

Greatest Commandment

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Mark 12:28-34 (The Message)

The Most Important Command

28One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?"

29-31Jesus said, "The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these."

32-33The religion scholar said, "A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!"

34When Jesus realized how insightful he was, he said, "You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom."

After that, no one else dared ask a question.

Mark 12:28-34 (NIV)

The Greatest Commandment

28One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

34When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

I got back from camp about a month or so ago where I was a director for the first time. One of the first things I did when I got back (other than grab a beer) was write down all of the things that went wrong and needed improvement. There was a lot of stuff: I could have trained the counselors better, I should have stopped the drama in the girls cabin faster, I should have brought more jokes to camp, the power points should have been done in advance, the program could have been better, I should have been more prepared. I then talked to one of my best friends who is a youth pastor in Southern Illinois and he asked me how camp went. I then started listing off the things from my list of 'what-went-wrong'. After about 5 minutes of this, he said to me, 'Jason, what went right at camp? God was there, right? Did you experience God at camp and show that to the campers?' "Yeah," I said, "God was definitely there." And then I started rattling off all the God moments of camp: Kids overcoming their fears and climbing to the top of the wall, everyone singing in one voice to God during worship, counselors being real and opening up to the kids, kids being real and opening up to counselors and each other. Then it hit me, I had forgotten the number one lesson I had tried to teach the counselors: Your number one job at camp is to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and soul. And love your neighbor as your self.'

How often do we forget this so very important lesson? The Pharisees totally forgot this during their days. They had over 600 laws (613 to be exact) that they follow meticulously. The Pharisees tried to reason out the implications of the laws, and to make sure that they avoided even the possibility of violating any of them. They forgot and lost sight of the very heart of the matter—Love God! Jesus tells us that this must be essential to everything we do—when we are at work, when we are doing mission work, we go to meetings (at church and work), how we treat our friends and family, and how we treat ourselves. They replaced God with blind devotion to the rules. How often do we do that? ☺

One of the biggest turning points in my faith journey was when I in college. I was getting over being betrayed by someone I trusted very much. It took me a while to get over it and forgive this person and God. I had strayed away from God for a long time and I wanted to make up for it. I started going to this Lutheran church, doing bible studies and just trying to be the most devote Christian I could. I became very rigid in my attempt to obey the commands and 'love' God. I became very artificial in my obedience and people thought I wasn't real. It wasn't until my best friend and roommate reminded me that we are saved by grace and not by our works.

It's something that is easy to forget. I forget it often and I find that I'm reminded in the strangest ways and am always surprised when someone puts me in check.

But let's break this down...

What does it look like to love God with all your heart/passion?

The Pharisees lost sight of the core of our beliefs, loving God. Without love for God, the commands hold an empty form. Just like if you got a birthday card from your mother that said, "Happy Birthday. I don't really mean it but it something I'm suppose to do." <Maybe put that into a graphic>. Jesus pointed this danger when he said in Matthew 23:

25"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. (Matthew 23:25-26)

If we try so hard to "love" God by following the rules, we are never going to succeed. Not only that but we fail God by not being an example of Christ. We need to love with our hearts and not just our outside actions. The Message translates heart to passion. I think this is a great way to describe it. We've got to be passionate for God.

Jesus says:

"The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45 NIV).

Loving God means being lovingly passionate to everything and everyone around you. We are all God's creation, created in his image. For me, that's an awe-inspiring concept.

What does it look like to love God with all your soul/prayer?

I had a problem for a very long time with prayer. I still do. I'm not very good at it. At the church I attended in college, I told the pastor, "You know, I think you guys pray WAY too much during church. I think it really detracts new Christians." But I was actually talking about myself. Prayer scares me. It scares me because you are bearing your soul to God. You are saying to God, "Here I am God. Here is everything about me." And I don't know about you but I sometimes don't want God to see everything about me—even though deep down we all know he does.

Prayer is still hard for me but I do it a lot more regularly now. Jesus prayed all the time and was completely open to God's will. The way he taught us to pray in Luke 11:

2He said to them, "When you pray, say:

" 'Father,[a]

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.[b]

3Give us each day our daily bread.

4Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.[c]

And lead us not into temptation.[d]' "

So, for those of you who have a hard time trying to pray, start with that prayer. Start with opening your soul up to God and say, "God, here I am. I'm before you humbled and asking for your will to be done in my life." Jesus tells us after teaching his disciples the prayer (Luke 11):

9"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

If this is the case, then what scares us about prayer? Jesus is telling us, that we not only have to love God with all of our heart and passion but to open up to his will and show ourselves to him. God wants a relationship with us and prayer is our way to directly communicate with him. We may find it tedious and doubt that God is listening but Jesus tells us he is. You may not get that new car you want but when you come to God with humility and love, God is there to provide you with that you need. In Hebrews 5 it says:

7During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

I think that last phrase says it all, reverent submission. That is how Jesus taught us to pray.

Mark 11:24,25 (NIV)

4Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

What does it look like to love God with all your mind/intelligence?

I think this one is a little more straightforward and easier than the other ones. God gave of the gift of a wonderful mind and intelligence (some more than others). It is disrespectful and a waste to not use our minds for God's purpose. Jesus did this on a daily basis by teaching his disciples and people around him the truths of God in ways that people could understand...well, most of the time at least. Jesus didn't shy away from using his brain. Jesus told us in Matthew about the three servants who were entrusted with the master's property. We all know how that story went: Two of the servants invested the money given them and it grew into more. Then the last servant just buried his talent in the ground, which produced nothing. When the master came back to collect from his servants he scolded the one servant who did nothing with his talents. Jesus is telling us to use our gifts.

Paul used his gifts of organization and oration to build the foundation of the Christian church. Martin Luther used his talents to rally against a corrupt and misguided church. Martin Luther King used his talents to spearhead the civil rights movement in the 60s. But one mistake I've made is to think the only way you can serve God with your mind is in the church. This isn't true. You must

serve God with your talents in your job, with your wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend, with your everyday relationships, in your community, and in your church. We must use the gift of our brain in everything we do to glorify and serve God.

What does it look like to love God with all your body/energy?

Jesus is calling us to get up off our couches, chairs, pews, cars, and our butts to serve God. We aren't called to be armchair Christians. Jesus repeatedly asked Peter, "Do you love me?" To which Peter repeatedly response, "Yes, of course!" Then Jesus told him, "Go feed my sheep." Paul says in Romans 12:

1Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual[a] act of worship. 2Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

I think people understand and execute on this one a little better than some of the other things. Why? Because it's easy to get up and go serve food at the family shelter. But the question is why do we do these things. I know plenty of people who call themselves "spiritual" that do good works. What is it that makes us different? What is Jesus calling us to do that is different? Paul tells us that in the beginning of that scripture, "in view of God's mercy." That's is what makes us different. We don't do it because it makes us feel good—even though it does. We do it because of mercy God shows us in our lives.

Another aspect of this, I think we all have problems with. I sure do. Loving God with our physical bodies. Paul tells us that our bodies are "God's temple" and to treat them as such (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). How well do really treat our bodies? I can tell you this is something I struggle with. I don't eat as well or exercise I could or even should—steak is okay to eat every night, right? Side note: Do you remember the "caveman diet" or Paleolithic diet from a few years ago? The main problem with that diet is that we aren't Paleolithic people any more. Our life expectancy was much shorter then back then. And most importantly, we aren't as active as now at we were back then. We aren't running miles to hunt down our food. We've transformed into a different people. Just like with using and treating our bodies for God, we have been transformed in Christ to shed the old ways of our lives.

What does it look like to love your neighbor as yourself?

I took a logic class in college. It was actually a lot of fun. "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal." Do you remember that logic proof? I think the only thing I remember from that class was the definition of a sound and valid argument. A valid argument is one in which the premise is logically connected to the conclusion. For example, "Jason is awesome. CJ is less awesome. Therefore the 49ers are going to win the super bowl this year;" is

not a valid argument. However, a 'sound' argument is a valid argument is one in which the premises are true.

So, when I read this last part of the commandment, in my infinitely nerdy way, I broke it down to a logic proof: "Love yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, you must love yourself." This is key to the whole concept of this commandment. How can we love our neighbors without first loving ourselves? And if you don't really love yourself, how can you effectively love your neighbor as Jesus calls us to?

That then leads to the question, how does Jesus calls me to love myself? Luckily for us, he just told us in his previous statements. You've got to love God with all your heart and passion. Doing that transforms you. It turns you into a compassionate person because you start to realize God's immense love for you. You've got to love God with all your prayers and soul. This humbles you and opens you up to God's will. It makes you take yourself off the mantle and put God up there instead. You've got to love God with all your mind and intelligence. This pushes you to use the gifts/talents that God has given you. You then live up to your full potential. And lastly, you've got to love God with all your body and energy. This pushes you to go out and be God's loving hands in the world. You now do this not because of you but because of God's mercy to you.

One of the things I remember about this church is the statement: Love God. Love Others. I love the fact that this is the vision of the church. It's right on. I've been going to different churches for the past year trying to find the right 'fit'. But I had been blind to the fact that God was pushing me back to this church because it is full of God's love and it's members embody that. When I came back to this church for the first time in 6 months back in July, I was smacked in the face with the love of this church. People came up to me and said 'hi', asked how I was doing, asked how life was. No one said, "Hey, how come you haven't been here in a while?" No one was guiltting me because I came back. It was and still is, a loving embodiment of God's church.

What this all comes down to is that Jesus is telling us that God wants us to love him with everything we have. Jesus is telling us to surrender our wills and let God guide us. It's not easy; it's not easy at all. In fact, for a long time I had a problem with the word "surrender to God" because I felt like I was giving up control. I then realized that after you build a relationship with Christ, it's not a daunting task. It's something you want to do. Just like you would want to listen to a coach or your parents or your best friend because you trusted them implicitly. Following God's will and loving him with everything we have gives us true joy. Joy because we are doing what we are meant to do but also because living in Christ is purely joyful—it may not be happy all the time but it surely is joyful. So, go out there and love God with all your heart, mind, body and soul; And love your neighbor as yourself.

Let's pray:

Loving God, we come before you today trying to love you with everything we have. It's a hard and daunting task but we do it because of the mercy you showed and the love you have for us. We want to love you with everything we have and to surrender to your will. Please give us strength as we attempt to do this. In your loving name, Amen.