

# The Most Important Commandment

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[ 0 : 00 ] There's a story that I've told in school assemblies more times than I can remember. It's a story you probably have heard before, and it's this.

It's about a man who died, and after he died, he found himself walking along a corridor. At the end of the corridor, there was two doors. One said heaven, and the other said hell.

Well, he knew which one he wanted to enter, but he was curious as to know what was behind each of the two doors. So he had a peek behind each door, heaven and then hell.

And before he went into heaven, he decided that he just wanted to know really kind of what the differences were.

And he was quite stunned by how similar in many ways they both seemed, visually at least.

Because behind both doors, there was an enormous crowd of people.

[ 1 : 06 ] Behind each door, the crowds were gathered around a large table. And both in heaven and in hell, the tables were covered with loads and loads of amazing looking food.

But on closer examination, he could tell that the atmosphere in heaven was so much better than it was in hell. Everybody in heaven was eating the food, whereas everybody in hell was sat there staring, looking absolutely miserable.

So before he went into heaven once and for all, he decided just to go in and ask somebody in hell what was going on.

He said, I see that you look also miserable here. And I also noticed that for all the food that is set out before you, nobody seems to be eating anything. Is there something bad with the food?

He said, no, there's nothing wrong with the food. He said, are you allowed to eat any of this food?

He said, yes. He said, well, why aren't you eating any of the food?

[ 2 : 18 ] And it was then that he noticed for the first time that everybody sat around the table was holding a very, very long spoon. A couple of metres long. And he was told that they were allowed to eat and enjoy as much of the food as they wanted, except there was one rule, that they had to use the long spoons.

And of course, nobody could actually reach their mouths with these spoons because they were so long. They could pick up the food, but they couldn't feed themselves.

Well, he didn't want to stick around in hell that much longer. So he left and went back into heaven and then realised what the difference was. They still had the spoons.

They still had the food. But they fed one another. And every time I tell that story in a school and assembly, and I normally tell the story with the aid of a couple of spoons sellotaped to the end of bamboo sticks and a bowl of Smarties.

And no, we've never poked out any eyes. But we never tell the story. We end up with those words of Jesus. Love your neighbour as yourself.

[ 3 : 32 ] How different would the world be if everybody did that and lived not for ourselves, but for one another? Never once has there ever been any sense of doubt in the room when, during that conclusion, that there's something wrong or peculiar or weird or strange or wacky about that set of ethics.

See, that story actually exists in different versions in many different world religions. Nobody knows exactly where it originated from. But nobody's going to argue with it.

You go into any culture, any religious tradition, any time, any place, pretty much anybody and everybody will agree that the concept of loving your neighbour as yourself serves as a pretty good foundation for any moral system.

No one's going to question it. So it should come as no surprise when Jesus says that the most important commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself.

Except that's not what he says. Now, Mark chapter 12 is a fascinating chapter because it's all about questions.

[ 5 : 02 ] And Jesus is being fired with questions. In fact, up to this point, they're all trick questions. As teachers of the law try to trick him, try to catch him out, asking him questions about a range of different subjects that they're spending all day talking about.

Tax, marriage and life after death. Nothing's changed in 2,000 years. But as they're absorbed in these themes and they're trying to catch Jesus out, there's an onlooker who's unnamed but is another teacher of the law.

Who comes at Jesus not with a trick question but with a genuine one right from the heart. And it's this. Having been listening to all of the conversation that's been going on. Says, Jesus, what's the most important command?

You know, the 613 different Hebrew laws. He's saying, what does it all boil down to? Is there one most important thing? What is it?

What matters most? Now, Jesus does go on to say, love your neighbour as yourself. But it's not where he starts.

[ 6 : 17 ] His response is to quote what is known in Hebrew thought as the Shema. Where he quotes from the Hebrew scriptures and says, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God 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 only when he has said that first, as the primary thing, does he then go on to say, Love your neighbour as yourself.

If we're to understand what it means to love your neighbour as yourself, it won't do to just drop the first bit. And yet, and yet, it doesn't stretch the imagination too much to be able to just hear the atheist say, But do we need the first bit?

Surely it will suffice just to say, We'll love your neighbour. You don't need God to be able to do that. Now, at face value, that's a very rational sounding point.

[ 7 : 32 ] But I want to say three things in response to the hypothetical atheist response that I might have just cited. And the first would be this. And it's not necessarily to do with this particular subject, but atheism in general.

Is that whenever I get into a conversation with somebody that says, Well, there is no God. I don't believe in God. I try to say pretty early on, Well, tell me about the God that you don't believe in. Because I can almost guarantee that the God that you don't believe in is the God that I don't believe in either. As a Christian. And I say that because it's so important for us to understand that God is continually rejected because of a false understanding of who God is.

Jesus' mission was to show us who God really is. That's the first thing. The second thing I would want to say, and this is more specific to the issue of this greatest commandment, putting God first before love of neighbour, or rather establishing the inseparability of the two, is I'd want to say that, well, if there is no God, and if there is no absolute truth, no ultimate truth, because we're here by accident, by random chance, then on what basis can you believe that it is right to love our neighbours as ourselves?

If we're not here by design, by purpose, but by random chance, why is it that as human beings we have this inner moral compass?

[ 9 : 35 ] This thing on which we can agree, why is it that we find that people will say, yeah, that makes sense. If only we all loved one another as we love ourselves. And why is it then that if we are here just as the result of random chance, why would we appeal to the use of rational logic to make that point?

But the third thing, and I think this is where we find the teachings of Jesus going right to the core, right to the heart of the matter, is this.

Jesus does not actually say that the most important commandment is to believe in God. Jesus does not say that the most important commandment is to believe in God.

Jesus does say that the most important commandment is to love the Lord your God. And the word agape is used to describe that love right here in this passage.

So not just believe in God, but to love the Lord your God. And not just to love the Lord your God, but to love the Lord your God with all your soul, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength.

[11:00] How can love be a commandment? Well, it seems here that Jesus is talking to something that lies at the very heart of the matter. That deeper truth underlying that very question, what's the most important thing?

It's this. We all have a God. Or if you like, we all have a faith. It's a nonsense to talk of people of all faiths and none as though it's possible to go through life without having a faith.

Of course, you might say that, well, I don't believe in God. That itself is a faith. But behind every human life that has ever been lived, there is always the pursuit of a set of values of that which is important.

There will always be something that we engage in with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. Whether we call that God or whether we call it something else, it's in our humanity to pursue that which is ultimate.

that sense of restlessness within us. You take that away and we cease to be human. It may be a moral code.

[12:25] It might be the things that we go after, whether we call that security, whether it's the pursuit of our career, whether it's the pursuit of financial well-being, the pursuit of an identity, just being accepted by others.

Maybe it's multiple things, but the fact is, is that it is part of our human nature to pursue with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And if it's not God, it will be something else. If God doesn't own you, something else will.

Well, let me put that in a different way. If you don't choose to allow God to own you, you will be unwittingly allowing something else to own you.

The point here, I think, that Jesus is exposing so powerfully and so clearly is this question. What is it that you're pursuing with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength?

[13:42] Or to put it even more bluntly, what's your God? You see, when we look deep into our hearts, into the patterns of our lives, as we look back over the years, as we look at our lives right now, the decisions that we make, the things that drive us, the things that make us get out of bed in the morning, it's those things that Jesus is saying.

Take a look at those things. What are they? What's your God? And as much as we can all agree that relationships are vital to life, of course they are.

They're inseparable from all of this, and that's Jesus' point. You take God out of the equation, and what are we left with?

In the 2010 movie called *Up in the Air*, there's a scene where a young man is having second thoughts about getting married.

The wedding ceremony is about to begin, but he's got a serious case of cold feet. He's not sure he can go through with the wedding.

[15:02] Then a family member who's played by George Clooney is sent to talk to him. The young man says, I don't think I'd be able to do this.

George Clooney's character asks, why would you say that today? The frightened young man says this, well last night, I was kind of like laying in bed, and I couldn't get to sleep.

So I started thinking about the wedding and the ceremony, and about our buying a house, and moving in together, and having a kid, and then having another kid, and then Christmas, and Thanksgiving, and spring break, and going to football games, and then all of a sudden, they're graduated, and getting jobs, and getting married, and you know I'm a grandparent, and then I'm retired, and I'm losing my hair, and I'm getting fat, and the next thing I know, I'm dead.

And it's like, I can't stop from thinking, what's the point? I mean, what is the point? That very anxiety lies at the very heart of human fear.

What's the point? Why are we here? Yeah, relationships, we see the meaning of them, the most important thing in life, of course they are, but even there, what's the point?

[16:55] Jesus says, here's the point. God. He's at the source of every relationship. God's at the source of every love, every craving, everything that is good, and right.

And only when we get that basic, fundamental, simple truth into our lives, and we understand that God loves us, and God loves us unconditionally, and that we've nothing to prove to him, and that we are accepted and loved unconditionally at that which is the most important relationship of all, then we are able to love ourselves, and we are able to love others.

That's the point. One last thing. We're going to pray in a moment.

Verse 32. This teacher of the law who comes to Jesus with the question, what's the most important command, and listens to Jesus' response. He summarizes back what Jesus has said.

He says to him in verse 32, 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 and with all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbour as yourself.

[ 18 : 29 ] And then, he goes on to say something that Jesus hasn't actually said. And this is really important and really telling. Because he says this, this is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Now, the preceding chapter of Mark's Gospel tells us that this whole scene is played out in the temple courtyard. Burnt offerings and sacrifices are taking place left, right, and centre.

That's what it's there for, the temple. And there is this teacher of the law surrounded by other teachers of the law in the midst of burnt offerings and sacrifices being offered every day in order to make things right with God.

Before Jesus, the Son of God, God in human form, this man says, Jesus, what you've just said is more important than any of this going on around us.

Jesus' response, you are not far from the kingdom of God. See, that word that far, you're not far from the kingdom of God, it's exactly the same word that we find in Luke chapter 15 when Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son and describes how the son who has rebelled against his father comes back with his rehearsed speech and while he's still far off, there's the word, the father sees him coming.

[ 20 : 20 ] That's the image. Now here Jesus says, you are not far from the kingdom. the fact that you see that love of God underpinning love in all relationships is so much more important than any amount of religious human effort.

You're getting it. You are not far from the kingdom. And so as we come to pray now, I'm going to invite us just to spend a few moments in stillness as we ask God's Holy Spirit to renew us in that knowledge and in that confidence that love of God is all we need.

and when we know that we are loved and loved unconditionally by him, then we are given that strength to love those people who in human terms we might call quite unlovable.

Because let's be quite clear, these words of Jesus about the greatest commandment are disarmingly simple. but simple does not mean easy.

And that call, that challenge to love your neighbour is not something that comes easily at all times. But knowing the love of God that is there unconditionally for us is the very thing that can set us free to love one another.

[ 22 : 12 ] So let's join together now in prayer. Let's just take a few moments just to be still and in the quiet of this moment to hear those words of Jesus once more.

Those words that say that the most important thing is to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. Lord God, thank you for the power of that most important command to know your love and to love you.

Lord, you know our lives inside out and back to front. You know our lives better than we know ourselves. And you know those things that we can easily place as gods within us.

Those things that we pursue with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Lord, forgive us for when we put other things other than you in place.

Lord, right now in this moment we ask that you would renew us by your Holy Spirit. Renew us in that sense of love for you before anyone or anything else.

[ 23 : 54 ] Holy Spirit, remind us of your unconditional love, we pray. And as we just wait upon God's Holy Spirit now, I invite you just to take a few moments to reflect on his unconditional, unending love for you.

Lord, renew us in that sense of knowing you as our loving Father. God's love for you. And as we wait upon your Holy Spirit to move among us now, so we bring into your presence our relationships, particularly any areas where we may find it difficult to love others.

maybe that colleague or boss or maybe a former colleague or boss, a family member, a neighbour. other. And I invite you before God to hold that tension and that difficulty before him.

Lord, help us to remember that when we draw near to you, we are not far from the kingdom.

[ 26 : 03 ] Lord, help us as we bring these relationships within which we may struggle before you. Help us throughout this week in any conversations that we may have to face, any difficult

interactions that we may have to engage in.

And Lord, where there may have been a relationship or relationships that have broken down altogether, give us that courage and that confidence to do everything we can to make peace.

Lord, give us the courage and the confidence that we may need to initiate a phone call or a conversation. Lord, we pray for healing, we pray for reconciliation.

Lord, renew us in that love of you and that love for others and sustain us in that way that only you can.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.