

## Jason Upchurch - Mark 12:28-34 - The Good News of Loving God

This week and next week we're going to slow down a little and work through this amazing little section. Initially I had planned to just go through this in one shot but there are really 2 issues here that I think we need to address.

The first, which we'll cover this morning, is actually Jesus's answer to the question that this scribe asks. What is the greatest commandment? If we just fly by that I think we'll do a huge disservice to our Lord who is telling us something incredibly important.

Interestingly, if you noticed, Jesus actually gives the first and second greatest commandment when the scribe just asked for the most important. So I think it's fitting we spend time on both of these and then return to the context at hand.

So we will get to the scribe and his reaction to Jesus's answer but really before we get to that and understand the significance of his reaction, I think we need to slow down and just meditate on what Jesus is saying here before I think we can understand what it means.

What Jesus is being asked here is the very essence of Christianity. What is a Christian supposed to do? What is the greatest commandment? And it wasn't just something in the NT. Jesus will answer with a verse from the OT. The people of God from the Garden forward were called to love God with their whole heart and soul and might.

**1 John 2:7:** I am not writing to you a new command but an old one which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.

Loving God and neighbor isn't new.

And I think it's also important to say that the question of the greatest commandment is not "how does someone become a Christian?" Those are separate questions. How you become a Christian is to trust that all of your sins are punished in Jesus as he died on the cross and that the only goodness you have is his goodness that is credited to your account. It's trusting in the great exchange: That Jesus died for your sins, and he rose to give you his righteousness.

Trusting that message - that good news - is what saves us. That is all of faith, not of works.

The question this morning is what do we do? Because it's just as important to know how to become a Christian as it is to ask "what does a Christian do?" How do we live now? And this is a fundamental question that we need to be able to answer. Not only for those who we are hoping become Christians, but we need to know for ourselves. What's the main goal of our lives.

It's Super Bowl Sunday, so I'm going to give one football illustration. I was watching a video of Dan Campbell, the head coach of the Detroit Lions. Who had an amazing season. And it's a pep talk he's giving his defensive players at the end of a hard practice a year and a half ago. And he asks them: "Defensively, what is the essence of what we do? Two things." And there's a few guys who mumble something. No one on the Detroit Lions defense actually knew what the big picture was. They didn't know the core of why they were stepping out on the field. And Dan is yelling at them: It's pursuit and tackle - that's the big picture but they didn't know what their job was. You have to practice running and tackling or you don't get the job done; but these guys didn't know that.

And as amazing as that sounds, I think what's more amazing is that as Christians we often forget what our job is. This is the exact question that Jesus is asked: "What is the essence of what we do?" What's the bottom line in the Christian life? What do we wake up to do every day? Two things. What are they? Love God. Love neighbor.

But if we don't know that or aren't reminded of that, then we can get really off track.

We can get so caught up in so much of Christianity that we miss the essence of what we do. “We gotta pray, tell people about the gospel, we’ve got to take care of our family, work hard, be nice to our brother, help our sister, we need to give, we need be faithful with money, work on getting rid of this sin, stop complaining, we need to read our Bible more, go make disciples, on and on. And these are not bad things. These are all commands.

But you know what? They’re not the main thing. They’re good things, and maybe they are the way we accomplish the main things. But the main thing we’re called to is love.

Paul says in **1 Tim. 1:5** that the very essence of his whole ministry, of everything he does for his people is to call them to love: The aim - the goal/final product - of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Everything that he does is to stir up in them love.

Now, we’re going to talk about love for a bit, but give me a few minutes to talk about what love is not. Because I think that’s important too.

A. Love is not a feeling. You probably knew I’d say this, but it’s worth the reminder in a culture that thinks love is whatever makes them happy. Get married to whoever or whatever you want because it makes you happy. “I just love them.” No; a lot of what people think is love is actually infatuation or lust, but it’s not love.

Love is not a feeling. Not biblically, anyway. Job says that Yahweh gives, Yahweh takes away, blessed be the name of Yahweh. Job is loving God despite his whole family and all of his property being taken away. Job is certainly **feeling** some things having lost everything, and in the midst of it he still expresses his loving devotion to God.

This also is true of our relationship to God in general. I was a very emotionally driven kid. I enjoyed going to Bible conferences because I got a spiritual high. I was excited about God! And it’s not wrong to be excited about God, I hope there are times when you’re excited about who God is and what he’s doing in your life. And even with this Youth Leadership conference I hope people were encouraged and sanctified and excited to learn. But that’s not exactly the same thing as love. A lot of people want to equate some emotional bliss with their relationship with God - and it doesn’t work.

God demonstrates his own love in that Christ died for us. Love is doing something in spite of what you’re feeling.

Same thing with people. When a wife says “Well, I just don’t love my husband anymore, I’ve lost the feeling.” Well, sorry to tell you but love isn’t a feeling. Love is a command. And if you are a Christian then you are filled with the Spirit and able to actually obey the commands. And you can obey them no matter what you’re feeling. We can love our enemies, we can love those who persecute us, we can love our neighbors - all people who we often don’t have warm feelings for.

B. Love is not politeness. A lot of people want to equate love to some sort of social etiquette from Victorian England where everyone was prim and proper and never says anything that would ever ruffle any feathers. There’s this idea that if we ever disagree with anyone or make them upset that somehow we’re not loving them.

Now we should be careful here because that doesn’t mean you can just go around being a jerk and it’s fine. But we say the right thing at the right time. Our speech is to be seasoned with salt - salt can be kind of intense but sometimes we need intense.

We’re always called to love, but we’re not always called to be polite. Jesus wasn’t polite when he was flipping tables over and calling the religious leaders snakes and sons of hell. Jesus wasn’t being polite when he called the religious leaders hypocrites. But he was acting in love.

Paul wasn’t polite when he told the Judaizers in Galatians that if circumcision saves you, then they should just cut everything off. “Why don’t you make sure you’re really saved?” Not polite, but love.

James wasn't being polite when he calls believers who love the world adulteresses, but he was loving them.

Again, that doesn't mean we're supposed to be rude or jerks. But sometimes just living out faithfulness and speaking truth means people are going to be offended. And sometimes we've got to be blunt for people to understand the truth. And that bluntness is sometimes - not always - the way they will understand their foolishness.

But this idea that we can't ever be strong or tough when we're opposing sin or nonsense is not biblical.

C. Love is not always about being right. A lot of people can be right about a lot of things and have no love.

**1 Cor. 13:2** Paul says we can have all prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and all faith to move mountains - but if we don't have love what are we? We're nothing.

This is why we have to speak the truth in what? Love.

This is why love covers a multitude of what? Sins. Because sometimes we're not going to agree on what sin is or what was right and wrong. And so we can either let that fester and grow bitterness or we just forget about it like God forgets about our sins.

Maybe put a different way: You can be 100% right about something and totally in sin at the exact same time based on how you're dealing with it.

Okay, that's a lot of time on what love is not. Let's talk about what love is. So we're going to break this down into 2 main points. Love God and love neighbor.

So the essence of what we do as Christians in 2 commands is Love God and love neighbor.

1) Love God. Which God? Any God? There's a lot of gods out there. Is my love for God the same as a Muslim's love for Allah?

No. If you're going to love God you have to actually know who God is. This is not the generic god of American feel good religion. This is not the false monadic god of unbelieving Jews. This is Yahweh, who we talked about last week.

This is why Jesus quotes the most famous passage in the OT. We've seen this before, and I want to turn back there because there should be a crease in your Bible in **Deut. 6:4-9**. Turn there. This is the **John 3:16** of the OT so you should be very familiar with it. And this is where this command comes from. **Read 4-9**

So let's notice a few things here. Especially from our study last week, it's not just any God that we give out devotion and love to. It's Yahweh - the one true and living God who is three in one. The devotion we give and the love we give is only to him.

Loving false gods doesn't do this and is an offense to Yahweh. That's why commandment number 1 is that we shall have no other gods before him.

So whatever this love is for God is a very exclusive love. Only love Yahweh. Only him and no others. This is not "It's okay to love whatever you want to believe as long as you love some god." No. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul and might.

Now, there is a sense in which what God is saying is to love him with everything we are. Heart and soul and might is catch all for everything you are. But I think there's some distinctions that could be made here. What does it mean to love God with your whole heart? Look at the connection in the very next verse. **Read 4-7**

Okay, so follow the flow here. We're supposed to love God with our heart. What's supposed to be on our heart? His commands. All of them. So we not only have to diligently know the commands of God - be learning them and growing in the knowledge of them. But they have to be on our heart meaning we need actually desire to do them.

Sometimes we know the commands of God and we don't want to do them. They don't make our heart happy. In that case we need to ask God to change our heart to desire his commands.

And then the next step in loving God with our heart in obedience is to diligently teach them to our children. Diligently teach what to our children? The commands of God. Not only do we need to know the commands of God, but we are required to diligently teach them to our children. All of them. Our children need to know the whole counsel of God. It's our job to diligently teach them.

Well, wait a minute, isn't this the OT? We're not under the OC. Does this really apply to us? Yes, for two reasons.

1. Who's quoting this Scripture in Mark's gospel? Jesus is. He expects his followers to obey this command.
2. In the NC the demand for obedience is not less than the OC, it's more. If you're a Spirit-filled believer in Jesus you've been brought into a greater covenant by a greater high priest with greater promises and greater demands.

We have been equipped with greater grace from the Holy Spirit to walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

**Heb. 2:1** says we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard. Why? Because we're in a greater more amazing covenant than the OT saints ever were. Hebrews goes on to say if the OT saints were spanked for not obeying, how much more will we be if we neglect such a great salvation.

So the way we love God with all of our heart is through heartfelt obedience to his commands.

Jesus says if you love me you'll what? Obey my commands. We can't say we love Jesus if we don't obey his commands. And we also can't say we love Jesus if we don't even know what his commands are.

So we love God with our heart by knowing commands, obeying, and teaching our children diligently the commands. By the way: how diligent do we need to be? **Read 6-9**

That's pretty comprehensive. All the time. Loving God is not something we turn on and turn off.

Now, again we need to be careful to not to try to make too much distinction between heart and soul. Heart is usually the center of someone's affection and desire, the soul is the inner life. Is there really a difference? Maybe some nuance, but for the most part what God seems to be getting at is the whole of the person.

We do have one other aspect here which is might, or strength. And I do want to tease one thing out here and another back in Mark. One thing about strength is that it's a physical manifestation of love. It's not just desiring on the inside of the person, it's actually doing the hard work - and by work I mean actual work, actual living - out of love.

Sometimes the way we love our wife is to actually do something for her. Make a garden or paint a room or build something. It's not just kind thoughts and kind words - it's actual action.

Well the same is true for God. Are our actions, our lives - the things we spend our strength on - are they loving God? Are we spending our strength and might for the glory of God in Jesus Christ?

We often spend strength on a lot of things. Hiking, camping, sports, gardening, house projects, video games, movies, businesses, jobs. There's all kinds of physical exertion (or lack of exertion) that we do. Can we make a direct connection between how we spend our strength and our love for God? And just being honest? Not trying to justify what we do because that's what we want to do. I'm not saying you can't have fun or build

things or whatever. But can we honestly say we're loving God with all our might? Our strength? Because we're commanded to. It's part of the first and greatest commandment. **Turn back to Mark 12.**

Now in **Vs. 29** Mark adds something to Deuteronomy. Heart, soul, mind, strength. Apparently Jesus mentioned mind as well. And I think it's easy to gloss over this. But there are a lot of Christians who don't consider loving God with their mind. Their not growing in their understanding of the Bible or doctrine or theology. They're focusing their minds on worldly things. They get caught up in arguments or situations or discussions. They read a lot of books or blogs or social media and they use a lot of mental power on it and really at the end of the day it doesn't matter. And it doesn't really do anything to love God.

On my phone there's a little thing in the battery settings that will tell me how much time I've spent on different apps. And it'll tell me how much battery power I've used on each app every day. I don't look at this anymore because it's too convicting but it's there.

Imagine you had that for your brain. How much brain power do we spend on all kinds of things that have nothing to do with God? And how much of our mental battery power is actually used trying to figure out how we can better know God and love God?

I think we might be a little surprised.

But this is the most important command. The first - the first and foremost of all the law: Love God with everything that you are.

Now, how many of you after hearing all that feel good about your level of love for the Lord? I don't. In every one of these ways I fail over and over. I think about things that have nothing to do with God. I spend time and energy on things that have nothing to do with God.

You guys know this. This is the first and greatest command and we break it all the time. What's the answer? Well, the answer is to ask forgiveness. But how do we do this? How do we love God more?

Two ways. First, ask him to increase your love for him. Ask him to convict you of things that get in your way of loving him. How we spend our time or effort or thought life? Maybe you need to reorient your calendar.

Second, remember why we love God at all. John says we love him because he first what? Loved us. One of the reasons we fail to love God is because we forget that he first loved us. That while we were yet sinners - wretched enemies - he had mercy and pity on us and saved us. And not just wiping away our sin, but seating us in the heavenlies with Jesus, giving us an inheritance and hope, rescuing us from Satan and his schemes and bringing us into a family. We focus on the gospel.

Remember when the woman was wiping Jesus feet with her hair and the Pharisees rebuked Jesus. "How could you let this woman - probably a former prostitute - touch you?" Jesus said 2 men had debts to a master, one 50, one 500. He forgave them both. Who loved the master more? The one for whom 500 was forgiven. What does that mean?

One of the ways you guys that our love and devotion and awe of Jesus increases is when we understand our sinful wretchedness. When we realize our sin is exceedingly sinful. Because it's only when we realize just how sinful we are that we realize how much grace God has given us and that we love him back all the more.

I've met a lot of people who claim to be Christian but don't have a lot of love for God. Do you know what the one constant theme is in all their lives? They don't actually think that they're all that sinful. Oh sure they're sinners, but not that bad. They've never been strung out on meth or done hard time or been like those prostitutes. And because they have a low view of their sin, they have a low view of God.

Sometimes the best way for us to love God is to look our sin squarely in the eye. To come to terms with it. So that we might be reminded of the amazing grace of God in washing white as snow.

**Pray**