

Love God With All You Are, And Your Neighbor Too

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture is a reading from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 12, verses 28 to 44.

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?

The most important one, answered Jesus, is this, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.

[1 : 15] To love him with all your heart and with all your understanding and all your strength. And to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.

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

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, Why do the teachers of the law say the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.

David himself calls him Lord. How then can he be his son? The large crowd listened to him with delight. As he taught, Jesus said, Watch out for the teachers of the law.

They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.

[2 : 18] They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely. Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.

Many rich people threw in large amounts, but a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

They gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything, all she had to live on.

This is the gospel of the Lord. Lord, praise to you, Lord Christ.

Well, thanks for that scripture reading, Brian. Good morning, everyone. My name's Andrew, one of the pastors here, and I'm happy to share God's word with you. Why don't we go to the Lord in prayer as we begin? Lord God, I pray that in the preaching of your word, that you would convince us how worthy you are of a heart, soul, mind, and strength kind of a love.

A love that gives everything to you, for you have given everything to us. Be honored in the preaching of your word, I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. All right, so we're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, chapter 12 today, and our focus, as many of you have probably noticed, is on this concept of discipleship, right?

[3 : 49] And more specifically, Jesus' words, deny yourself and follow me. Deny yourself and follow me. You've been hearing that a lot over these past months, and I'm really curious to know how

many of us here hear these words, deny yourself and follow me, as a warm and honoring invitation into a great privilege.

Or how many others of us might hear these words as a harsh and repressive challenge from like an authoritarian leader. You know, during the early part of my life, even growing up in the church, calling myself a Christian, I would have identified with the second group, the latter group.

I would have said that being a Christian is so inconvenient, so restrictive, so limiting, so prohibitive of my many desires, I felt like my faith was antithetical to delight, antithetical to the desires of my heart.

And while that thought still enters into my mind from time to time today, one thing that's really helped me was a moment that I had as a high schooler at a summer youth retreat. My counselor, he sat down with me in the grass, and he opened up his Bible with me to a passage that I'd heard, I'd read, you know, hundreds of times before.

It was Psalm chapter 37, verse 4. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. You know, all my life, I had read that verse as meaning, delight the Lord, make him happy, make him delighted, and then he will give you your heart's desires.

[5 : 18] But this counselor helped me realize that actually, the passage was not telling me to delight God with my obedience in order to get something from him, but rather it was telling me to find my delight in the Lord.

And that I could trust that he would then give me the desire of my heart, because if I was delighting in the Lord, he would be the desire of my heart. And he would not withhold himself from me ever.

And this was mind-blowing. This was revolutionary for me. One pastor, John Piper, he's built a whole ministry based on this idea called Desiring God. This idea affected me, so many people like me, because so many of us had grown up in the church knowing that the right answer to the chief purpose of why we existed was to glorify God, to honor God, to worship God and obey him.

But the thing was, we all thought our life's purpose was to glorify God at the expense of our enjoyment, at the expense of our deepest desires.

But what John Piper so clearly and concisely preached was that the chief end of humanity was not to glorify God by restricting our enjoyment. No, he preached that the chief end of man was to glorify God by enjoying him forever.

[6 : 33] Like God didn't make us to be his sad servants living lives desiring things we were never supposed to want or have. No. God made us to be his cheerful children, made to desire and enjoy him forever, made to love him as he loves us.

And see, this is the heart of discipleship. This is the goal of deny yourself and follow me. It's not just another rule to add to the list. Discipleship is about rightly ordering our hearts, our desires, what we love, denying our misdirected loves and redirecting them toward what our hearts were made to truly love.

To quote the theologian Jamie K. Smith in the book *You Are What You Love*, he writes this, Discipleship, we might say, is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.

See, again, the aim of discipleship is not merely knowing the right things with our heads or doing the right things with our hands. It's about loving the right person with our hearts. So to quote Smith again, Discipleship is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing.

And he asks, like, what if instead of starting from the assumption that human beings are thinking things, we started from the conviction that human beings are first and foremost lovers? How would that change our approach to discipleship and Christian formation, he asks.

[7 : 59] The question I want us to consider today is not merely what should we know and what should we believe, but what are we hungering for? What are we thirsting for? What are our hearts inclined towards? Or more simply, what do we love?

What do we love? And maybe your initial thought is, well, I love a lot of things. I love sushi. I love movies, dogs, volleyball. I love to travel. And these things may all be good and true and fine.

Sure, we all have lots of lesser loves, relative loves, but my question is, what do we love first? What do we love most? And this may seem like a pointless exercise, like does it really matter?

Or who cares? But while this might seem like an unnecessarily abstract question to consider, deep down, aren't we all looking for something or someone ultimate to love?

To devote our hearts to something or someone ultimate to orient our whole lives around. An ultimate love that can rightly order all our other loves. That's what we need.

[9 : 02] Think about it. You might love dogs, but isn't it important to love your neighbor more than a dog? Right? Like, what would it say about you and what kind of world would this be if it was okay to love a dog as much as a person?

Right? Or even amongst people, isn't it more important to love your mother more than your next door neighbor? And we could go on and on and on, but my question is, all the way down this chain of loves, who or what should we love the most?

What ultimate love should condition all our other affections? Because if we haven't identified this most foundational, all-consuming love that assumes first place in our hearts, then our lives are basically just being lived on a whim, on unexamined, subjective intuitions about what is right and good and true and worthy.

And maybe some of us are okay with this kind of relativistic way of living in this world, and we're not convinced it really matters what we love as long as we enjoy it and nobody gets hurt. But according to Jesus, it absolutely matters.

It absolutely matters what your highest and greatest love is. And in fact, the whole of the Christian scriptures bear witness to the fact that it is precisely because humanity has loved the wrong things that this world is as messed up as it is.

[10 : 22] See, it's not just that we haven't loved enough. It's not just like, you know, we just needed to put more love, more positive energy into the world. No, the problem is that we failed to love rightly.

The problem with the world is our misordered, misdirected love. It's that all of us have been looking for something to devote all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength to something most worthy to live for, something most worthy to die for.

And yet we've set our affections upon all kinds of created things, sure, even some really good things, but things that were never designed to bear the weight of that kind of love and worship and adoration.

And this is what the Bible calls sin. And this has only ever led to competition and conflict and chaos. You have one tribe saying, I love this with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Another tribe says, I love this with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And what happens? What happens? They go to war because of their conflicting ultimate loves, which they are willing to fight for, kill for, and die for because they've made these conflicting loves ultimate.

[11 : 33] And so some, particularly modern, secular Westerners, have suggested that maybe the solution is we should just not love anything with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

Maybe we should just love with moderation. And in one sense, they're right. Nothing in this world is worthy of our ultimate, untempered love. But the solution can't be just to dial down how much we love because not only will that never actually solve the problem of toxic polarization and tribalism, but my question is, is a moderate love the only kind of love that was ever meant to exist?

Is the world truly better without an all-your-heart, soul, mind, and strength kind of a love? Is there really nothing in all of reality that we can conceive of that might be worthy of that kind of all-consuming love?

In our scripture passage today, God's word reveals to us something, someone most worthy of this exact kind of love. Someone who is not of this world and yet came into this broken world.

And this is the big idea today. The life-giving Lord demands and deserves our love. The life-giving Lord demands and deserves our love. Now, where we are in Mark's gospel, here in chapter 12, in the passages, you know, right before the text that was read today, Jesus has just been questioned by the religious leaders regarding various questions of the Jewish law, questions about politics.

[13 : 01] Should we pay taxes to a foreign emperor like Caesar? Questions about marriage and the afterlife. If a woman loses her husband and remarries, who will she be married to in the age to come? Tough questions, tough questions that raised a lot of debate and required tons of knowledge about the Hebrew scriptures.

But of course, none of these questions could stump or trap Jesus. They only became opportunities for him to demonstrate his knowledge and his wisdom and his high regard for the Hebrew scriptures.

And so in our text, verse 28 says that one of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating and noticing that Jesus had given them good answer after good answer after good answer.

He had one big final and foundational thing he wanted to hear from Jesus. No more traps, no more trying to stump him, just trying to get to the bottom of who Jesus is and what he's about. And it says he asked him, of all the commandments, which is the most important?

Like of all the 613 commandments in the Torah, which was the most important? And so Jesus being a faithful, orthodox Jewish teacher, he rightly cites and paraphrases the very words of Moses from Deuteronomy chapter 6, the central affirmation of the Jewish faith.

[14:11] We call this the great Shema, which means to hear or to listen. Verse 29, Jesus says, the most important one, answered Jesus, is this. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

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 Jesus even cites Leviticus chapter 19 to throw in a bonus, second place commandment, verse 31.

The second is this, love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. And then upon hearing Jesus' answer, this teacher agrees. In verse 32, he agrees, well said, teacher, the man replied.

You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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 the burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Now if you are a Christian, even if you are not a Christian today here in this room, most of us probably won't find this exchange between Jesus and the teacher of the law to be very surprising.

[15:16] And in fact, this is probably what so many of us, Christian or not, love and admire about the person of Jesus. He keeps the main thing the main thing, right? He keeps it simple, love God most and then love your neighbor as yourself.

And we're like, yes, of course, love is the way, more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. And I think this, I think the tendency for many of us, modern Western readers of scripture is to kind of read this in a liberating, sentimental way.

Maybe even as if Jesus is saying, there is only one command we really need to obey and all the burnt offerings and sacrifices and other commandments don't really matter as long as we love God in our hearts.

Like, oh, how nice of Jesus to just simplify it and bring it back to love. We love that, right? But if this is how we're reading the passage and Jesus' answer about the most important commandment, then I don't think it's hit us like it's supposed to.

Look with me at verse 34, how verse 34 concludes. It says, after Jesus gives this answer and they have this exchange, it says, and from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions.

[16:26] Like when the crowds and the teachers of the law heard Jesus' answer, they were like, oh, how sweet, bravo, great answer, Jesus. Thank you for simplifying and condensing the 613 commands of the Torah for us.

No, they seemed to be hit by the weight of what Jesus was saying. See, when Jesus gave his answer, he wasn't actually lowering the bar of Moses' law. No, he was actually demonstrating how shockingly high the bar truly was.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength isn't some lower standard. It's actually the highest of standards, the most difficult of all the laws and commands in the Torah.

You know, like to the relativist liberals who maybe want to advise and suggest a moderate, tempered, or generalized, ambiguous kind of love and sentimentalism that doesn't pay attention to the specifics of God's will.

Jesus was saying, no, love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, like in every detail of your lives through obedience to every jot and tittle of the law. Out of the whole of your soul, met with every breath and the whole of your life, with all your energy, vitality, and spirit.

[17:35] Out of the whole of your mind, with all your intellect and all your rational capacities, and even out of the whole of your strength, meaning all of your embodied might and ability, and even with all your material resources, this was an all-demanding love.

And this was equally disturbing to the religious conservatives who prided themselves on following all the rules and devoting all the details of their lives to following the law because Jesus was saying, external obedience is not enough.

You actually have to love me. Like out of your whole heart, meaning the very command center of all your affections and desires and commitments, Jesus was saying to them and he is saying to us that the most important command upon us is a demand for the whole, the whole of who we are, inside and out, in our actions and in our affections, in our dealings and in our feelings.

Do you understand what he's saying? Do you understand what a show-stopping answer this was for Jesus' Jewish listeners? Can you begin to feel the weight of this command that we have perhaps become overly familiar with?

He's demanding everything of us. Not some generalized, unthinking, sentimental, yeah, sure, I love God kind of a love. And not even the most meticulous, mere obedience.

[18 : 56] This was the greatest and most important law to love the life-giving Lord, Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth. To love this giver of life with the whole of the lives he's generously given to us.

And my question is, do any of us love God this much? Has anyone here loved their maker out of the whole of their heart, out of the whole of their soul, out of the whole of their mind, and out of the whole of their strength with every second of their existence?

What God demands of us is a terribly, terribly high standard. And rightly so because he is God. He is the Lord. It is he who has made us and not we ourselves. As the Shema says, the Lord Yahweh, the I am, our God Yahweh is one.

That means he is indivisible, absolute, the one and only, without rival, the maker and sustainer of all of life, eternally pre-existing all things in glory and honor and power, worthy of all the love that ever existed.

And not because he's an egomaniac, but because he's God. He's the only one that can bear the weight of an all your heart, soul, mind, and strength kind of a love.

[20 : 07] Anything else we try to set that kind of love upon will ultimately crumble under the weight of such love and eventually disappoint us and then discourage us from loving again.

Like, think about it. Maybe your ultimate love is your spouse or your romantic partner or maybe your love is set upon that future longed-for partner that you hope to have if you're single. But even as great as that person may be, will they ever be the most supremely worthy of your undying affection? Is it not possible that they will let you down, hurt you, forsake you, break your heart? That is the danger and the inevitable demise of placing our wholehearted love upon anything other than God, the God who has promised to never leave us nor forsake us.

So you see, this isn't some arbitrary command issued by a megalomaniac God. It's the only kind of divine command and demand that actually makes sense. And it's absolutely imperative for us to understand if we desire to be citizens in this God's kingdom.

But what's interesting here is that even while the scribe agrees with Jesus, Jesus doesn't say, nice, you got the answer right, you're in. No, he says in verse 34, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

[21 : 26] Like you're close, but you're not far, but you're not in. You're close, but you're not in. You're not far. You're close, but you're not in. And this means that it's not enough to just agree about the greatest commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

No, we also need to know who exactly this Lord is. And this brings us to verses 35 to 37. Here, Jesus subtly indicates to them who the Lord is that demands and deserves their love.

And it's him. Yahweh come to them in the flesh. And notice how he goes about making his case. He doesn't give them some irrefutable philosophical argument or give them some grand, massive, undeniable miracle.

No, he gives them a Bible study. Because for Jesus, the scriptures bore perfect, undeniable, authoritative witness to who he was as both the messianic royal son of David and the Lord Yahweh at the same time.

Look what he does here. First, in verse 35, he recognizes that everyone agrees that the coming Messiah would be a son of the great King David. A great figure from Yahweh would one day, a great figure whom Yahweh would one day enthrone at his own right hand, establish his kingdom forever, put all his enemies under his feet.

[22 : 40] And yet, there's one extra detail that David himself mentions in Psalm 110 that Jesus cites here about this messianic son of David. David writes, the Lord, that is Yahweh, Yahweh said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.

So what Jesus is asking is how can David's Lord also be his son? Like no father, especially no king in a traditional Jewish society would ever call their son their Lord.

And yet, that's what David seems to do in Psalm 110. And Jesus is asking, what's up with that?

What's up with that? Now, Jesus doesn't give an answer here, but he's giving a huge hint.

A huge hint as to who the Lord is. A huge hint as to what kind of Lord he is. He's both the messianic son of David and David's Lord.

See, all the Jewish people in the temple were definitely expecting a Messiah. And maybe they were even willing to believe that Jesus of Nazareth might be that messianic son of David. But for the most part, their conception of this expected son of David was that he would be some kind of political revolutionary who would reestablish the kingdom of Israel under the reign of David's ancestors.

[23 : 58] But what they didn't understand was that they needed so much more than a son of David.

They needed a son of God. They needed Yahweh himself. And this is why Jesus told the scribe who had the right answer about the greatest commandment that he was not far from the kingdom but he wasn't exactly in it either.

Because no one realized the true identity of the Lord. They didn't realize the life-giving Lord who demanded and deserved their love was standing right in front of them and that he was at the very same time the messianic son of David.

And this is so key to understanding who Jesus is. This is so key to understanding what it means to be a disciple and to deny ourselves and follow him. So key to loving the Lord our God rightly with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength we have to understand that Jesus the human son of David is at the same time the Lord.

This is the only way we will ever enter the kingdom of God. This is the only way we will ever love the Lord rightly. We have to understand the two natures of Jesus Christ that he is human the son of David and divine the son of God.

And if we don't hold both we will never understand the nature of this Messiah's kingdom and we will never love the Lord nor our neighbors as we ought. Now Jesus gives an example of this in verse 38 to 40 about how if you don't understand this you're not going to love your neighbors rightly.

[25 : 22] Calling out the teachers of the law who care more about respect and status in the marketplace and the synagogue than the widows they were supposed to care for. The Pharisees failed to love the widows all because they didn't understand the true nature and identity of the Lord who demanded and who deserved their love.

See this phrase they devour widows houses what was going on here what this means is they were greedily cheating widows out of their property. So in ancient times widows had little or no power in the courts and it was not uncommon for a husband to appoint in his will a Jewish legal expert a scribe or a Pharisee to be the executor of his widow's estate.

So essentially this gave the executor authority to oversee the widow's finances and assets so it would not be hard for a corrupt teacher of the law scribe, Pharisee to find legal ways to trick a widow out of her house and other property.

And this is precisely what the religious leaders were doing. And this would make sense for them to do if they didn't realize who the Lord truly was. If your conception of the Lord this Lord that you're supposed to love if your conception of this Lord is that he's just some kind of high and holy God in the sky who put you in charge of the temple and over the affairs of poor widows it wouldn't make sense for you then to care more about your status than people.

It would make sense for you to even deceive yourself into thinking that your status and your religiosity were proof of your piety and of your love to the Lord. When you don't know the true identity and nature of the Lord you will always care more about status than God and people.

[27 : 02] You may even deceive yourself into thinking that status and religiosity are confirmation that you love the one true Lord. The teachers of the law genuinely thought that they loved the Lord with all their heart soul, mind and strength but they were genuinely mistaken and they loved really their status and their money and public opinion far more than they loved the one true Lord.

But while these religious leaders they failed to love the Lord rightly Jesus was able to identify someone in that temple that day who did illustrate how to love the Lord with all her heart soul, mind and strength.

Verse 41 Verse 41 says Jesus is sitting there in the temple watching the crowd give their free will offerings to God in the temple many rich people are throwing down big money and Jesus doesn't critique these folks it's good that they're giving but most notable to him most notable in the eyes of

God is this poor widow who also comes in dares to go in amongst these big ballers and shot callers right and put her own meager contribution next to theirs two very small copper coins worth only a few cents in the Greek these coins were the smallest currency that existed two lepta less than a few cents even according to some commentators and Jesus does this verse 43 calling his disciples to him Jesus said truly I tell you this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others they all gave out of their wealth but she out of her poverty put in everything all she had to live on Jesus sees this woman that no one else sees he values her offering when the rest of the world sees her as having nothing valuable to offer the world offered the world valued her at two cents but God values her as a whole life offered up to him and these are the economics of the kingdom of God no gift is ever too small in his eyes it might just be that the time and money you spend to take a kid out from our youth group to Boba the moment you spend to stoop down and give a little preschooler a high five or the moment you spend packing those little mustards into those brown bags for our loaves and fishes ministry to serve our houseless neighbors it might just be that such free will offerings as those are more valuable in the eyes of God than the million dollar deal commissions your tithing to our church or consider this what if Jesus cares less about what you give and more about what you hold back what if the application for some of us is not hey give more but hey what areas in my life am I treating like they don't belong to

Jesus like doesn't all we have belong to the Lord the widow understood this she gave in greater proportion because she had a greater faith she gave in greater faith everything she had to live on trusting that her father in heaven would give her that day her daily bread she committed to first of all saying hallowed be your name your kingdom come your will be done because in many ways she had a clearer view and understanding of who the Lord was of who Yahweh was a clearer view than the teachers of the law who loved money and status more than the Lord you know I can end this sermon holding up this poor generous widow as the model for our capital campaign as we're trying to finish paying off this building and I could end with an application like you know try harder to be generous and trust God like this widow give it give your all just give it all but you know there's this little detail in the Greek that indicated to me that actually this widow is not primarily meant to be a mirror for us to see ourselves for us to compare ourselves to but she's more like a window for us to see

Jesus in the Greek Jesus says she out of her poverty gave all she had the whole of her bios that is the whole of her life does that remind you of anyone in the person of Jesus God has revealed himself as the life-giving Lord in more than one life-giving way not simply by giving us life but by giving up his own life his bios for us not simply by breathing his spirit into our lungs but by breathing his own spirit out upon a cross this life-giving Lord loved his father in heaven with all his heart soul mind and strength and he at the same time endured his wrath against our sins he endured the judgment upon all our misdirected loves upon that cross and in doing so he has shown us how to love our neighbors even more than ourselves he gave it all you might even say he loved us with all his heart soul mind and strength a love without limits from that cross and it's only when we've encountered him as both life-giving

[32 : 18] Yahweh on high and life-giving son of David on a cross that we will ever love him as he demands and as he deserves we'll ever love him as he's loved us first will you pray with me Lord help us to see ourselves first and foremost not as thinkers or doers but as lovers Lord would you redirect our loves toward you would you convince us that there is no one more worthy of our love our heart soul mind and strength love than the life-giving Lord Jesus Christ who didn't just give us life but gave up his life so that we might be brought back to you Lord what do we have that we have not received what do we have that does not belong to you Lord let us give lives let us live lives of sacrifice of acknowledgement that everything we have is yours and would you in doing that receive glory and would you bless the world in our generosity

I pray in Jesus' name amen