

Mark 12:28-34 “Understanding God’s Love”

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

If you could, you can turn in your Bibles to Mark chapter 12, verses 28-34, but I will be honest about our sermon this morning. You will be turning in your Bibles at least five other times, four other times, and turn back to Mark chapter 12.

And the reason is, is because what we wanted to do, what I wanted to do is invite our congregation into what we've been doing across the street.

And on Wednesday nights with our middle school students, we've been talking about the love of God. We did it for 10 weeks, and so I wanted all of us to work together.

And the reason why is because one of the things we can do sometimes is invite our kids into what we're doing, but we want to invite our adults and all of us here into what we're doing with our students.

[1:06] And I want to take a moment to remind you and tell you, because not everybody is a parent of teenagers right now, and not everybody sits in our parents' meeting.

I want to make sure I remind you of why we're looking at this passage and how it's relevant to your kids and to you, I think, ultimately.

And it's this, it's because the goal of the youth ministry and ultimately also our children's ministry is that as much as you may be blessed by it, our goal is not to make nice little well-behaved kids.

I'm sorry, that's just not our goal. We love if you have a nice, well-behaved blessings on you. Blessings on you for what you're doing in your house.

Come help us teach a class. We love that. But we have a different goal. We have a, what we think is a biblical and kingdom-minded goal for your children. And so what we tell parents when they enter into the youth ministry, and we repeat it year after year is this, is that our goal for your children is that they would be lifelong followers of Christ.

[2:14] That in their teenage years, as they follow after Jesus, it would not be a phase or something they did as an extra thing in their lives, but it would be something that they did with all of their lives.

So that they would be followers of Jesus in their teenage years, their 20s, their 30s, their 40s, their 50s, their 60s, throughout all their lives until they meet Jesus himself many years from now.

And so our hope is that they would have a relationship with God through Christ now and forever.

And so we want them, and when we teach the scriptures across the street, when we teach them these things, we want them to understand it.

But I want to make sure you also hear this. Understanding is too clinical. So the title of the sermon is Understanding God's Love. There are a lot of people who can give me a lot of really good answers from the scriptures that answer the question about what God's love is like.

But we as people who follow Jesus, there is something spiritual and real and transcendent happening amongst God's people.

[3:24] It is not just us understanding information. Please know we are not trying to help your kids understand information about God. That is true that that happens.

But we really want them to know and love God all their lives. And so when we talk about understanding God's love, we are not talking about it in a strictly knowledge way.

We are talking about it in a spiritual, holistic, real way. And I think that is true of what our kids need. But I think it is true of what we need as God's people.

I don't think it is just something that is for them. I think it is for us. And so I want to make sure that we are answering these questions and understanding these things.

And we are seeking after God himself because we are called to love God and love our neighbor. And so that is kind of our focal point.

[4:25] But we are going to be bouncing around scripture for a little bit in the hopes that we can see a bigger picture of God's love. And kind of give you a view of what we have been trying to communicate with our children across the street.

So if you will read with me from Mark chapter 12 verses 28 through 34. We will start there and we will read through that passage. So one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another.

And seeing that he answered them well, asked him, Jesus, which commandment is most important of all? 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, with all your strength. And the second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than this. Than these.

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

[5:34] And when Jesus saw the answer wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. Let's pray and we'll dive in.

Father, we're grateful for your word that you teach us about what it means to love you and to be loved by you and to love one another and to love our neighbor. Would you help that be real to us today?

Would you help us to understand our goals are not necessarily just strict understanding in a kind of educational sense.

But that our goals are that your truths would reach deep into who we are and transform us by our understanding and knowing the truth.

So that we might know you more deeply and walk with you more closely. And therefore love our neighbor as we respond to that love you've shown to us. Father, we love you and we thank you for all these things.

[6:34] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So we open with this story of Jesus being questioned by a scribe and he is asked, what is the greatest commandment?

And Jesus answers correctly, obviously, and he's Jesus. And so you have this, him answering with the Shema from the Old Testament, this truth of who God is and our call to love God with our whole selves.

Everything that we've got. And so that's where I wanted to draw the picture to what we're trying to teach our students. And we're trying to teach all of us. And we're trying to understand ourselves.

Is that it's not just that we're trying to help your, the kids across the street know some truth about God. It's that they would love God with all of who they are. Heart, mind, soul, strength.

Holistic, holistic, all of life where it cannot, you cannot help but see that it bleeds out of every area and square inch of who we are. And so knowing that this is what Jesus calls us to and then says, we want to love our neighbor as ourselves, right?

[7:42] So there's a, there's an, it happens where we are called to love God and then there's a call to love others. And, and we've taken for weeks and weeks and weeks, different looks at the scriptures, trying to help our students understand love itself.

And so we, we can't, we want to make sure we start with where love begins. Where, where does love come from? Where's its origin? And so we want to make sure that we know that its origin comes from God himself, right?

So in order for us to really understand what does it mean for me to know and love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength, where does love come from? And, and in 1 John, and so this is where, if you want to turn with us, I'll read it to you also, but if you'd like to.

In 1 John chapter four, the, the apostle John, the disciple John, he, he tells us where love comes from. See, we live in a world where we like accomplishment.

This is, this is what we like to do. We like to own that we can do a lot of things. And we like to, to say that we're in charge or we're the center or we're in power or we have it all together.

[8:52] But we did not create love. We did not create this affection for others. We did not create this idea of caring for people. Though our intention, our, our hearts and intentions often are, we've done, we've created this thing.

We've made this idea up. God in his kindness reveals to us in scripture that it is from him, that he, in the Trinity, long before creation, loved one another.

There was an affection for the triune God within himself that existed long before we were created. And that he himself gives us this love as something we could even, let alone come up with a word, but that we could experience and know.

And so John tells us this, beloved, let us love one another for love is from God. And whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

He reminds us that the love that we walk in, the love that we walk in, in this world is not something that we created. Though we are very human centered, though we are very me centered.

[10:06] This is where love comes from, God himself. It is not a human invention. Which then begs the question of what, what in the world is happening?

How, how would we even know about it? It's a reminder though, even in this one sentence, that is a gift of God's grace to us to even know love in any form. Because God could have kept these kind of realities from us, but God in his infinite love for his people, gives us this idea of love and this ability to love him back.

In a way we could have never fathomed or understood before, had he not been the creator and the originator of it. And that's a beautiful thing that we even get to love others and love God.

But because he's given us this gift, we get to experience it and know it and live it out in our daily life. And we want you to know that this is not something that we've created.

This is not something that we made, but it's something that God gives us. And what's insane also in this is if you think about the Genesis account and how God is the creator of all things. God in his power, his authority and all that he is, and he's the one who's created love and given it to his people to know and live it out with others.

[11:27] This affection for him, this worship of him, this care for him. He's given it to us. And so what it reminds us is that it humbles us.

It ought to humble us. That God gifting his love to his people is an act that would humble us to remind us that we are not in charge.

God with his creative power, his authority, he's the one who's made it. And so it should remind us of, oh, God is perfect and holy. And even the love that I express is small and imperfect compared to this massive and big and incredible God.

And then it goes on to say, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. It's a reminder that God has, in his grace, gifted us this ability to be known by him.

He says we'll have been born of God to be his child, right? So we see that God and his infinite love for his people, he gives us this love because it's from him.

[12:40] And here's the thing where it pivots later on in 1 John. You don't have to turn there if it's in the same chapter in verse 19. It tells us that we're able to love.

We're able to even share love with others because he loved us first. And so this God who is all-powerful, who creates this idea of love, this reality of love, he, in his grace, bestows on us the ability to love him and others.

This gift of grace enables us to speak with confidence to loving others, to loving God, to making God the very center of our lives.

And so we go back to the words of Jesus in Mark. It's to love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We could not do it had not God given us this as a gift to even be able to return love to him.

So God, in his infinite power and wisdom, he gives us this love to worship and show our affection and our appreciation for him because he loved us first.

[14:00] And so this love, this is where we were kind of walking. So I'm hoping this is somewhat of a linear sermon today in kind of our study of this because we want to walk through kind of what we've been going through in our Wednesday nights.

And so we start with understanding that God's, that love comes from God first. And then who's it for? Who's it aimed at? And so we've said this in a million different ways. I had to take like two or three lessons that we've tried to condense down.

But we want to make sure that God's love is aimed at his people. But I want to make sure we're even more specific in Romans chapter 5, right?

In Romans chapter 5, we're reminded about how God shows his love and who he shows his love to. In Romans chapter 5, it says God shows his love for us.

That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And I think this is one of the harsher times that we often have when we're teaching is that there's a prerequisite of understanding our own self and identity to really understand the power of God's love.

[15:10] There's something we have to know about ourselves. We have to own it and we have to live in it. And really, it's not fun to just name ourselves as sinners.

It's a tough place to live because I think we want to believe we're good people at the core of who we are. We do good things and we'd like to believe we've got enough together that we're not that bad. But we have to come to grips that God is showing his love to people who are undeserving of that love. Sinners far away from God.

The Bible speaks in other ways that we are enemies of God, objects of wrath. There are harsh ways that God describes who we are in our state before we know Christ. And this reality is that his love is aimed even at sinners.

That he has not forgotten or forsaken the broken and hurting people. See, God's love is willing to intervene on our broken and sinful lives.

[16:20] And so what God does is he aims his love at broken sinners in need of him. And so what could we do to win God's love?

What we could do is nothing. There is nothing we could do. Nothing we could do to earn it. Nothing we could do to accomplish it. Nothing we could do to make it happen. But we have to live in this reality that we are sinners in need of a savior.

And God shows his love for us that he sends a savior to these sinners. He sends his son, Jesus Christ, who died for us.

So we understand where God's love comes from. And who's it aimed at? It's aimed at sinners in need of saving. We all have failed. We all are in desperate need of someone to intervene.

In God's love, he actually sends his son for those who are undeserving. I want to make sure you hear that I'm not advocating for all of his music catalog.

[17:34] But, and maybe I've mentioned it in a sermon before. But there is a line from an Eric Church song. He's not a wise theologian or philosopher, I promise.

But sometimes he sings a lyric that makes sense to me. He says, on the day I die, it's the name of the song is Sinners Like Me.

And on the day I die, I know where I'm going to go. I'm not going to sing it for your sake. Me and Jesus got that part worked out. I'll wait at the gates till its face I see. I stand in a long line of sinners like me.

And so what even the world, even in country music, right, understands is that the prerequisite, the reality that God's love is poured out on people.

Not who have it all together. Not who have everything right. But it's poured out on people who are sinners. In need of a Jesus. Because I don't like the way he says it. Me and Jesus got that part worked out. I mean, Jesus got it worked out.

[18:38] But I do like that he understands that he's a sinner and he needs Jesus. For salvation, for eternal life, for cleansing.

And I think that's really important for us to remember because people, we need to remember that God's love is aimed at broken people who are in need. And we need Jesus.

For he's the only way. And so it's this love that God is revealing to his people. It's not just that it's for sinners, but it was a very costly love, right?

And so we're going to look at the whole passage right there in Romans chapter 5 just really briefly. And so I'm going to read it to you. It says, We were not worthy.

We were not able. And God sent his son to die in our place for our sins.

[20:00] And what's incredible about this is that God loves you and God loves me with such a costly love.

And I know that's an over-exaggeration in a sense. There's so many better ways to express that. But it costs the son of God his own life for the penalty of our sin to be paid for.

For the reality of our sin to be paid for. It was a heavy cost that God would send his own son for you and for me so that our sins would be cleansed and forgiven and we would be made right before God.

And so God's love actually does more than just exist, but it does something and it accomplishes salvation for sinners at the great cost of Jesus.

But we don't stop there, which is why, which is one of the things that I really appreciate about what we're trying to accomplish with students often. But I think we all struggle with this too, is that though we understand that God's love poured out on us brings sinners into sainthood, brings salvation into the lives of believers.

[21:21] It does something even more and it rearranges our identity and makes us something different. It gives us a new identity in Christ.

And so the power of God's love, it actually has transforming power. So it would be one thing to say, yes, we are sinners, it's true. But what God's love actually does also is it transforms us into his own children.

And in 1 John 3, it says this, The reason why the world does not know us is they did not know him. And this verse reminds us that men and women who have placed their faith in Christ, they are now children of God. They have a new identity.

Yes, you have been cleansed. Yes, you have been made righteous before God because of Jesus's righteousness. Yes, you have been transformed from sinner into his own people.

[22:23] But more than that, there's this beautiful, intimate, familial language. Sorry, family style language. I said it so fast, it didn't even sound right to me.

Family language used in the Bible over and over and over again. That reminds us that you're not, this love doesn't just bring you forgiveness. Sins, you're now seated with God at his table.

You are united to Christ in his righteousness. You are known by the living God because you are so loved and cared for that you are now no longer sinners, but you are brought into his family.

And it is by God's own power that he transforms you from enemies to his people. From sinners into children of God seated at his table.

Our status before how God sees us has changed because of the righteousness of Christ. And you are no longer seen as just a sinner. You're seen as his beloved son and his beloved daughter.

[23:27] It doesn't mean that we're done sinning. I want to make sure that you understand that this is, we still live in a broken, fallen world. And we will still struggle from now till we see Jesus against the sin of this world and the flesh.

But it does mean that when God sees you, and he does see you, he sees you as his beloved son and daughter.

You are a part of the family. You belong to the king of the most high God. You are no longer foreigners and strangers.

You are no longer wandering and alone. You are now in God's family. And so now that you've been brought into this family, that the love of God has brought you into this family.

You have other, you suddenly realize that, yes, I'm not alone. I have an identity. Suddenly you have other people that you are called to love yourself.

[24:27] That the love of God moves us towards his people. That we now have others. And you can just be awkward right now and look around.

That's who. We're called to love. We're called to love our people. Those who have called on the name of Christ. Those who are committed to him and his church and his work in this world. We are called as brothers and sisters both here and across the street. And in churches across this city, we have brothers and sisters in Christ. We are now a part of a family that belong to our God. And here's what we're reminded to do. Jesus, after he has inaugurated the Lord's Supper. After he has washed the disciples' feet. He tells them, a new commandment I give to you. That you love one another. Just as I have loved you.

[25:27] You also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another. And this is very difficult to do.

Because all of us here know families. Some of us have walked away from tough family situations in the past week. Families are complicated.

Families are difficult. Families are beautiful. And good. And we're called to one another. To love and serve the way Jesus served his disciples.

We're called to love and serve one another. And I know this is a daunting task. Because we all carry burden and baggage and hurt.

But we are called to love one another. And we can do that by serving one another. This is a great opportunity to plug if you're not in a grace group.

[26:31] You can join a grace group and learn to love a small community of members at Southwood. You can love one another in your fellowship, your encouragement. Here's one that we hate.

Here's one I hate. We can love one another by correcting and helping one another. I hate being told I'm wrong. I'm being honest. I don't like when someone says to me, yeah, well, you're wrong.

And I don't love correction. I do love when my brothers and sisters do it in a way that loves me. And even though we love calling, there's this, we can love one another by calling out our sin and our struggle.

And I don't know the reality of what my brothers and sisters are doing when they are correcting me is not saying, look at what you're doing wrong. They're saying, look to King Jesus.

They're not telling me how I've fumbled the ball. They're telling me how I need to keep my eyes and my whole heart, mind, soul focused on Jesus and loving him and worshiping him and giving him.

[27:36] And it's not just that I've messed up, it's that I have lost sight of the one whom all my affections are for. And so there are realities of loving one another that are difficult in the context of the family, of our church and our people.

And so, but that doesn't change. Unfortunately, Jesus' call to us, our command to us to love one another, to walk with one another in hard times, in easy times, celebrate victories, care for one another, comfort in hurt.

We're called to love one another because we've been loved so greatly by our God that it moves us and motivates us towards one another.

And then Jesus, at the end of this passage, he says, they will know you are Christians. Those outside of our fellowship will know that you are Christians by your love.

Like they will see the way you love one another. And so that kind of pivots us to where we kind of want to at least end our sermon in this sense is that I want it to be something that reminds us that God has called us to our neighbors.

[28:54] And the ways we do that are always very diverse and different. Some of us get involved in our school. Some of us get in our neighborhood HOA. Some of us get involved in our teams and clubs and the different things that we're involved.

There are lots of places that we're called to carry this good news of God's love for us people that is so powerful that it transforms us from sinners into saints. And this whole thing that we're trying to communicate to all of us.

There are lots of places that you can take it. But it doesn't change that we are called to love our neighbor. To love our neighbor as ourself.

And that takes us back to Mark chapter 12. Because Jesus says that we're called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And this is the love that we should have as our primary love in our lives.

And then it says to look to our neighbor. And so our goal, like we said from the beginning, our goal with our children across the street and our youth ministry, children's ministry, is not to see them be people who are nice to their neighbors and nice about coming to church.

[30:09] We want them to be people who holistically love God with all that they are. And that love is so transformative, so powerful that it can't help but move them to others, to their friends, with the good news of who Jesus is.

There's a verse in Acts chapter 4 that has become one of my favorite verses over the past probably 10 years. And it's when Peter and John are before the Sanhedrin and they've been rendered a verdict.

And they said basically, don't stop talking about Jesus. Just stop. And they answer and they say, whether that's right before God or not, we cannot help but speak about what we've seen and heard. And so when we've been so loved by God and our love for God, we offer back to him our worship and our love to him. And we cannot help but talk about and speak about how God has transformed and made us into the men and women that we are.

And we can't help but share the good news that we've experienced and know and love. We can't help but bring it to our neighbor in word and deed. We can't help but go to those places with that kind of confidence and that kind of understanding of God's love for us.

[31:34] It's so much bigger and it's eternal. So I want to ask you, how are you engaging with your neighbors?

How do you know them? How do you ask them questions? Not just so that you can introduce them to Southwood, but so that you can introduce them to Jesus. How can you meet their needs?

And before we can ever do that, we have to, before we can love our neighbor rightly, we have to, let's recenter ourselves on things we've already talked about today. We love others.

We love our neighbor because he loved us first. We love others because Jesus loved us first and gave his life for us. We're not sharing, I'm not, I'm not sharing Bill's saving love.

That does not exist. I'm sharing Jesus's saving love. And that is one of the best ways that we can love our neighbor is by sharing with them the truth of what Jesus's love does.

[32:49] And so what we're really trying to do is, and I think I've used this in a sermon before and we use it a lot. So it's, if it's a beat up, it's a very beat up example. But we say it across three lots that the love God has shown upon us, the love God has shared with us is the way the moon reflects the sun's light, right?

Like the moon doesn't give off its own light. I, as a sinner, don't give off my own light. But Jesus, when he, when he has shown his light in my life, it reflects into the lives of others.

And so the love that God gives to us and pours out on us is reflected into the world as we love and walk with our neighbors as well. And that's all rooted in this thing that Jesus has called us to first and foremost.

It's, it's a picture that we cannot even begin to fathom, but we're called to love God first and above all else in our lives.

That he would take top priority, that there would be no square inch as an old theologian used to say, there's no square inch where Jesus does not say, this is mine.

[34:02] And so we, as God's people, are called to reflect that love and to share that love with others. And in a moment, we're going to, we're going to talk about God's love reflected in this table.

And how God himself sent his son to show us, to show us a picture through his death of his great love for us, his costly love for us.

And that's the love that has transformed us. It's God's love for his people. And so we, as his people, take that love out these doors, into Huntsville and beyond for the sake of seeing Jesus magnified, lifted up, and for his love to be reflected into a world that needs it.

Let's pray. Father, we're grateful that we can know your love in any sort of way. Lord, we're grateful that you care deeply for us, that your affections have been poured out on us, your people, that you

would dare to step into this world.

And as we've just celebrated Christmas, we're reminded that that's, what an incredible picture of your love there, that you would put on human flesh, that you would show up, that you would tabernacle, that you would dwell with your people.

[35:30] And so, Lord, we just pray that you would help us to love you. Would you break our idols and our hurts and our sin so that we might love you?

And Lord, so that we might be reflectors of your great love to others. Would you bless us today as we seek to honor and glorify you in all that we do?

We love you and pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.