of living, inviting them into a communal way of life, embodying a distinct social identity. Make no mistake about it, brothers and sisters, we are going to Atlanta to be a distinct people. And what happens if we love one another in front of them, displaying the distinct beauties of the kingdom? Can you see it, us down there, as a selfless people, a radically new kind of people, a diverse body, with dealers and doctors all united around the love of Jesus transformed by his love for them?

Can you see it? What if we were a people that proximity made just as much difference in where we lived at square footage because we embraced our value of cultivating gospel impact through proximity and neighbor love? Can you see it? What if we were the kind of people who prioritized community over individualism and refused to be an isolated people? What if we gave one another just as much time as we gave to Netflix and we listened to one another's story and listened for one another's pain and listened to one another's hurts and decided that we were going to be the kind of people that showed up anyway?

Can you see it? Us embracing our value of pursuing authenticity before God and one another? Could we not display the kind of distinct community that would be very attractive? Y'all want to know the truth about Atlanta? It's a place increasingly full of strangers and a crowd. It's a place estranged from their families and bound by their past and confused by their culture and alienated from their God. What would happen if we love one another in front of them and invited them into distinct communities? Could not the kingdom come? I believe it can. I believe it could.

And here's the thing. Jesus doesn't just stop there. He doesn't only command us to love one another in front of them. He goes further to say, they are our neighbors, too. Love them.

You see, they would have assumed that when Jesus said neighbor, he meant Jews. But he presses so far beyond their assumption. In Luke's account, he does. He says, then who is my neighbor? And Jesus tells this parable of a man, of a good Samaritan, who are the enemies of the Jewish people, and one of them is destitute, and one of them is a Samaritan.

And we can summarily discover that both the enemy and the impoverished are our neighbor. In Matthew five, he's going to say it overtly. He says, you have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So it turns out that our neighbors are not only those who are like us, but our enemies and the impoverished, those who are actually the opposites of who we prefer. And Jesus lived this out, didn't he? In his ministry, he loved the leopard, the Samaritan, the gentile, and the criminal. Which means then, in turn, that we must also love the democrat, republican, homeless, and homosexual. Is that not what God calls us to? They are our neighbors, and as Jesus loved them, the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus loved the poor. He loved the outcast. He loved the marginalized. He loved us when we were his enemies. He became like the least of us.

Like, let's wrap our minds around this reality that he came as an impoverished, oppressed Jew, not a powerful Roman. And if he did that, maybe he was trying to teach us that the oppressed and the marginalized are our neighbors. Can you consider with me that Jesus said he had no place to lay his head. Therefore, the homeless must be our neighbors. If his mother was a widow and a single mother of seven children in poverty, then surely the single mother must be our neighbor.

Look at his life. He was predisposed to being interrupted by the hungry and the hurting, the social outcast and the sick, the demon possessed and the down and outs. All the while, he loved them and the kingdom was coming. If we are to see the city of Atlanta transform, we must embrace our value of prioritizing our inheritance in heaven and our value of creating space for people to encounter God. We must be those who preach the gospel and pour into our neighborhoods, who call for faith and bring a cold cup of water, who make disciples and minister to the broken, who labor for the faith and for just laws.

With our lips and our lives, we must be those who proclaim the gospel, pulling back the veil of the coming reign of God, bringing into view what is hidden from the lost. The kingdom of God has come, and it is coming. They will ask us who we are, and we will say, we are followers of Jesus. We are those who bring, sign and foretaste of the power of the kingdom. We are those praying and pleading, oh, God, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In Charlotte as it is in heaven. In Nairobi as it is in heaven. In Atlanta as it is in heaven.

We are disciples formed over time into a greater love of God and neighbor. And we are a distinct people with distinct love in every space we occupy. What a task. What a massive task in front of us. And here's the thing about this task, maybe the most important thing. The task in front of us is impossible to truly love our neighbors as ourselves. Impossible to love God in this way. Impossible. Like which of us have ever loved God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul? It's impossible. Transform the city of Atlanta. There are 6 million people. Impossible. See, the task before us is impossible unless God shows up. But that's the good news of the gospel, ain't it?

That we have a God who shows up here's the thing. Our only hope for his kingdom to come is if he, the king, shows up. Our only hope for that city to be transformed is if the transformer, our God, shows up. And this is where we place our hope. We say at kingdom city all the time.

We long to experience what only God can do. And we know that our hope is not in vain. Because 2000 years ago, with a big, bright star in the sky, our God and our king showed up in a manger. He experienced everything you and I have ever experienced. The hunger, the pain, the heartbreak, the betrayal.

He made his way through this broken world, yet without sin. He loved us, he healed us, he fed us. And in return, we reviled him.

God came to us, and we didn't love him like the command told us to. No. Instead, we killed him.

This is the darkness of humanity that we are unable to love a good God. Has anyone other than me struggled to love God the way that we should, to love him the way that he deserves to love him? For he is holy and he is good.

What do we do when the greatest command feels impossible?

Whole brothers and sisters, we remember the gospel. We remember that God first loved us. Romans five tells us that while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us. John 3:16 says, God so loved the world. So loved, so loved that he gave his only son.

Can't help but believe that in a room this size, there's somebody who's been trying to love the Lord their God in their own strength for decades, running into the same wall over and over and over again. Can I just tell you that he's crazy about you, that he loves you so much right where you are, without the striving, without the effort. He has removed the judgments against you. If you would only trust him.

This is our hope for the people in the city of Atlanta, that God loves them, too. And yes, this task before us is impossible. But we serve a God who does the impossible. He came. He walked among us.

He was crucified. But early Sunday morning, early Sunday morning, our God, our king, rose with the sun, doing the impossible. He burst from that grave so that all who would hope in him would have life and love. This God is our hope for Atlanta. It is our hope for his kingdom.

It is our hope for his glory. And what is impossible for man is possible for God. We go knowing that he won't fail.

Let me pray for us. Jesus, you are so good. You rescue us from hopelessness. You rescue us from our own commands. You rescue us from our religion. You rescue us from our striving. And our attempts to earn our own righteousness. You rescue us. And we love you because you are kind. And we love you because you first loved us. And we love you because you are worthy. O king of glory. Would you have your worship from your people? We delight in you. We love you, we trust you. We will give our lives for you. So God, we pray all this your perfect name.