

The Jesus Creed

Mark 12:28-31

Series: Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

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Worship: We Love Because He Loves

Key Sentence:

What is better than taking seriously what Jesus says is the most important?

Outline:

I. The Challenge (Mark 12:28)

II. The Most Important (Mark 12:29-30)

III. The Second is This (Mark 12:31)

Mark 12:28-31 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

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Mark 12:28-31

What is the most important thing in life? What is the most important thing to do now? I imagine we've all asked ourselves questions like this at one time or other. Even at 63 I sometimes find myself asking "what do I want to be when I grow up?" The answers can be trite and meaningless or profound and deep. Quora, a question and answer website has a question that's been around for a while and has received many answers. Most of them, for whatever reason are from the country of India. The question is "What is the most important thing you can do today?" The answers range from simple to trite to profound. For example the most recent answer came during a time when the Indian city of Mumbai was experiencing a catastrophic flood. Advait Pramod Dubey has practical advice for "what is the most important thing to do?" he says "Give shelter to people if they ask you for help. Charge your mobile phone and keep it ready as it can be useful at crucial times. Make a team to arrange food for people stuck in rains and if you are rich enough to fund it yourself. Please do it. You can buy at least biscuits for them." That's being the helper in a crisis.

But many of the answers are not so useful. Vikas Verma, a student at Rajasthan Technical University says the "most important thing in life is self-satisfaction. Irrespective to age, you must be satisfied with what you are doing in life. If you are not then make change in your life. Then you will be happy. Basically, everybody wants to be happy so that's [the] most important thing in life." It's a pretty common point of view. Sitangshu Das says "The world is entering a phase where people are able to fulfill all their needs yet for some reason or other are not happy. The thing that needs to be done right away is to identify the things that make you happy." Debayan Bhattacharya says "The best thing you can do today, with respect to you, is be better than what you were yesterday, and that might be about improving any certain aspect of yourself." This quickly becomes trite. The first thing on his list is "Work harder at the gym, push yourself to do that one rep extra," Sumanth Gururaj says "Take the stairs & avoid the elevator. Eat healthy. Think good thoughts. Forgive all. Make a goal, if you have none. Do a charity, if you haven't done earlier. Make the best use of your time. In short 'Right now, do the right thing.'" Well thanks, that's helpful. Not. But sometimes what's trite is helpful. Shelby McCowan quotes the famous graduation speech by U.S. Navy Admiral William H. McRaven. "If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task, and another, and another."

By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed. Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that the little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you'll never be able to do the big things right. If, by chance, you have a miserable day, you will come home to a bed that is made. That you made. And a made bed gives you encouragement that tomorrow will be better. So, if you want to change the world, start off by making your bed."

What's the most important thing to do today? Maybe it is making your bed. But I'm convinced even making your bed for the purpose of self-satisfaction is ultimately futile, and unsatisfying. It misses the target, falls short of the mark. What's the most important thing to do? If we find our answer on Quora we'll probably miss the target more often than not because we will have the wrong target. What's the most important thing to do? Maybe instead of asking the internet at large, we ought to ask the person best qualified to give the answer.

On the second of April in the year 30, Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds. The next day, according to Mark's gospel he went to the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers, saying "My house shall be called a house of prayer." Both acts were of deep frustration to the leaders of the Jews, the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees. So during the following week they tried to challenge his authority and reputation, even while making plans to kill him. They asked "By what authority are you doing these things." But the question he asked in response shut them down. So they tried trick questions: "Should we pay taxes to Caesar." Again his answer was unassailable. When they asked "whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" he showed them that they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

One of the scribes, a lawyer and religious scholar who was probably also a Pharisee, seems to have been deeply impressed by Jesus and by the answers he had given. We have no idea how much this particular scribe knew about Jesus, nor do we know his name. We do know that over and over in the Gospels, the wisdom and teaching of Jesus are an amazement to those who heard him. Mark 1:27 "And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority!'" Mark 9:15 "And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him." Mark 10:24 "And the disciples were amazed at his words." When Jesus gave his answer to the question about taxes to Caesar, the leaders who heard it marveled. This particular scribe hears all this and concludes that the question he's been sent to ask Jesus is a serious one. It's a "what's the most important thing to do?" kind of question. Maybe he's concluded that Jesus is the person most qualified to give a serious answer.

Certainly as we read the gospels, and as we move live as believers, I think we should come to that conclusion. If you're going to ask this question, "what's the most important thing to do?" Quora is not the place to go for our answers. Jesus is the one we should go to. Because what is better in life than taking seriously what Jesus, the person most qualified, says is most important? Mark 12:28-31 *And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"*²⁹ *Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*³⁰ *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*³¹ *The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* There is no other commandment greater than these."

"Which commandment is the most important of all?" In other words "What's the most important thing to do?" Remember, the scribes were the legal and religious scholars of their day. They were all about making distinctions within the law: lighter and weightier commandments, smaller and greater, ranks and categories of commandments. Palestinian scribes would eventually find 613 commands in the Old Testament. Even today you find these commands listed, references given, and evaluations made as to whether they are still in force. These commands became the heart of religion for most Jews. The question of which command had first place was one that would occur to any scribe.

The words "most important" in the ESV translate the Greek word 'protos' from which we get our word 'prototype.' Which commandment is the prototype or key to all the others? Kent Hughes says, this question "came from the scribal mind game of trying to reduce their religion to a single axiom, as for example when Rabbi Hillel was promised by a Gentile that he would convert if Hillel could give him the whole Law while he stood on one foot. Hillel answered with a version of the Golden Rule: "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor; this is the whole Law—the rest is commentary." Other Jewish teachers had given answers like "Love the Lord with all your life and one another with a true heart." Though he had been sent to trip him up, this was now the kind of answer the scribe was looking for from Jesus, having seen that he answered all the other less profound questions so well.

Scot McKnight was one of my professors at seminary. His best known book is called *The Jesus Creed*. I blatantly stole the title for this sermon. In *The Jesus Creed* McKnight teaches that while faithful believers created all the other creeds of the church, like the Apostles' Creed, Jesus himself, in his answer laid out these two commands, the summary and essence of God's law, as a creed for living.

McKnight says “A scribe asks Jesus about the essence of spiritual formation and Jesus gives him an old answer with a revolutionary twist: ‘Love God and love others, and love God by following me.’ . . . This is the Jesus Creed. It is the foundation of everything Jesus teaches about spiritual formation.” McKnight says “The Jesus Creed has become a silent partner in my life. Sometimes when I sit, sometimes when I walk, sometimes when I lie down, but always when I rise in the morning, I simply and quietly recite to myself and before God these verses. It punctuates my morning; it sets a rhythm to my day . . . It constantly reminds me, not as a command but as a confession that whatever I do throughout the day is to be shaped by loving God and loving others.” McKnight has chosen to take this answer seriously because what could be better in life than taking seriously what Jesus says is the most important?

Jesus himself grounds his answer in the central truths of the ancient Jewish faith. Verse 29 “Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” These is the *Shema*, the Jewish prayer repeated every morning and evening from Deuteronomy 6:4. *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad*. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” The command to love God stems from his uniqueness as Lord and God. This is the fundamental truth of our Jewish heritage, that there is one God, Yahweh, the eternal and self-existent God of all creation, of all time and space, who has graciously made himself known through covenant and steadfast love.

In verse 30 Jesus extends the quote to Deuteronomy 6:5 “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” We’re dealing with three different languages here, with Hebrew, Greek and English. The first Hebrew word, *lēbāb*, is used of the pumping organ, the heart, but far more often of our entire inward, immaterial being, including our mind, our will and our emotions. The Greek term Jesus uses is similar. The second Hebrew word, *nepesh*, often translated soul or spirit, is larger, encompassing the whole of life, physical and spiritual. And the final word, *meod*, is larger yet, the totality of what we are. It’s usually an adverb, exceedingly, but is translated into Greek as mind or strength. Jesus himself, here in our verse uses these two words, mind and strength, to capture the one Hebrew word. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament says “The three parts of Deuteronomy. 6:5: *lēbāb* (heart), *nepesh* (soul or life), and *me’ōd* (muchness) rather than signifying different spheres, seem to be, semantically, concentric circles. They were chosen to reinforce the absolute essence of personal devotion to God. Thus *lēbāb* denotes the intention or will of the whole person; *nepesh* means the whole unity of flesh, will, and vitality; and *me’ōd* accents the superlative degree of total commitment to Yahweh.”

The point is believers are called to love God with all they have and all they are, all the time. Scot McKnight points out that God loves his people this way, with a love that is totally committed and honorable. He quotes Lewis Smedes memorable language, “Yahweh is the sort who sticks with what he is stuck with.” Our love, McKnight says, is a response to his love. To put it simply, as John’s first letter says, “We love because he first loved us.”

Don’t miss this. God’s steadfast love and sacrificial redemption are the cornerstone of this creed. If God had not loved us and rescued us there would be no hope of us loving God or others. I was momentarily in Deuteronomy this week and noticed how passionately God expresses his love. Deuteronomy 7:6-9 “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.”

Like the people of Israel, slaves in Egypt, we were slaves to sin. Jesus tells us that. But as slaves we could not free ourselves. It was the perfect life of Jesus and his sacrificial death on the cross and his victorious resurrection that redeemed us from that slavery, just as the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. But though the events are very different, God’s motivation is constant and unchanging. The Lord your God is God and keeps covenant and steadfast love, hesed. The Lord set his love on you. The Lord loves you. The Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand.

It is only on this foundation that we can hope to love God and others with all we are, to confess this creed Jesus proposes. William Lane's commentary says “Because the whole man is the object of God's covenant love, the whole man is claimed by God. To love God in the way defined by the great commandment is to seek God for his own sake, to have pleasure in him and to strive impulsively after him.” Is there any question that in the checklist of life as a believer this should be the first item? That in targeting our lives this should be the target? As those who have seen our own sinfulness, those who have stood at the foot of the cross where Jesus died for our sins, who know the miracle of his resurrection and who have accepted by faith his payment, what could possibly be more important in our lives than loving the God who saved us?

Yet, somehow that daily truth eludes us. We live our lives on a grid of daily duties and distractions, thinking about the next thing we must do, being sidetracked by the next entertainment, worrying about the future, regretting or celebrating the past, seeking or avoiding relationships, yet forgetting or neglecting what is most important, love for our creator and redeemer. All the activities of our minds, our hearts and our hands are supposed to be lived out and made meaningful by the fact that we are doing them out of love for God. Any activity of mind, heart or hands that cannot grow out of love for God should not be done at all. We'll come back to this at the end of this message as we look forward to the remainder of this series.

Before we get there, though, we have to recognize that Jesus does not stop. He adds, verse 31 "The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe asked for one command. Jesus says "the one command is love God and love others." They are inseparable, essential to each other. We can't love the unseen God except that we express love to those he has created. We can't love people unless we love the God who made them and died to call them his own. We can't do either except for the foundation of he loved us and redeemed us.

The epistles of John nail this, 1 John 4:20: "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." To love God with heart, soul, mind and strength is seen in loving others with heart, soul, mind and strength. You'll ask me 'well, where does that leave self - it says love your neighbor as yourself?' You don't have to worry about that. Trust me, you already love yourself. Even if you hate yourself, it's still self-focused. The whole goal of the Christian life is to get from the natural state of self-focus to the supernatural state of loving God and loving others as Jesus did.

It's a very short checklist, a very clear target: love God, love others. When you wake up in the morning and make your things to do list, these are the only two things that need to be on it. The rest, as the t-shirts say, is just details. Don't get me wrong. I know working this out in practice is wildly challenging. Impossible without the help of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of God's Word. But you'll never work the complex practice unless you recognize the simple principal.

This truth made an indelible impression on the apostles and their teachings. We've already heard what John said. James, in his usual brief style, agrees "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right."

Paul, in his usual style, expands this. He says "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." The scribe who asked is also impressed. He literally exclaims "Beautifully said, teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Because these two commands go together, and are essentially one, it is legitimate to also say that we love our neighbors, love others with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. To love God with the totality of our being is put into practice as we love others with heart, soul, mind and strength. That doesn't mean there aren't things we can do to love God directly. There are, many. We love him in prayer, praise and worship. We love him in receiving his word as authoritative in our lives and seeking to understand and obey it. We love him in fleeing from sin and temptation, confessing our failures as they occur. We love him in trusting when circumstances get difficult. We love him by lament.

But, we also love him by obedience, and a lot of that is focused on others. We love him by obeying his commands to love and care for others. Whether we are reading the epistles of Paul and James and Peter or applying the principles of Leviticus and Proverbs, we find many concrete attitudes and behaviors that we are to have toward others. Some of these are loving others with our minds, engaging others to help them think through things. Some of these are loving others with our hearts, coming alongside other to comfort and care and pray with and love on. Some of these are loving others with our hands, coming alongside to help in any kind of need.

Clearly this topic of loving God and loving others is not going to be covered in one sermon. If this is the summary of all of our response to the love of God with all of our lives, it's going to take more than one sermon to explain. But isn't this what we want? I mean deep down as a believer don't you want to really love God fully, to really love others, to stop just loving yourself? What could be better in life than taking seriously what Jesus says is the most important? Isn't that what you really want? I think you do. I think I do. The elders think we do, and have planned this summer series to give us more than one week to apply the Jesus Creed to our lives.

So beginning next week we'll be focusing for eleven weeks on specific ways to love God and love others with our minds, with our hearts or with our hands. Some of these are very simple and practical things, some of them will be very challenging yet still practical things. Some will be just a few verses of Scripture, some many, and a few will also be pointing you to specific good books that amplify what we'll be able to say on Sunday morning.

Let me close with a few examples. Next week we're going to look at a few verses in 1st Peter which remind us to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in us. This is loving God and others with our minds, thinking through the challenges currently confronting the Christian faith and understanding and being prepared to talk about those challenges in helpful ways. A good book goes with this one, *Confronting Christianity* by Rebecca McLaughlin. If things had gone according to plan we would have started a combined youth and adult Sunday School class this week built off this book. That's been postponed, but we'll get to it. In the meantime, next week, we'll focus on how we can be prepared to give an answer, to love God and others with our minds.

Second example. Two weeks from now we'll be looking at the topic of gratitude. This is an aspect of loving God and others with our whole hearts. Being grateful is also one of those things that blesses others, that blesses God, but that is also a huge blessing to ourselves. The week after that we'll be preparing to love God and others with our hands by looking at the role good works plays in the Christian life, and how we are saved not by but for good works.

I could go on and on. Loving God with our minds by telling ourselves his truth and not believing lies. Loving others with our hearts by taking seriously the one another commands of the New Testament. Loving people with our hands by learning hospitality, even in the midst of coronavirus. We'll take a practical look at this creed, this one overarching command, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. And to 'love your neighbor as yourself.'