

Jason Upchurch - Mark 12:28-34 - The Good News Loves Our Neighbor

Well, as I mentioned last week we are slowing down a little bit to dive deeper into what Jesus means by love God and love neighbor. This whole situation with the scribe revolves around these 2 commands which Jesus calls the greatest commandments.

And I think it's fair to say that if there's anything we should be sure that we understand as followers of Jesus it's what the Lord Jesus says the most important commands are. So I want to slow down and tease these out a little. And this morning specifically with loving our neighbor.

These 2 commands are amazing in many ways.

Just to give you one way that they are amazing is that they really sum up everything God has already commanded us to do. In the OT, there were 613 laws that the Israelites were to follow. Now, to be honest with you I don't know who counted and came up with that number, but that's the number everyone gives.

But let's say that's true. How do you even begin to abide by 613 laws, especially when none of the people of God had their own copy of the Law? No one had their own Bible. No one did daily devotions or home Torah studies. How do you keep all of that?

Well, you can boil it down to love God and love neighbor. Basically every law God gave comes under the umbrella of love God or love neighbor.

Even in the 10 commandments, most people divide the 10 commandments into the first table of the Law and the second table of the Law.

The first table are the first 4 commands - no other gods, no images, don't take the Lord's name in vain, keep Sabbath. That's how we love God. And second table are the commands to love neighbor: honor parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery or steal or bear false witness or covet.

And that's how it is with the rest of the 603 commands. They either focus on loving God or loving neighbor - or both.

Love really is the central ethic for the people of God.

That's why Jesus says: "So whatever you wish others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." **Matt 7:12**

That's what love is: Doing. It's doing, it's action. Doing to others what we would want them to do for us.

Now, as we saw last week loving God is hard. And it takes gospel motivation to love him. We love him because he first loved us.

I would argue that loving people is harder than loving God. Why is that? Because people are just the worst. God is perfect. God is merciful and kind. God is always right and always just. And even when we're commanded to love God we know we should because he's worthy of all our devotion.

But people are sinful and wretched. And our love for humans is often unlike our love for God.

We never have to forgive God. God's never sinned.

We are called to forgive people. People sin against us all the time and sometimes it's very deep.

God is also wise and he rules the whole universe and the course of history by wisdom.

People are often foolish and blind to their foolishness and their foolishness often affects us. I've done foolish things thinking they are actually wise and it affects people.

And then people are often strange. In John Piper's book *This Momentary Marriage* he talks about how spouses deal with two things: sin and strangeness. Sometimes spouses sin against us, sometimes they're just strange. And this is really true with all people. Not everything people do that we don't like is sin or even foolishness. Sometimes it's just weird. And we're called to love weird people.

So although the command to love God is primary, I think the command to love people is often more difficult.

So we have this second command. How do we keep the command? How do we do it? And let me tell you we're going to spend some time in an unexpected place.

We could go to the parable of the Good Samaritan and talk about how everyone is our neighbor and how we often learn how to love one by watching unbelievers do it better than we do.

We could go to **1 Cor. 13** where Paul gives us a list: love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy or boast.

But actually I think Jesus here tells us exactly what he has in mind. His two two replies to the scribe to love God and love neighbor are just quotes from the OT. Last week we saw the quote is from Deuteronomy. The quote to love our neighbor is from Leviticus 19.

So let's look at where it was originally written. **Turn to Lev. 19:9-18**. The command that Jesus quotes is technically in **Vs. 18**. But you know when you quote a movie to someone? When you quote the one line what you're expecting is the that person knows the whole context of what you're quoting and why. You're referencing a whole section by a simple one liner. That's what Jesus and the apostles often do in the NT. When they quote a line from the OT they're not just cherry picking the words. They're expecting us to connect the whole context to what they're talking about. That's what's going on here. **Read 18; 9-18**

So this is the context of what Jesus is quoting. And I want to spend a little time here because it's important for us to understand what he's getting at.

First of all, remember last week we saw that the command to love God was from **Deut 6:4-9**. Hear O Israel, Yahweh your God, Yahweh is one. And you shall love Yahweh.

Remember our love and devotion to Yahweh is defined by Yahweh. He determines what loving him is, not us. We don't get to decide. Actually, it appears that for the most part **Vss. 1-8** are about loving God - sort of a recap of the commands to love God.

Well, in the same way, Yahweh determines what loving our neighbor is, not us. We don't get to decide what love is or is not. Notice how throughout the section we read it says "I am the Lord" or "I am Yahweh." He says it at the end of **Vs. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18**. Five times. That's interesting. Why say that about these commands?

Because he is making it clear that he determines what loving our neighbor is. And these are very clear commands.

And just like last week we need to understand that our love for neighbor isn't determined by our feelings or by sentiment or what the culture thinks loving them is.

Doing things with your boyfriend that you should only do with your husband isn't love. Giving the cold shoulder to your neighbor because you don't want to talk to them isn't love. Using someone's preferred pronouns isn't love. God defines love.

Now, just really quick. When we're reading through the Law we need to think in terms of principles more than specifics. The specifics are important to a degree, but when you read a law in the OT, your first question should be: "What's the bigger principle being taught here?" Sometimes we're given the bigger principle, sometimes we're just given the example. But often the principle is what we should be thinking about.

So let's look through these at the examples and principles.

A. Be Generous to the Poor. Read 9-10

Now, it would be easy to read this and think, "I don't have a field and I certainly don't harvest it so I'm good." But the principle here is that how we love our neighbor is to be generous to them.

But what does be generous really mean? First of all I think it means we need to plan for generosity. The land owners in Israel's day had no idea who would be wandering by their field come harvest time. They didn't have migrant data for sojourners coming across the border. God just said to do this.

Make sure that you don't harvest to the edge of your field. Leave some on side and in the corners of your field so that those who are poor can come and harvest a little. And when you go through the field, if you drop anything don't go pick it up.

Remember in the book of Ruth she was gleaning in the field of Boaz? He was fulfilling this command by having some spare for the poor. And Boaz told his workers "Hey, leave some bundles of grain in the field for her. Help her out."

This is loving our neighbor. It's planning to be generous to those who might need help, even when we don't know who they are.

The other principle here is that love demands hard work. Initially I was thinking "love encourages hard work." But actually I think it's love demands hard work because I think this is the biblical ethic. Notice that this isn't a hand out. The field owner doesn't go harvest and give out grain. No, the field owner simply provides the opportunity for work. And the poor and sojourner are required to go do it

Again, in the book of Ruth when Boaz invited Ruth to the table of the workers to eat roasted grain she realized it was extravagant kindness. No one would expect this kind generosity and certainly not to a Gentile.

The biblical work ethic is "Anyone who is not willing to work, let him not what?" Eat.

Listen, loving our neighbor means we need to call them to work hard. And work excellently. Christians should be known as the hardest working people in society. In the place you work your boss should ask if there are more people at your church he can hire. When unbelievers see your home, they should understand that work is happening and being done.

It's not loving our neighbors to let them think they can just live on government handouts and not have some sort of gainful employment or operate a household well.

It's not loving our teenage/20-something neighbors to let them think they can just exist in our basement until they're 29 while they do nothing and contribute little or nothing to the home. That's actually stealing from parents.

I don't even think it's loving to our very little neighbors to just give them allowance handouts. Make them work for it. Love is generous but that generosity is a planned generosity that demands hard work.

The gospel says: Let the thief no longer steal but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. **Eph 4:28**

That's gospel transformation.

The gospel also calls us to provide for relatives, including older parents, as well as members of our own household. If we don't we're worse than unbelievers. **1 Tim 5:8**

Are there times when we're between jobs, laid off, injured, maybe we got fired or whatever? Sure. And while we don't have fields we can go glean from, we do have various social programs that can aid us. I think those are fine for a season - we pay into them.

And as someone who has been out of work I'll tell you it can be hard. It's difficult and hard to keep going and looking for a job. Why is that? I think especially as men it's hard because we are designed by God to provide and if we're not doing that it's going against the image of God in our design.

It's easy to think love is just giving out everything someone needs. It's not.

B. Love is honest. Read 11-12

So love is honest. And honesty expresses itself in a variety of ways.

We don't steal from our neighbor. We don't take that which is not ours. I know this seems obvious but all sin seeks to justify itself. "Well, they took something from me, so I'm going to take something from them." Or "It doesn't matter, it's insignificant."

This could be stealing time at work, stealing tax money, stealing your brother's toys, stealing money, stealing food. I've bought and sold vehicles over the years and I think almost every time I've sold a vehicle people have asked me if I would put less money on the bill of sale. They want to pay less taxes.

Which is an interesting situation because they would claim that that is an act of love. I'm doing them a favor - it doesn't really hurt anyone it's just a little less in taxes they have to pay.

The problem is if we do that we have no integrity. We're liars and we're also thieves. And you can't lie and steal with your neighbor and claim that you love them. And if we're going to be dishonest in this area, where else are we going to be dishonest?

I've been at restaurants and coffee shops where people will lie about their birthday to get a free dessert or drink. I remember reading the book *Freakonomics* and one of the chapters talked about how millions of American children disappeared in one year, 1987. Millions; they just vanished. It was the year the IRS required social security numbers for dependents on tax returns.

What is stealing? It's any wrongful taking of what's not yours. And the easiest way to figure out if you're stealing is to simply ask: If the person who owned it were standing there with you would you take it without permission? Would you do what you're doing if they were watching?

And if your actions would change if they were there then you're not loving your neighbor. You're stealing from them.

And the same thing with deal falsely. **Read 11**

Dealing falsely is basically conning people. It's stealing or taking some kind of advantage because you're either lying to them or withholding some truth that would change their actions if they knew it.

It's the proverbial used car salesman who doesn't tell you that the brakes are bad. It's failing to disclose hidden fees on your cell phone contract. It's not telling someone the things that are wrong with the item you're selling on Craigslist. Proverbs talks about unequal weights and measures. And it's a form of lying. It's not being honest with the situation.

And it's even more serious if you take an oath. **Read 12**

When you swear by the name of Yahweh, you are taking an oath using God's name. "I swear to God" or "I swear before Yahweh." This is usually in marriage or some sort of legal contract.

Ecc. 5:4-7: When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

We often promise things very flippantly even vowing to God. Jesus says let your yes be what? Yes. And your no, no.

I don't know how many times a day I'm asked by my kids to do something or other. And the reality is that our lives have so many moving pieces very rarely do I commit to something. "We will try to go to the park this weekend." "I'll try to look at your broken bike this week." I don't want to commit to something I might not be able to fulfill. Now, just a caveat on that: we do need to actually commit to things. Sometimes we need to commit to not doing something. Other times we need to actually follow through with what we've said or make hard deadlines for ourselves to get things done.

That project that's been sitting? You gotta execute sometime. Do what we say, honoring our oaths is loving our neighbor.

Love is generous and love is honest.

C. Don't take advantage. Read 13-14

So, remember we're talking principles here. What is oppression? Oppression is where you have the advantage over someone and they are kind of at your mercy.

Your neighbor mows your lawn for an agreed price, but you don't pay them right away. You could. You've got the money, but decide not to.

You tell your kids to do 5 things and then they get to do something fun and instead you make it 7 things or 10 things. I mean, what are they going to do?

Your buddy buys your lunch and you keep forgetting to pay them back. They gave to you, but you don't give back to them.

It's when we use our position and situation to disadvantage others. This is the husband who always buys nice things for himself but never nice things for his wife. The older brother oppressing the younger children because they're stronger. The mechanic shop charging extra when they shouldn't because what are you going to do? You need a car.

It's the in home care worker stealing from their client or abusing their client.

And the example here is not putting a stumbling block in front of a blind person or cursing a deaf person. I don't think too many people go around trying to trip blind people - you'd need to be a certain amount of sick to do that. Or swearing at deaf people behind their back.

But it's the image. When we take advantage of people that's what we're doing. They're blind - as it were - they're at our mercy. And so there's a level of trust that they are relying on for day to day needs that we are called to ensure they get.

And just as it is offensive to trip a blind person or curse a deaf person, it's offensive and hatred to oppress our neighbors.

D. Love is not partial. Read 15-16

The sin of partiality is the sin of giving favor to one class of people simply based on their class. Or it could be disfavor on one class. The classic example is racism.

We are quick to give justice to a certain skin color, or we're wary of a particular ethnic group. And we justify it: well, I know a lot of - enter your category - that acts like that.

Jewish people this, Hispanic people that, black people this, white people that. No. That's the sin of partiality.

With all the MeToo movement and the ChurchToo movement a few years ago there was this idea of “Believe every woman.” We even saw that during a Supreme Court nomination. A woman is accusing a high profile judge for wrongdoing. We should believe. Why? She’s a woman.

And the answer is no, we don’t believe every woman. “Why wouldn’t you believe her, why would she lie?” Because that’s not biblical justice. It’s not fair to women and it’s not fair to men.

Biblical justice says we’re going to evaluate the situation based on the facts and evidence and testimony. Both sides get a chance to tell their story.

Proverbs 18:17: The one who states his case first seems right until the other comes and examines him.

That’s why in our society lady justice is blindfolded and holding a scale. She can’t see the parties because if she did they might sway her. She simply hears the evidence and weighs it. That’s love. True biblical love for neighbor.

And that’s what we would want if we were accused. We would want to know justice would happen. Or if we are the accuser, we should want to know that justice will be served.

And here, the issue of partiality is based on economics. Which is often what happens in our society. We’re not partial to the poor. The poor aren’t some special oppressed class who are always beaten down by the man. Are they sometimes? Sure.

At the same time the rich aren’t always evil, greedy oppressors.

I remember working at a granite fabrication plant and one of my co-workers asked the owner why he got to make so much money and this other guy was just over minimum wage. He actually asked the owner this. And the owner looked up at the 30,000sf building and said, I’ve got \$600k into this building and a few million work of tools and granite slabs. How much did you put into it? Zero. He also provided employment for 80 people and he wore ratty old jeans and drove a 10 year old van but he had a nice house on the river. He wasn’t mean or oppressive. He was providing for a lot of people.

So not only in our heart do we not prejudge, we also don’t slander our neighbor. Slander speaking things that ought not to be spoken about the person.

It could be false accusations. It could also be stating truths that are not supposed to be shared as well. This happens all the time, but particularly in legal situations where parties are trying to discredit each other. The more you can discredit the other party, the more weight your case has and the more likely you are to win.

That’s not how we love our neighbor.

E. Love from the heart. Read 17-18

In both of these commands the issue is the heart. We don’t hate our neighbor in our heart. And we don’t bear a grudge. What that means is that we don’t have unresolved conflict. We seek to resolve our difficulties quickly and in a godly humble manner.

How? First, we reason frankly with our neighbor. This means we just need to be honest with them about whatever is going on. We need to have difficult issues.

If you’ve got beef with a long time friend, go talk frankly with them. It’s hating them to bear a grudge in your heart. God says: go speak frankly. Just go have an honest conversation.

And don’t take vengeance, don’t try to take justice into your hands. It’s not up to you to punish your neighbor, that’s what the justice system is for.

And of course he sums the whole thing up by the command that Jesus quoted: you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.

How would we want our neighbor to love us? If we were in their spot, how would we want them to treat us?

If I were buying something from them, how would I want them to deal with me?

If they had a problem with me, how would I want them to handle it?

If I were down and out, how would I want to be shown generosity?

Turn to John 13:34-35. Where do we get this motivation to love each other? It's from the gospel. When Jesus calls us to love sinful wretched people who are the worst, he's calling us to do the same thing he did. **Read 34-35**

It's a new command because now we've seen love embodied in Jesus. We've always been commanded to love, but now we have a clearer and greater picture.

How does Jesus love us? That's our picture to love one another. In the same exact way that Jesus loved us, that's our expression of love to each other.

And notice, this love is how the world will know that we are Christian's. If we have Jesus's love for one another.

Pray