

Let Love Rule

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[0 : 0 0] Let's just bow our heads in prayer. Father, Jesus has said that we are to love you with all our soul, all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength.

And Father, we acknowledge that we cannot do this in and of our own power. So we ask, Father, that you would bring these words of Jesus deeply into who we are, that they might rule in our hearts to the end, that we will love Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons, one God, that we will love you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we will love our neighbors as ourselves.

So Father, we ask that you would gently but powerfully do this mighty work within us. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So some of you who are familiar with Anglican worship, when you heard me read the text of Scripture, you knew that it was something which, that most Sundays we say that text.

In fact, you might not have really known exactly where it came in the Bible, but now you know it comes from Mark. And it's a common place in Anglican worship to say it. In fact, one of the problems with it is that because it's a common place, we might not really sort of realize how, actually, how offensive it would be to many people in our culture if they were to hear it.

And the other thing is not just how offensive it would be, but actually if you sort of just, you know, take a moment to step back from people being bothered by it, it's actually very helpful and wise because our culture is a bit, its understanding of love is complicated.

[1 : 4 4] It seems simple, but it's complicated. I'll give you two illustrations to help us think about the text, sort of ground our thinking about the text. A few years ago, I was involved in a discipline issue, not connected with this church, but with another church.

And after the discipline issue and the ongoing consequences from it, I got different phone calls and emails from leaders and family members to say that the person involved in the particular issue had suffered enough that they'd had an active healing and they were sorry.

And what was now happening was not loving. And I had to use, I should use my influence to show love and to help these people show love.

Now, what I've left out in the telling of this particular story is that the discipline issue involved the pedophile. And I had a role in unmasking the pedophile and initially confronting him that his secret was known and that we knew that he had in fact been guilty of sexual touching and other types of things of young girls.

And what had happened was that the person involved, the man involved, had claimed that now he'd been healed, that he was very penitent, that he had been healed.

[3 : 2 4] And four of the victims, four of his victims had pressed charges against him. And so that's what led the pastor of the church and other Christian leaders and family members to ask me to use my influence to talk the four women out of pressing charges because they'd suffered enough.

And if I didn't do that, I was being unloving. Now, this is a, this is actually a, this is a more relevant, I mean, I think it's a very relevant story to this text because in our culture, part of the thing which is a bit complicated in our culture is on one hand, we're told that love is love and that we are to love unconditionally.

But on the other hand, we also know that there's a large part of our culture that's involved, especially in matters to do with racism and other types of things, that if you say, no, no, no, love is love, or you need to love unconditionally, then that's actually viewed as being a violation of justice.

That you're not supposed to, in a sense, love in this particular case. And the people involved in trying to pressure me in this particular case, all of the, all of them, I mean, you might, as soon as I say that now, you all would say, George, you did, because in fact, I didn't back down.

I supported the, the women in pressing charges against the, the men, that I did the right thing. But in our culture, and for them, I, that would have been viewed that I was, that I wasn't loving.

[5 : 02] So there's a bit of a, a problem in how we think about love and justice. I don't know if it's as much a case in compassion, I haven't heard about it, but it probably is a case because it's been a constant critique of Samaritan's Purse and the Christmas shoeboxes.

That to encourage things like compassion or shoeboxes is a violation of justice. So we shouldn't just be pre-giving money to children like this, or Christian, you know, we shouldn't be giving money to children like this.

We should be instead combating the structural problems and injustices that lead to there being poverty. So this is not a completely abstract issue, especially on a Sunday like this.

There's another sort of similar type of issue is that the, the slogan, love is love, and the demand of us to love unconditionally isn't really very easy at dealing with the problems of sentimentality, like mere emotion, and with, well, with self-centeredness and selfishness.

I'll give you a particular thing. One of the things that I would be required to do is if there was a man who came to me and he wanted to be, he comes with his, his young, his fiancée, and he wants me to do the marriage.

[6 : 26] And I would ask him a little bit about other marriages and stuff like that. And if I found out that, in fact, he had, in fact, been married for some 15 years, that he was, had three children from that previous marriage, that he'd now come to an end, and that he wants to marry this woman who's considerably younger.

And, well, I, I'd have to not love him. I couldn't just accept that love is love, and I couldn't accept that I should just love him unconditionally.

I'd have to ask him some very, very hard questions. They'd be questions that would leave me sleepless the couple of days leading up to it.

But I'd have to ask him, how does he plan to maintain his financial obligations to his first wife, and in particular to the three children?

And I'd have to ask him, how does he plan to maintain his family?

[7 : 55] Why he left his wife? Love is love. Well, that's just, that doesn't really help at all with self-centeredness, and that's just a sentimental statement.

And if he was to say, well, you know, you're not loving me unconditionally if you ask those types of questions. I'm offended. Don't you all think I would have to press into that claim that I'm loving him, not loving him unconditionally?

In fact, I'm not loving him unconditionally. He's correct. If he wants to do what he wants to do, and I challenge him, I'm not loving him unconditionally. So the question is, am I unloving?

Am I acting in an unloving way? Am I acting in an unloving way? Am I acting in an unloving way? So in light of that, let's look at the text, hopefully briefly, and sort of listen to the words of Jesus.

It helps us to overcome something that at first glance, I mean, we don't really notice it maybe, but at first glance, it's something offensive to a lot of Canadians. But the part that's offensive is actually deeply important and wise if we want to be able to love.

[9 : 04] And here's how it goes. So it's Mark chapter 12, verses 28 and following. Mark 12, 28 and following. And if you're using these little booklets, it's on page 76.

And the context of this is that Jesus has had a series of sort of gotcha types of aggressive questions by members of the elite.

And after a series of aggressive gotcha type questions, which don't work, this fellow has been listening. And now we actually see somebody asking Jesus an honest question.

Like he's just curious. He'd like to know the answer. It's a non-aggressive, non-gotcha question. And here's how it goes. Verse 28. And one of the scribes came up and heard them, that's the different arguments, and heard them disputing with one another.

And seeing that Jesus answered them well, asked them which commandment is the most important of all. Now just to pause here for a second to remind you, a scribe, what on earth is that?

[10 : 07] When you think of this, when you see the word scribe in the New Testament, think of somebody who sort of is like in our culture would be a lawyer and a public intellectual, and also someone, imagine somebody high up in the Privy Council, or just high up in the civil service, maybe an assistant deputy minister or something like that, who has a basic sense about how the system works.

And so when you see the word scribe, think assistant deputy minister, public intellectual, and lawyer, sort of all move together into one.

Somebody who knows how the system works, can speak into public matters, and is a bit of a legal expert. So that's who's speaking to Jesus, and he asks them this question, which commandment is the most important of all?

It's an honest question. Verse 29. How does Jesus answer the question? Now actually, just before I read the answer, if you just pause for a second and think of it from a world perspective, the answer is not obvious.

Like, if you were to ask people, if you were to do a bit of a survey, and ask people, what do you think the most important moral command is? I know one guy, not making this up.

[11 : 23] He said, love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe. Love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe. Look out for number one.

I mean, many people wouldn't come right out and say it bluntly, but that would in fact be the moral command by which they organize everything else. Always look out for number one. And by the way, when I look in a mirror, I'm scene number one.

For many people in the world, like our friend, we have friends here from other culture. For many places in the world, the main moral command that people would say is, do not shame your family.

That is the prime moral command. Do not ever shame your family. For others, the main command would be, don't let others have power over you.

If you think about it for a second, there's not an obvious answer to this question as to which moral command is the most important moral command. So how does Jesus answer it?

[12 : 24] Well, he answers it in a way which, at first, is going to be offensive to us, but actually, if we think about it more, is profoundly wise and helpful. Verse 29.

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

And the second is this, You shall love your neighbors yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. Now, what Jesus does here is he actually quotes from a text in the book of what we now know of as Deuteronomy and a book that we now know of as Leviticus.

And it's a very small little side point, but I think it's a really important one to notice. He doesn't quote, in terms of what's the greatest moral command, he doesn't quote something from the surrounding culture.

He doesn't quote Plato. He doesn't quote Aristotle. He doesn't quote the Stoics. He quotes the Bible. Believe it or not, Augustine, 1600 years ago, over 1600 years ago, he wrote a book called On Christian Doctrine.

[13 : 42] But it's actually not a book about Christian doctrine. It's a book about how to interpret the Bible. And there, he tells you something. When he's telling you this, over 1600 years ago, he's not sharing anything new.

He's basically sharing what people have known for a long time, how to interpret the Bible. And one of the keys that has always been the case for Christians about how to interpret the Bible is that the Bible interprets the Bible.

The Bible interprets the Bible. That you don't go to Freud. You don't go to Jung. You don't go to Jordan Peterson. You don't go to critical race theorists.

You go to the Bible to interpret the Bible. And we see that's what Jesus does. To interpret all of the moral commands, he goes to the Bible. And he says, these two particular Bible texts, these particular moral commands, this is the way.

These are the greatest commands. These are the organizing commands, so to speak. And the other thing about it is, and it's not, the reason it's not translated this way, like the translation's fine, but it misses something which is in the original language, which can't really be translated grammatically well into English.

[15 : 01] And if you see, look at verse 30 again, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. You can misinterpret it and think it's instrumental language, but it's not instrumental language.

It's source language. In other words, what it's saying is that out of all of my heart, flowing from my heart, all of my heart, I am to love the Lord my God.

Out of all of my strength, flowing out of my strength, I am to love the Lord my God. Out of all of my mind, out of all of my soul, heart, out of.

The very center, and by using these four languages, it's saying out of us. And it's a very, very hard thing for us in our culture to even think about how you love with your mind.

Like it actually sounds like the lead up of a joke in a comedy special to talk about loving with our mind. But that's what Jesus is saying here. And so in a sense, because it's trying to capture all of us, it's also saying that out with all of my money, with all of my looks, with all of my job, with all of my family, with all of my possessions, with all of my sexuality, with all of my time, with all that who I am, that out of all of this, I am to love the Lord my God, that this is in fact the first and great commandment.

[16 : 33] Now, do you see the controversial bit about all of this? If you don't, I'm going to circle back to it. Because the fellow's response to Jesus helps us to be clearer about what it is that Jesus has just said.

Look at verse 32. And the scribe said to Jesus, you are right, teacher. Actually, that should be rabbi. You are right, rabbi. It's easy for us to forget that Jesus was Jewish.

You are right, rabbi. You have truly said that he, that is God, is one. And there is no other besides him. And to love him, verse 33, with all the heart and with all the understanding, with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

And when Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to the scribe, you are not far from the kingdom of God. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. So what's the presenting problem with how Jesus answered it?

I think if I was to be sharing this text with a group of non-Christians, the thing that would jump out at them, which they notice, but we don't notice it because we just say it all the time, is, George, are you saying that only Christians can be moral?

[17 : 58] I mean, that's what Jesus says, isn't it? Look at verse 29. You know, what of all the moral commands, what's the most important moral command? Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. I mean, that's offensive. Like, Muslims don't agree with that. Hindus don't agree with that. Buddhists don't agree with that.

In fact, actually, at the time that Jesus said that, other than Jewish people, no non-Jewish person would have agreed with that. The Romans and the Greeks, the pagans, they would have all said, what do you mean? To be moral, I have to believe in this one God, that he's the only God that exists, to be moral?

See, in our day and age, of course, we think that these things are very separate, that you have your views of whether God exists, and then you have your views on morality, and you have your views on justice, and you have your views on love, and these are all very, very separate things.

And yet, Jesus says that this is the most important of the commandments, and the second is like it, that you love your neighbor as yourself. So, is Jesus saying that only Christians can be moral?

[19 : 16] Well, quickly, no. He's not saying that. He's not saying that at all. Any Christian who knows their heart, and any Christian who knows other Christians, will know that it's definitely not the case that only Christians are loving or moral, or that we are more moral or more loving than people who are Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus or atheists or agnostics.

There's all sorts of reasons why we do moral acts and why we fail to do them, and the Bible, Jesus here isn't saying that unless you believe in God, you're going to be immoral. He's not saying this at all.

But, what he is saying, if you just take a step back from it for a second, is actually something which we all agree with, we just don't necessarily think of it in terms of how it connects to God.

So, just think of it in terms of this. Imagine for a moment that you were in Las Vegas on a holiday or for work or something like that, and, you know, during your, every time you went down to the hotel buffet or whatever for your meal, you always notice these two young guys, and you notice these two young guys, you notice how they talked, you notice how much they were drinking, you notice how they dealt with other young women and stuff like that, and you might roll your eyes thinking, yeah, yeah, that's why they say what goes on in Vegas stays in Vegas.

And then if afterwards he discovered that one of the two of them was single, you'd say, well, he's probably going to stay single if that's how he sort of lives his life and deals with, treats women. Or if he doesn't stay single, he should stay single if that's how he treats women.

[20 : 57] But then if you discovered that the other fellow was married, you'd have a very, very different, you'd have a very different set of moral evaluation of him. The existence of the marriage relationship that you, that how one person acts who's single and how another person acts who's married, you're going to have a very different type of moral assessment of them.

So you see, what you've just established is you understand that if there's a relationship involved, it changes the moral universe. And the fundamental claim that Jesus makes and that Christian makes and Christians make is not that I happen to like the idea of the Christian God more than other ones, just like I happen to really like French vanilla ice cream more than any other ice cream flavor.

It's not that, yeah, you know, French vanilla ice cream is the best ice cream flavor. Barbecue potato chips are the best type of barbecue chips and the triune God is my favorite type of God.

No, it's not like that at all. We are making, Jesus is making a claim that God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, three persons, one God, that that God actually truly exists.

That he exists just as much as any one of us exists. In fact, not only just as much but vastly more. And that therefore, every human being has some type of relationship with that God whether they realize it or not.

[22 : 17] And just as being in a relationship changes how you should be living your moral life, if there is in fact a God that does exist, it should change how you live your moral life. We've already accepted the principle.

To give you a different example, imagine that you go off on a camping trip or a hiking trip with some people from some inveterate hiker types. I won't start mentioning names but you sort of know who you are. And you think you're out on Crown Land or you believe you're in Crown Land and you get a little bit lost.

Maybe more than a little bit lost but you don't want to get worried. And as you're a little bit lost and you now didn't come back to your cars at the right time but you find an abandoned building on Crown Land.

And so you believe it's an abandoned building. It looks a little bit run down. It definitely doesn't look as well kept up as your house and there's nobody around. And the fact is you're cold and et cetera, et cetera and there's some stuff in there so you make yourself at home in the building and you maybe even rip up some of the things in the house to make a fire so you can be warm.

And that's one way of living and we would all view how you live in that house in light of the fact that it's an abandoned unowned property on Crown Land. But if in fact it turned out that you had left Crown Land you're now on private property and this isn't an abandoned property but it actually belongs to somebody.

[23 : 42] And then not only does it belong to somebody but that as you go into the house and start to make yourself at home and start to break up the furniture and start to make up the fire you hadn't realized that the owner of the house had just been in a bush a couple hundred yards away and they come into the house while you're doing all of that.

Well you'd understand that that's a radically different way of living. You're not in an abandoned house you're in a house that's owned by somebody and that the owner is present. Well it's the exact same type of thing with what Jesus is saying.

Once again if God doesn't exist then it's God doesn't exist we are so wasting our time here. Like if he doesn't exist we should just leave and go do something fun.

Right? But in fact there is a God that does exist and therefore in a sense every human being is called to have some type of relationship with him if the triune God exists and if this isn't if the world that we find ourselves in isn't abandoned and with no owner but there actually isn't an owner and he's present then that has to change how we live in it.

And to know the owner or to know the one that we're in a relationship with and what they're like becomes unbelievably important if you want to try to figure out what it means to live a good and moral life a just life a life that flourishes a life of beauty it matters deeply.

[25 : 09] And the second thing though in fact if you think about it for a second especially I don't have time to develop it but if you know as I've said many times before only the Christian God really provides a proper basis for love that from all eternity the Father has loved the Son and the Son has loved the Father and the Holy Spirit has loved the Father and the Holy Spirit has loved the Son and on and on and on and only the Christian God only the Christian God is truly a God of love.

And then doesn't it make sense that what Jesus said I'm sort of changing how he says it but getting the sense love love if you want to love your neighbor if God is love then doesn't it make sense that if God is love that to love with all of who you are love himself that that will help you to love your neighbor.

In fact actually to go even further because Jesus is Emmanuel he's God with us he's speaking these words and it's very interesting he's speaking these words not the day two days before he closes a business deal that will make him the modern equivalent of a billion dollars.

He's not making these comments two days before he goes to war and is going to lead troops in a battle that will end up conquering half of the known world. He says these things a day or two before he dies on the cross which is a day or two before he rises from the dead.

So if you think about it doesn't it make sense that if you want to love your neighbor as yourself you need to love love himself if you want love's help to love your neighbor well.

[27 : 02] Like that's just wisdom. Another part of it that's very very wise is how it changes your mental and spiritual and emotional universe to understand that God is big and you are small.

The fact of the matter is is we live day by day assessing who's big and who's small and if our problems are big and we feel small we'll feel very very anxious and that big problem or that big person ends up dominating our imagination and dominating how we make decisions and we feel very very very small but if God is big and we are small that means that everybody everything that we're dealing with is going to be small compared to the big God.

See that's why I think that the words of Jesus which at first seem sort of offensive to us and to our culture not to Christians necessarily are very very wise because if God is big and we are small that begins as the more we understand that the more we grasp that we are to meditate upon the fact that if we want to live well justly and love well and to be generous and to be kind that we need to love God himself with all of whom we are and to love him properly means to also understand just how big he is that he is the sovereign God of the entire universe and that starts to help us to be a non-anxious presence to others because God is the biggest thing the biggest one not that problem or not that particular person it becomes a guard against our love being self-centered and narcissistic to understand that we ultimately are dealing with a God who is vastly bigger than us and bigger than any problem we are going to fix to deal with

I wasn't to act in a just way towards the victims because I was to love unconditionally and it's one of the things which is very confusing in our culture how you still have justice and how you still have love and part of the problem is that that word unconditional love unconditional love means you don't think about justice that's what unconditional means and so we're sort of caught in our culture increasingly about how you combine justice with love and it seems as if really you have to almost be bipolar that you either have to be justice or you have to be love but you'll notice that Jesus doesn't say that love replaces the commandments what he says is that love of God and love of neighbor is what all of the commandments hang on these doesn't mean that because of love sometimes because of love you're not just or because of love you're not generous or because of love you don't care for the poor no no no no no you have all these other moral commandments often if we exercise justice without love the justice can be very very hard and can be very very cruel and can be very very unfeeling and can forget about the real people who are there and so what

Let's bow our heads and... I invite you to stand for a moment. Let's stand and bow our heads in prayer. Father, we acknowledge before you that when Jesus said these things, he was on his way to the cross. And Father, we know from Jesus' own words that it was him dying on the cross which most fully reveals who you are. And it not only most fully reveals, Father, who you are, but it's also an act by which we are redeemed and made right with you.

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We ask, Lord, that you might fan into flame within us a deep longing and yearning to love you with all our mind and all our strength and all our soul and all our heart and love our neighbors as ourselves. And we ask, Father, that you would bring this word home deeply to us as we think about how to deal with the powerful, how to deal with the weak, how to deal with children, how to deal with the aged, how to deal with the unborn, how to deal with those close to death, how to deal with those in great need and those who have much, how to deal with generosity, how to deal with faith, how to deal with forgiveness, how to deal with taking action when action is called. Father, we ask that these great principles would be that with the help of your Holy Spirit in the presence of Christ, that you would form us to be people of love, to live life well for the glory, your great glory, for our true good, and for the good of our neighbor. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

Amen.