

A Searching Question

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[0 : 00] Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. What does such a statement, such an exhortation actually look like in practice?

Long before I was thinking about this sermon tonight, as I reflected, I realised that over the years I've asked myself that sort of question as to how does this show out practically in our life?

And maybe a way to get a better understanding of what it means to so comprehensively love God is when we reflect on our response to God when we go through great trials in our life.

Or perhaps when we reflect on how another Christian responds when they undergo great trials. Just in fact, in this last week I was challenged and in fact greatly encouraged by another Christian's response following a diagnosis of cancer.

Let me read to you and you can see on the screen what this Christian wrote. I write this on the eve of prostate surgery. I believe in God's power to heal by miracle and by medicine.

[1 : 15] I believe it's right and good to pray for both kinds of healing. Cancer is not wasted when it's healed by God. He gets the victory and that's why cancer exists.

So, not to pray healing may waste your cancer. But healing is not God's plan for everyone. And there are many other ways to waste your cancer.

I'm praying for myself and I'm praying for you that we will not waste this pain. The writer then goes on and a bit sort of in the genre of Dave Letterman.

He lists his top ten. His top ten list of you will waste your cancer if. And then he expands. You'll waste your cancer if, etc, etc.

And it was number five in his top ten that really captured my attention. You'll waste your cancer if you think that beating cancer means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.

[2 : 21] He then goes on and explains what he means by that. He says, Satan and God's design in your cancer are not the same. Satan desires, designs to destroy your love for Christ.

God designs to deepen your love for Christ. Cancer doesn't win if you die. It wins if you fail to cherish Christ.

God's design is to wean you off the breast of the world and feast you on the sufficiency of Christ. Christ is to wean you off the breast of Christ. It's meant to help you say and feel.

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. About you, I found those very challenging but also most encouraging.

I wonder if you can guess who might be the writer of those words. Okay, we've got two down here.

Hints for some others. This is someone who has spent their ministry life preaching and teaching with a great emphasis on the glory of God and being completely satisfied in him.

[3 : 30] Lisa thinks she knows. Up the back. Okay, who was it Lisa? John Piper. John Piper. So John Piper is an American pastor and the writer of many fine books.

Books like *The Pleasures of God*, *Desiring God*, *Love Your Enemies*, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, etc. So that's how John Piper currently, this was written on the 15th of February, that's how John Piper is currently seeking to deal and put into practice what he's been teaching the body of Christ for decades about cherishing Christ.

But I wonder even if you don't know much about John Piper but having described some of the books that he's written, you might sit back and say, yeah but that's fine for super Christians. The reality is I'm just a young Christian.

Or you might say, that's fine for super Christians but actually in my Christian life it goes through all sorts of ups and downs. I'm not a John Piper. Well, as we look at just these short verses in chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel, these famous words of Jesus, I want you to keep asking yourself tonight this question.

Are there any restrictions given by God as to who these words apply to? Are there any restrictions given to us?

[4 : 56] Well, let's remind ourselves then of the context for this searching question. Which commandment is the first of all? You recall that Jesus has come to Jerusalem and he's in the temple grounds.

Various groups have been approaching him back in chapter 11, verse 28. The chief priests, the scribes, the elders had come to him and they questioned his authority. In chapter 12, verse 13 and following the Herodians and the Pharisees come to him and they seek to trap him.

And you recall as Sir Megan preached that night, the question was primarily political but it had sort of a theological overtone. And then last week in chapter 12, verse 18, the Sadducees come to Jesus and they also seek to trap him.

And you remember their question was about the resurrection and it was very much a theological type question. And now one of the scribes draws near, comes to Jesus.

The scribes, of course, were a group that had been challenging the authority of Jesus up in the Galilean region. And we see that from the beginning, essentially, of Mark's Gospel.

[6 : 06] But I want you to notice that the climate, if you like, the interaction between Jesus and the scribe is quite different to what we've been looking at in the last couple of weeks. And I think that's a reminder, it's a reminder to me at least, to be very careful not to tar every person in a group with the same brush or however that metaphor runs.

So, I think you'll see this scribe is a little bit different. Notice with me, and if you're following there in Mark chapter 12, page 825, notice in verse 28 that the questioner is polite.

You see, Mark records that the scribe had taken notice that Jesus had answered them well. That is, these groups of antagonists that had come before him. So, he's noticed that Jesus has answered well, and the sense of well is that he's answered in a wholesome way, in a satisfying way, in a good way.

I think it's reasonable for us to see that the scribe is eager and he's genuine in posing this question to Jesus. In a sense, this is a legal question.

Well, on the surface, it's a legal question. But Jesus' response has great practical application for each one of us living in the 21st century.

[7 : 26] See, the scribe simply asked him this. Which commandment is the first of all? Now, the scribes had determined that the Jews, the Jewish nation, were obligated to obey 613 separate laws in the first five books of Moses.

That 613, if you're good with numbers, was broken down into 365 negative precedents or precepts and 248 positive ones.

613 in total that they were to obey. And, of course, the rabbis, you can imagine that they had lots of talk feasts, debating and discussing and pondering. Well, of these commandments, they used to speak of which were the heavy ones and which were the lighter ones.

And these teachers of the law, as they got together for these talk feasts, they'd keep trying to work out, is there one single summarising principle? That's a reasonable question, isn't it, when you're battling with 613?

Is there one single summarising principle? So, it's not surprising that this polite scribe says, which commandment is the first of all? Of course, some of the Jewish leaders had looked back to Leviticus, Leviticus 19, verse 18.

[8 : 43] And they'd seen this is the great principle where we read, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. For many others, they looked to Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 and 5.

This is what they saw captured the Jewish faith. Those verses are called the Shema. It's from the first word of that confession, translated as here. This was repeated twice a day by pious Jews.

So, we read in Deuteronomy, Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Now, these wonderful verses in Deuteronomy, they had great practical and great theological significance for the Jews. See, this was the first Old Testament passage that a mother would teach her child.

And now Jesus, in a unique way, a somewhat unique way, He combines these two texts from Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 6. And so, we read in verse 29, Jesus says, The first is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[9 : 51] 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. And the second is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

There is no other commandment greater than these. Let me go back to that question at the beginning. So far, have you noticed any restriction that Jesus places in this exhortation?

If you look at the beginning of that in verse 29, notice as you start from Deuteronomy, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. I mean, this is obviously not a commandment, but it sets the context.

You see, what it does is it puts Jesus right in the middle of Jewish orthodoxy. I say that because Jesus is making it abundantly clear that He holds to, that He believes in the oneness of God. The doctrine of the Trinity doesn't mean there's this plurality of gods. There is a distinction of persons in the Trinity, but within the unity of the one true God.

[11 : 01] And Jesus sets that context right at the beginning. It's interesting that Jesus was asked, which commandment is the first of all? And He actually answers in giving two.

And in so doing, He sort of pulls together in a summary form the Ten Commandments, if you think of the two parts of His answer. You see, it's on the basis of our vertical love for God that we can truly love our neighbour, horizontal love.

And I think the context of Jesus' words is helped, if you like, or in understanding Jesus' words, it's helped if we look at the context of them in Deuteronomy.

The Lord has entered into covenant with the nation of Israel. He's graciously chosen them and He showered His love on them. And as Christians, God's in covenant with us, the new covenant instituted by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Like Israel, none of us chose God. He chose us, but not because we were more righteous than others, but out of the good pleasure of His will.

[12 : 14] God, who's rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved and raised us up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Jesus says in verse 30 that we're to love God with what? Our heart, our mind, our soul and our strength.

We need to understand the biblical symbolism behind those four words. You see, the heart, if you like, is the seat of the entire personality.

We're not talking about the pumping station that pumps blood, I think it's 6,720 times the distance of the equator in one day. We're not speaking about that heart.

We're talking about the way a word is used describing our entire personality. If you like, it's the command center of our body. It's where decisions are made and where plans are hatched in our heart.

[13 : 20] And soul and strength, they focus on intensity. But soul's also got that extra thought of our inner being. So what we're being commanded to do is to love God with the way we think and with all the intensity of our being, with all that we are and all that we have.

All of us, our whole being, is the object of God's covenant love. If you think about that, God doesn't sort of say, well, love this bit but not that part, or your mind but not your soul.

God loves the whole person. Our whole person is claimed by God for himself. And Jesus demands simply that we unreservedly commit the whole of our person to God and to him alone.

I want us to really reflect on the fact that this is not some dry legal matter that we're discussing. What we're talking about is a moment-by-moment dynamic relationship with the living God, a relationship of complete commitment and of complete dependence.

[14 : 35] We're not talking about sort of loving some force or some cosmic principle. We're talking about giving our whole life to a personal God and it's a personal God who has first loved us.

Well, how do we know this? How do we know that God first loved us? God the Father sent his beloved son to die for us. God proves his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So, in response to the searching question of the scribe, a reasonable question, a polite question, Jesus declares love to be the most important thing in life.

And our love for God, our vertical love for God will express itself in love for fellow men and women. created in God's image.

See, that's what Paul says to the Romans in chapter 13. He says, Oh, no one anything except to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

[15 : 46] The commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. Sounds like Kristen. And any other commandment are summed up in this word, love your neighbor as yourself.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. A Sunday school teacher was teaching her kids the benefits of loving others.

And she concluded by saying, Look, the reason that you're in this world, you can just imagine the kids sitting around, children, is to help others. Well, after a moment's silence, a little girl piped up, Well then, what are the others here for?

Sorry, that's a bit, that's a bit subtle for the VCYC people. Let me ask you to consider then, as we think about commandments, are we living by rules, or are we living by relationships?

You see, it's critically important that we avoid two extremes. One extreme is legalism, and the other extreme is antinomianism, or simply no law, living without law.

[16 : 56] Because the reality is that God, our all-wise creator, has established boundaries for us. He's established boundaries for us, so that we live this life to the full, and that we honour and reflect His character.

The New Testament is not short of clear instructions. There are in fact hundreds of them. But critically, our motivation to obey, must be our love for God.

That's what needs to drive our obedience. Otherwise, our spiritual life dries up. The image in my mind, is simply like creek beds, in the northeastern part of South Australia.

That would mean much to people, if they keep going down the beach every summer. But these are barren, dry creek beds, and that's what happens, when we obey, if you like, in a legalistic way, and not out of love for the Lord.

And one of the products of this dryness, is that we don't love our neighbours, as ourselves.

Mahatma Gandhi, in his autobiography, wrote that during his student days, he was interested in the Bible.

[18 : 16] Deeply touched by reading the Gospels, he seriously considered becoming a convert. Christianity actually seemed to offer a real solution, to the caste system, that was dividing the people of India.

So, one day, he went to church, to see a minister, and asked for instruction, on the way of salvation, and other Christian doctrines. But when Mahatma Gandhi, entered the church, the ushers refused to give him a seat.

And they suggested, that he go and worship with his own people. He left, and he never went back. And in his autobiography, he writes this, he said, if Christians have, caste differences also, I might as well simply remain a Hindu.

You see, if we proclaim God's love in Christ, and yet live our lives in unloving ways, the watching world will rightly call us hypocrites.

A teenage boy came home from choir practice early one evening, and his father was incredulous. His son had never come home early from anything. And he sort of peers over his paper, and says to him, well, what brings you back so soon?

[19 : 30] Well, we had to call choir practice off this week. The organist, and the choir director, got into a terrible argument. It was a terrible argument, about how to sing, love divine.

And so, we just quit for the night, and I'm home early. Friends, that's not the way of Christ. As we love vertically, love will flow out in horizontal directions.

And that is such a powerful witness. Back in the second century, the unbelieving Greek writer by the name of Lucian, he wrote the following, after he had observed the warm fellowship of Christians.

This is what he said. It's incredible to see the fervour with which the people of that religion, help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator, Jesus, has put it into their heads, that they're brethren.

You can nearly hear his amazement, as he writes these words. A loving relationship with God, enables us to have loving relationships, with others.

[20 : 41] Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength, and with your soul, and love your neighbour, as yourself. I wonder if you've found any restrictions yet, on

this exhortation by Jesus.

Is it applying just to a special group, that we might label as super Christians? Well, if you look on there in verse 32, the colloquial translation, of the scribe's response, might be something like this, as he responds to Jesus, something like, sort of right on.

I mean, you've got it. He says, look, this is fantastic. He says, you're right teacher, and then with great listening skills, some of us here on the marriage course, we've been taught about, listening by repeating back.

Well, he repeats it back. You're right teacher, you've truly said that, he is one, and besides him there's no others, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour, as oneself.

But look at what the scribe goes on, and says at the end of verse 33. This is much more important, than all whole burnt offerings, and sacrifices. This is actually pretty extraordinary, coming from a scribe.

[21 : 57] You see, the scribe would have been focused on, perhaps even preoccupied, day in and day out, with the regulations concerning sacrifices.

So, this last part of verse 33, it's extraordinary, but it's extraordinary only at one level, a pretty superficial level, because the priority of love for God, is clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Indeed, the prophet Amos, is scathing, in his denunciation, of the unloving mindset, of the northern kingdom of Israel, in the 8th century.

You see, the people, they were simply going through the motions, of bringing their sacrifices, and they were not loving God, with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength.

And their lack of love for God, a breakdown in the vertical dimension, flowed into oppressive, evil behaviour, towards their fellow Israelites.

[23 : 03] So, Amos writes this, he says, you oppress the poor, you crush the needy. And God, in some of his strongest words, to his people, addressed to the northern kingdom, says this, I hate, I despise your festivals, I take no delight, in your solemn assemblies, even though you offer me, your burnt offerings, and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

And the offerings of well-being, of your fatted animals, I won't look upon them. Take away from me, the noise of your songs, I will not listen, to the melody, of your harps.

Now, we need to understand, such a pronouncement of that, as not a dismissal, of the sacrificial system. God had graciously, instituted the sacrificial system, for his nation, for atonement, for atonement, for individual Israelites, for atonement, for the nation of Israel.

And this sacrificial system, was to be upheld, upheld until the perfect sacrifice. The Lamb of God, came, and died on the cross.

A once for all, never to be repeated, never needing to be repeated, sacrifice for sin. See, so that, the scribe's statement, in verse 33, isn't a dismissal, of the sacrificial system, but it's a correct statement, of what's the most important thing.

[24 : 30] And it was about, a decade, about 10 years, after that, strong denouncement, in the prophet Amos, of Israel's ungodliness, that the Lord, declares a similar message, and this time, through the prophet Hosea.

In Hosea 6, we read, for I desire, steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. See, the scribe, is not out of line.

And we know that also, as we look at verse 34, we read there, Jesus saw, that the scribe, had answered, wisely. Not like the rich man, in chapter 10, this scribe, is clearly making progress, in discerning, what the kingdom of God, demands.

And so, Jesus said to him, you're not far, from the kingdom of God. It's a difficult verse though, isn't it? I mean, it kind of just sort of, hangs there.

It's clearly intended, intended to, encourage the scribe, to keep reflecting, on what it means, to be a citizen, in the kingdom of God. You see, to be in the kingdom of God, is not just a point of saying, yes, I approve of Jesus' words.

[25 : 46] It's a matter of, submitting oneself entirely, to his authority, and to his person. Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Love your neighbour, as yourself. What is it, that fired the heart, of Jesus? What was it, that drove him, to summarise the whole, of the law, just with these two commandments?

Simply, that God, is love. See, that's what the Apostle John writes. Beloved, let us love one another, because love, is from God.

Everyone, who loves, is born of God, and knows God. Whoever, does not love, does not know God, for God, for God is love. Now, this doesn't mean, that God is some force, or some principle, He's the living, personal God.

And saying, that God is love, is not saying everything, that's true about the living God. But, it is saying, that God's, very nature, is love.

[27 : 02] It is saying, that love, permeates, who He is. So, let's then, think about this, on a very personal level.

A Christian, is a follower, is a disciple, of Jesus. And so, we're called to, emulate our leader. To emulate, our Saviour, and Lord.

What's the key then, to Christian discipleship? Love. Love is the measuring rod, of Christian discipleship.

Christian love, doesn't discriminate. Christian love, is self-giving. Eric Honigke, led the German, Democratic Republic, East Germany, from 1971, until 89.

And, after, Germany, reunified, came together, he first of all, fled to the Soviet Union, then he was extradited, by the new, Russian government, sent back to Germany.

[28 : 04] He was in prison, tried for high treason, and crimes, that were committed, during the Cold War. However, he was dying of cancer, and he was released, from prison.

Honigke was detested, and widely hated. He wasn't allowed, to live in his luxury villa, but a Lutheran pastor, offered to let, the homeless Honigke, live, in the pastor's guest room.

The pastor, even paid, Honigke's expenses. This was, I think the word is stunning, it was surprising, since Honigke, had persecuted, with great intent, the church.

The move, by the Lutheran pastor, was widely resented. Many people, threatened to quit the church, and in fact, some did, at least the visible church.

And the pastor, received, numerous, vile, phone calls. But when he was asked, why he did it, the pastor, simply referred, to God's love, in sending Christ, to die, for sinners.

[29 : 15] You see, friends, loving God, with our whole person, isn't reserved, for those, who we might regard, as spiritual, superheroes.

Jesus' words, are for you. Jesus' words, are for me. They're not just words, for John Piper. Jesus doesn't put, any restrictions, on his words. Indeed, all men and women, are called, to love God, with their heart, their soul, their mind, and their strength.

And as we, love God, God who first loved us, the ministry, of the Holy Spirit, flows through our lives, in love, for others.

You see, as you reflect on that, loving your neighbour, as yourself, is both a command, that's clear from the text, isn't it? And it's a, gift of God, as we yield, in our lives, to the Holy Spirit.

So, as I close, imagine if the Lord, was to ask, each of us tonight, me, you, starting with me, the following question, how much, have you loved?

[30 : 31] How much, have you loved? how would we answer? How would we answer? Father, we thank you for your powerful word, and we thank you for your powerful spirit.

We praise you that, you're a loving God, a God who first loved us, who sent the Lord Jesus, to die for us, as sinners.

Chose us, not because we were better, than anyone else, but simply in accordance, with your good pleasure. Lord, help us to take these words, that we've read, and heard, probably so many times, dozens of times, in church, and by your spirit, challenge us, encourage us, convict us, in each of our hearts, in each of our entire beings.

So Lord, we would indeed, with our heart, our soul, our strength, and our mind, love you, love you with our whole person. And that Lord, we would be, powerful ambassadors of love, as our vertical love for you, flows out horizontally, to a world, that watches, critiques, a world that's got great pain, great spiritual darkness, and needs to be touched, by your love and grace.

Speak to us and challenge us, each one tonight, we pray, for Jesus sake, and for his glory. Amen.