



Love God and Love One Another

Mark 12:28-34

Sermon for February 13 2022

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Introduction

Today we are looking at Question 7 from the New City Catechism.

I will read the question, and then let's read the answer together.

Q7: What does the law of God require?

Personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience; that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love our neighbors as ourselves.

What God forbids should never be done and what God commands should always be done.

Next week we will begin studying the 10 Commandments, and talk more about what God forbids and what God commands us to do. Today we will focus on loving God and our neighbors. Let's look at today's scripture reading.

Mark 12:28–34

28 One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate.

He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord.

30 And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.'

31 The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

32 The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other.

33 And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law."

34 Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Let's pray together.

Father, please send the Holy Spirit to give me wisdom and truth as I preach. Please open our hearts and minds to your truth, so we can glorify you in everything we do. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

During his life, Jesus had a lot of conversations with teachers of religious law, like the man in verse 28. Priests and pastors and religious leaders like this are leaders called by God to serve both God and man. They are to be connected in vertical and horizontal relationships. Religious leaders should be in healthy vertical relationships with God, living holy lives with a clear conscience. That vertical relationship with God enables them to be effective teachers and mediators horizontally to God's people.

But the religious leaders in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago were often disengaged from the people horizontally.

Why? Because they had separated themselves from the heart of God. They knew the cold law of God very well, but they did not know the warm heart of God. When we are disengaged from the heart of God, we will also be disengaged from our neighbors. I am glad that the man in today's text was a little different from some of those cold-hearted religious leaders. Jesus complimented this man in verse 34.

"34 And when Jesus saw that he answered 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."

How do you know if you are far from the Kingdom of God, or very close to it? How can you know if you truly love God? That is the question we are answering today. Did you notice something about singular and plural words in today's scripture passage? In verse 28 the teacher of religious law asked Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is

the most important?" He wants to know which one of the commandments is most important. Did Jesus give him one answer? No. In verse 31 Jesus said, "The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

Jesus said these two commands (plural) are the one most important command (singular). Why did Jesus say this? The first answer seems like the most important, don't you think? Isn't most important to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength?

Maybe we can think of it this way: can you see my faith? Can I see your faith? No, we cannot see what is in the heart and mind of our neighbor. However, is there a way to measure how much I love God? There is. God gives us a gauge to measure our love for God. And do you know what that gauge is? It is love for your neighbor.

We heard this scripture reading earlier. The prophet Isaiah is criticizing the people who do religious rituals like fasting to show their love for God. But it is fake, and empty.

Isaiah 58:4-7,9

4 What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me.

5 You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?

6 "No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

7 Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless.

9 Then when you call, the Lord will answer.

God is telling us through Isaiah that our love and faith are not real if they are hollow. God can see through empty religious activity. God can see if our cup is clean on the outside, but dirty on the inside.

Imagine with me this story. Tom is married to Susan. Tom buys her flowers on her birthday and on Valentine's Day. He takes her out to dinner once a month, and on special trips. Tom tells Susan "I love you" almost every day. Tom is married to Susan, but Tom also has two girlfriends. Tom also buys flowers for Mary and Jennifer. He takes Mary and Jennifer to dinner and on special trips.

How do you think Susan feels about this? Does Susan believe Tom when Tom says, "I love you"? No, she doesn't believe him. Maybe if Tom said every day, "Susan, I love you with all my heart, and all my soul, and with all my mind, and all my strength!" Then do you think then she will believe him? No, she won't. Why? Because Tom's actions do not match his words about love. He says one thing, but he does something different.

Look with me please at these two commandments that Jesus speaks about. Look at the word "love." What kind of word is love in these sentences? Is it a subject, a noun, verb, or an adjective? It is a verb, right? Jesus used love as a verb or action word of the sentence. This is important. We often think of love as a feeling, and it is. But our feelings come and go. Our feelings do not stay the same. And sometimes our hearts lie to us.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote this: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Our hearts deceive us. Our hearts tell us that we can do dangerous and unhealthy things without consequences. A common theme in movies and the world today is "follow your heart." That is bad advice. My heart is lost without the Holy Spirit. I can't trust my heart to lead me to good decisions. Our feelings are not reliable because they change so easily.

We are now six weeks into 2022. Many people make promises to themselves on January 1st. They want to lose weight or exercise. Maybe you decided you would run every morning before work or school. You were feeling very committed and optimistic about this plan six weeks ago. But today, when it is cold outside and your bed feels so comfortable, how motivated are you to go running in the dark?

Our feelings are not consistent enough to motivate us to do hard things. This is one reason that so many marriages end in divorce. People get married because they have a feeling of love for the other person. But life gets hard when you start to live together. You experience the stress of money problems and work. If God blesses you with children, they are a joy--and also a lot of work. There are so many things that a husband and wife can argue and fight about. The feelings of love you felt in the beginning can be drowned in the stress and work of everyday life.

What can we do about this? I will ask you again: What kind of word is love in the two commandments Jesus spoke about? Love is a verb. Love is an action, it is a choice. That's why Jesus can say in other places "love your enemies." He doesn't ask us to have a loving feeling toward our enemies and those who persecute us. That would be very difficult. Instead, Jesus tells us to love our enemies with actions.

We cannot love like this by ourselves. Loving our own family is hard enough. But loving our enemies requires special power that we don't have. Please look with me at 1 John 4:9-12, 20.

"9 God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.

10 This is real love--not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

11 Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other.

12 No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

20 If someone says, "I love God," but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?"

Verse 20 is the perfect explanation for the connection between these two commandments. If we don't even love people who we physically see around us, can we really claim to love God who we cannot see? The command of Jesus to "love your neighbor as yourself" is very hard for me, to be honest. Because I love myself very much! We all do.

The Yombe people in Congo have a proverb, "Dia lobula" which means to "give your neighbor the bread already in your mouth." Giving someone from my surplus is not difficult. But giving someone food or money that I need seems impossible. But let me tell you, friends, Jesus is commanding us to love people even more than this.

On the night before he died, Jesus said this to his disciples, in John 13:34-35.

"34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The standard here is not to love others as I love myself. What does Jesus say in verse 34? "Love one another just as I have loved you." The expectations of Jesus are more profound and impossible than the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule says: "treat others as you want them to treat you." Jesus is instead saying to us: "I want treat others the way I treated you. You must love other people even more than yourself. You must offer the kind of sacrificial, other-centered, redeeming love that I gave you."

Jesus loved you when you were morally incapacitated, dead in your rebellious transgressions. Jesus loved you when you were His enemy. He loved rebels like us enough to die for us. That's the gospel, and it is the only power that can help us love others. Jesus gave His life willingly to save you, because He loves you. I know I say that every week, but we need to hear it every week! I need to be reminded every day.

I like to think of the connection between these two commandments as a piece of elbow macaroni. Do you recognize this piece of pasta? It is the kind often used to make macaroni and cheese. Which is delicious. I think if you remember this pasta shape, you will remember the connection between these two commandments. See how the pasta is open at the top? We must keep our heart and mind open to the love and truth of God from above. That way, his love can flow through us and out to other people. If there is no love for other human beings coming out of the bottom, it is because nothing is entering the top.

Think about the quantity of love that Christ gives you and me. How many sins did he die for? How many prayers has he answered? How many blessings are waiting for us in heaven? If Jesus has given me such abundant love, why do I close my heart and hand to my neighbor sometimes?

Here's what I want you to remember, my friends. The two commandments in today's passage are connected. And they must come in the correct order. We are first invited into a strong, loving, vertical relationship with God. Jesus died to make us the children of God. After that, as his children we distribute to others the kind of love we received. If are not loving the people around us, that is evidence that there is a problem with our vertical relationship with God.

To finish this sermon, let me tell you a true story about a farmer in China, who had become a Christian. His fields were on the side of a mountain, terraced with dikes. The walls retain the soil and water. This Christian farmer watered his fields by carrying water up the mountain. Many trips up and down, every day. The farmer had a lazy neighbor, whose fields were below his. At night the lazy neighbor often opened a hole in the dike. He drained the water down into his own fields, to save himself the trouble of carrying water up and down the mountain.

What would you do about this? Would you go bang on your neighbor's door? Would you yell at him and tell him to stop stealing your water? Let me tell you what this Christian farmer did. He began carrying water up not only for his fields but also for his neighbor's fields! After seeing this for two weeks, the neighbor was so amazed by this humble love that he became a Christian too.

My friends, when we offer sacrificial, generous, and radical love to others, we are pointing to Jesus. Because that kind of love cannot come from us. When we love our neighbor well, we are showing the character of the Kingdom. We are providing evidence to the world that there is a supernatural kind of love that motivates us.

Yes, it is very hard to love our neighbors the way that Christ loved us. When a lot of love is flowing out horizontally to others, you will need to be refilled vertically by Jesus. When we feel drained we must run back to Jesus the Living Water, so he can refresh us. In this process, Jesus teaches us to love others like he loved us. With all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

Let's pray together now: Jesus, you loved us when we were far away from God. We were your enemies. We wanted to be left alone in our sin. But you poured out your love and blood to save us. You showed us what real love is. Now please use us as instruments of your love. Help us love our neighbors in your name, so the world will know that you are the Lamb of God. Please do this, Father, for our good and your glory. We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.