

The greatest commandment * Mark 12:28-34

June 4, 2023 * Bring a friend Sunday * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

At this point in the service, we like to look together at a passage from the Bible because we believe that when we read the Bible, we hear God speaking. The Bible isn't just the highest point of human wisdom, like the Charter or Rights and Freedoms or the Communist Manifesto; the Bible is the Word of God; it is everything we need to know from Him about Him and us and the world and life and so we go to the Bible to see what God has to say.

And the question that I want us to think about today as we open God's Word is this: is Christianity all about rules? Is following Jesus all about following rules?

Have you ever heard that before? I think there's this idea out in the cultural consciousness that Christianity is just about rules and as long as you keep the Ten Commandments and all the others, you're ok. Don't drink, don't smoke, don't play cards on Sundays or go to the movies (that was an older generation); just do the right things and God'll be happy and then you'll get to go to Heaven when you die.

Is that true though? Is Christianity simply a legal code where you check the right boxes to earn God's favour? Is following Jesus just following rules? Or is there something more to it than that?

This is where we go to God's Word to find out. So join me if you will at Mark 12, starting in verse 28. There are Bibles in the pews there so you can follow along with me if you'd like. That way you can see where I'm getting this from so you know I'm not trying to pull a fast one on you.

Mark 12:28 – Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with some of the religious leaders of His day. Just like there are Liberals and Conservatives and Democrats and Republicans today, there were different people on the religious spectrum back then and each party had attempted to trip up Jesus but He managed to outwit them all. And so verse 28:

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Now this was an important question because at this point in the Jewish religion, the rabbis figured out that there were 613 different laws in the Old Testament. Can you imagine? 613 rules to follow! I have a hard enough time remembering all the rules in Monopoly; can you imagine trying to keep 613 rules to keep God happy? As you can imagine, people were interested in knowing which of those 613 rules was most important.

And so, having been asked, Jesus goes back into the Old Testament to answer the question:

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

Jesus goes immediately to what was probably the most obvious candidate for the Greatest Commandment in most peoples' minds, because this was an important idea not just in Jewish religion

generally, but in their everyday lives. People would recite these words every day because they were central to their identity as the people of God.

See, thousands of years before, God had rescued His people from slavery in Egypt and then decided to DTR. Do you know that concept? DTR? This was an idea floating around when I was in university: you'd be hanging out with another person for a while and then you start thinking that maybe you'd like to be more than 'just friends'? That means it's time to DTR, define the relationship.

Well, God rescued this nation from slavery and then said 'Listen, you might not know much about me, but I've given you freedom and life. So there are two things that I want you to know. First: 'the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' That's a roundabout way of saying 'look, I know you saw other 'gods' in Egypt but the reality is, I'm the only one. There is no other God but me.' And two, since I've already delivered you freely with no effort on your part from slavery and given you a brand new life, it makes sense that you would respond to me by loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.' Which is to say 'with all of your will and intelligence and desire and emotion.' Love the Lord your God (the ONLY God) wholeheartedly and unreservedly.

So, as important commandments goes, that's a big one.

But wait, Jesus says, there's more! And He goes on, verse 31:

31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Jesus takes the commandment to love God and ties it to another commandment – the command to love your neighbour. He's actually quoting Leviticus 19:18 where God says: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' See, loving God is not just about loving a Divine Being you can't see; loving God involves loving your neighbour that you CAN see. Loving the people around us is one of the ways that we express our love for God.

And not just loving them half-heartedly or belatedly. It's that 'as yourself' part. I assume that you love yourself and take care of yourself and look out for your own well-being; Jesus says: 'do that for your neighbours too as much as you do for yourself.'

So: what's the greatest commandment? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. In another, similar passage (Matthew 22:40, Jesus actually says 'All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments,' which is to say that those 611 other commandments are just expressions of these two related ones). So, love the Lord, love your neighbour.

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. (That's the 'Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God is one' part).

33 To 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."

At one point in history, people got to thinking that keeping the Laws about sacrifices was all you needed to do to keep God happy. They kept the rules, they did the sacrifices, but their hearts weren't really in it

and their behaviour reflected that. They said they loved God but they were definitely not loving their neighbour and that cast doubts on their so-called love for God.

By Jesus' time though, some of the teachers, like this guy, started realizing 'what you do should express your love for God' and so they were at the place where they could say 'actually loving God by actually loving your neighbour is more important than all the other rules because by loving God and loving your neighbour, theoretically at least, you're inevitably going to follow those rules.'

And Jesus said 'yeah, you're right!' This guy was onto it. He knew that the most important thing you can do is love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself.

But notice what Jesus says in verse 34:

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Now that seems strange to me. Because it seems as though Jesus has agreed with this guy's conclusion, and yet 'you are not far from the Kingdom of God' implies that this is not the end of story. The religious leader seems to get it; he knows that the most important commandment is 'love God, love your neighbour.' Shouldn't that get him into heaven?

If Christianity is all about rules, then yes. If you keep these rules then God will love you and then you will get to live with Him forever.

But here's the issue – 'Do you love the Lord with **all** your heart and mind and soul and strength?' Like, really love Him, with ALL your heart, not distracted by money or work or hobbies or other things, putting Him first, even above yourself in all that you do?' And 'do you love your neighbour AS YOURSELF?' Wholly and unreservedly caring for others as thoroughly as yourself?

I'm going to bet 'no' because I can't even do that. None of us can love the Lord and love our neighbour as fully and completely as the Lord deserves. We have this tendency as human beings to gravitate away from God and toward ourselves and that separates us from Him. God created each and every one of us in love with good plans for our lives and yet we tend so say 'I don't really care what You think; I'm better off on my own.' And when we act as though He doesn't exist, when we do what we want, when we become self-centred rather than God-centred that pushes us even farther from Him.

If Christianity was all about following rules, then we'd all be screwed because none of us loves the Lord as fully and unreservedly as He deserves; none of us loves our neighbours as fully and completely as we love ourselves. And that means that we would all fall short of the perfection that's required to enter into the presence of God.

But you know what else God revealed in the Old Testament when He 'DTR'd' with His people? Exodus 34:6, He said 'I am gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.'

Instead of wiping us out for our refusal to honour Him, God sent His Son to deal with our sin and make us right with God. 1 John 4:9-10 says:

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

God is so full of mercy, so abounding in steadfast love, that even though we ignore His good will and act like He doesn't exist, He chose to redeem us rather than to abandon us. He took the initiative and paid for our sin on the Cross of Jesus. That's why this thing is front and centre in our church. It shows us what God's love looks like.

At the Cross, Jesus took my sin, your sin, my refusal to acknowledge our creator, your desire to do your own thing and paid it back at the Cross. Jesus didn't just come to teach people like the religious leader in our passage how to be a better person; He came to make him a brand new person who lives for God. He offers that same life to us freely to each and every one of us. We don't earn it by keeping rules; we receive it as a gift, taking hold of it by trusting Him.

Following Jesus is not about following rules; it's about receiving the love of God that we see on the Cross and then walking with Him in our daily lives. Christianity is not about ritual, it's not even primarily about the ethical; our Christian faith is spiritual – being restored to relationship with the love who loves us.

Well, if that's the case, does that mean that all that other stuff is irrelevant? The stuff about loving God with all your heart and soul and strength and loving your neighbour as yourself? Did we waste our time reading that Bible passage at the beginning?

No, but as believers, we come at it differently.

Instead of feeling like we have to love the Lord and love our neighbour out of guilt or trying to keep God happy, we love the Lord and love our neighbour out of love for what He's done. We love Him because He first loved us.

We love the Lord and love our neighbour in response to the Cross-shaped love He's shown to us.

The Cross is really is the key to it all.

It reveals God's love for us; Jesus gave His life to give us life. When we embrace it for ourselves, we become God's beloved children, cared for by the sovereign Creator of all things.

And then, because of what HE's done, we love with Cross-shaped love too.

We love upwards – loving the Lord whole-heartedly and unreservedly. We apply all our wisdom and emotion and effort to honouring Him with all of our lives.

And then we love outwards – loving our neighbour the way God has loved us, sacrificially, graciously, fully and completely.

We love the Lord and love our neighbour in response to the Cross-shaped love He's shown to us.

So here's what I want you to do:

Receive the Cross-shaped love of God and love God and your neighbour in response.

Know that God loves you fully and completely. Know that ignoring Him separates you from Him. And know that He is offering you the blessing of being restored to Him by trusting in Him.

There is no amount of rule keeping that will make you right with God; I know that from my own experience. For years, I tried to be good enough for God, doing enough good things and following the right rules, but how good is good enough for God? For every good deed it seemed I managed to fall into two more bad ones. It was miserable.

But then I realized that I was trying to earn God's love. And yet, the Bible tells us that He has already shown us His love. Remember 1 John 4? This is how God showed His love among us. He isn't waiting for us to get our act together; when we're in pieces, Jesus died for us and now He offers us a brand new start in life.

Look at the Cross, what Jesus did to win you back and know that He did it for you, to restore you to the God who loves you.

Receive the Cross-shaped love of God and when you've done that, **love God** and love neighbour in response.

Love God back for the way He's loved you. Spend time with Him as you would a friend. Give Him your undivided attention and love. If there are things that are distracting you from the love of God, put 'em away and love the Lord with all that you are.

Receive the Cross-shaped love of God and when you've done that, love God and **love neighbour in response**.

Express your love for God by loving others. Extend to them the same love that God's extended to you.

Love for the unseen Lord is best expressed not just in words, but in deeds of love towards the Lord's people whom we do see (David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters* [BST], 1 John 4:20-21).

And listen, I hope you see that reflected in the actions of those who invited you. If they've done kind things for you, it's not just because they're nice; it's because they're motivated by the Cross-shaped love of God. We've all received God's love and want to share that love with other people. THAT's the heart of the Christian faith. Loving as we have been loved.

If people in churches have hurt you before, have acted in unlovingly ways, then I'd like to apologize for them, because that's not our way. It's not supposed to be. It's possible that that person was treating religion as a rule sheet; as long as I check off the boxes, God will love me and it doesn't matter what I do. But it DOES matter what we do.

If we've received the Cross-shaped love of Jesus, then we should love with a Cross-shaped love ourselves.

Receive the Cross-shaped love of God and love God and love your neighbour in response.