

The Gospel of Mark – The Heart of It All

Mark 12:28-34

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



We are continuing in our journey through chapter 12 of Mark's Gospel this week, and we will hear a very familiar discussion from Jesus, the greatest commandment. All four Gospels give an account of this event. And, as we should expect from four accounts by four different authors, they each have the essentials in common but give unique perspectives. What is central to all of the Gospels is the imperative of the ethic of love. As we read the question of the "greatest commandment" in English, we can miss the true weight of the question. This was not a casual or secondary question. It was of absolute and primary importance. Think of it this way, if the essentials had an essential, this would be it. Here is how one commentator explains it, "Impressed with Jesus' wisdom in answering the Sadducees, the scribe asks, according to the NIV, " 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?' " This is not an entirely accurate translation, however, for according to the Greek text, the word "all" (Gk. *pantōn*, either masculine or neuter, genitive plural) does not modify "commandments" (Gk. *entolē*, feminine). The sense of the question is thus not which is the most important commandment, but rather **which commandment supersedes everything and is incumbent on all humanity—including Gentiles.**"¹ Did you catch that last statement? Take a second and chew on it. The commandment that supersedes everything and that everyone will be held accountable to. This is a **big** question! In fact, we could say it is one that defines our very existence. With such a significant question lingering in the air, how does Jesus answer? "Love God with your everything and love your neighbor as yourself."

In our culture today, love is seen as the primary or most important virtue. As long as we are loving or what's loving, we are living an ethical and virtuous life. And that is not altogether wrong. But how do we know if what we are doing or acting is truly loving? What is our rubric for loving action? What is our motivation? **As Christians, love received is always the motivation for love extended.**

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 370. (emphasis added)

1. What is love? – A working definition.

- a. **Love.** A central virtue in most ethical traditions, one that denotes an attitude toward another involving both an affection for and a deep commitment to the other. In the Christian tradition, love (especially agape) is an expression of the essential nature of God, the central characterization of the relationship between God and humans, and the chief virtue that is to characterize Christians in their relationships to God and one another, as shaped by the indwelling Holy Spirit. **The connection between love and God's own character gives rise to the Christian focus on love as the fundamental characteristic of Christian discipleship and hence of Christian ethics.**²
 - i. In fact, many philosophers and sociologists think of love as the primary or highest virtue of an ethically centered life.
 - 1. Consider the way we talk about care for the planet, the displaced, our political institutions, and even justice itself. All of these are paired with love as the central value. I.e., If you love this, then you will...
- b. **Love is a tricky word in our context.**
 - i. **Culturally** – Love is often equated to not limiting someone's expression or being permissive in order to limit pain and enable self-expression or self-discovery.
 - 1. **Martha Nussbaum** (Philosopher and author): "To be able to be loved is important, but to love is even more so... True love is a union of the emotional and the cognitive, **a recognition and appreciation of the other's individuality and uniqueness.**"³
 - a. Here, Nussbaum very much reflects the thinking of the Western secular age and the focus on the individual.
 - b. The challenge in this position is that the ultimate conclusion presses toward the reality that as long as an individual's uniqueness is being appreciated, then that is all that matters. The question of ethics and morality is left subjective at best.
 - 2. Those things are not inherently bad. However, it really isn't a complete definition of love. And, as noted above, leaves ethics and morality purely subjective.
 - ii. **Biblically** – Love is exclusively tied up with the character and nature of God.⁴
 - 1. **Benevolence, Grace, Mercy, Persistence**
 - a. When we think in terms of God's moral attributes, perhaps what comes first to mind is the cluster of attributes we are here classifying as love. Many regard it as the basic attribute, the very nature or definition of God. The basic dimensions of God's love to us are (1) benevolence, (2) grace, (3) mercy, and (4) persistence.
 - 2. **Love and goodness go hand in hand.**
 - a. Looking at Jn. 3:16 – Out of love God sent his son so that humanity might again experience the goodness of a right relationship with God.
 - 3. **Love and serving go hand in hand.**
 - a. Again, let's go back to Mk. 10:45 – The Son of Man (God) did not come to be served, but came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

² Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

³ Martha Nussbaum – from *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 266.

iii. What does love require, and what does it result in?

1. Requires – ⁵

- a. **Benevolence** – By benevolence, we mean God’s concern for the welfare of those whom he loves. He unselfishly seeks our ultimate welfare.
- b. **Grace** - By this we mean that God deals with his people not on the basis of their merit or worthiness, what they deserve, but simply according to their need; in other words, he deals with them on the basis of his goodness and generosity.
- c. **Mercy** - God’s mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy.
- d. **Persistence** - We read of God’s persistence in Psalm 86:15; Romans 2:4; 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; and 2 Peter 3:15. In all of these verses God is pictured as withholding judgment and continuing to offer salvation and grace over long periods of time.

2. Results in –

- a. **Goodness** – The experience of what is truly good.
- b. **Justice** – The restoration of a wrong, specifically, to be made whole.
- c. **Growth** – Formation into something new.
 - i. **“Love in the biblical sense, then, is not merely indulging someone near at hand. Rather, it inherently involves justice as well. This means there will be a concern for the ultimate welfare of all humanity, a passion to do what is right, and enforcement of appropriate consequences for wrong action.”**⁶
 - ii. “Christians are commanded to love their neighbors. In fulfilling that obligation one will undoubtedly consider whether specific act in a particular situation is just and benevolent to the neighbor - to do so seems necessary in view of what it means to love someone. But what makes the loving act morally good is not that it is benevolent or just, but that God commanded it. To summarize: what makes an act an act of love is at least in part that it exemplifies benevolence and justice. What makes such a loving act moral is that it obeys God's command to love.”⁷

c. **Love is – A working definition for our time this morning.**

- i. **Caveat** – I do not expect that everyone will agree with this definition, and that is ok. My hope is that we are at least 80% onboard so that we can engage with what Jesus is teaching in Mark.
- ii. **Our working definition - Love is a persistent concern for someone’s greatest good and the willingness to serve them toward that end.**

2. The Ethic of Love

a. **Situational Ethics – What is most loving?**

- i. This is a fine question, but a confusing one. Why? Because we are unable to see long-term consequences. → I.e., We often miss the forest through the trees.

⁵ See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 267–268.

⁷ Feinberg, John S., and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

- b. Ethics – The way we live life.** → Moral philosophy, or the division of philosophy that involves the study of how humans ought to live. Ethics focuses on questions of right and wrong, as well as the determination of the human good.⁸
- i. **Situational ethics** – The question of love.
 - 1. A term coined by the Episcopalian theologian Joseph Fletcher to denote the ethical theory that love is the primary, if not the only, principle governing moral action, and consequently that all other ethical principles and laws are illuminative, rather than descriptive, in nature and force. Situation ethics teaches that in any given situation the moral agent must seek to discern what in that circumstance would be the most loving course of action and then act accordingly.⁹
 - ii. **Utilitarian** – The question of the end.
 - 1. A theory of moral reasoning within teleological ethics that looks to the principle of utility, that is, the degree to which an act is helpful or harmful in the world as a whole, to determine the rightness or wrongness of an act. Moral living, therefore, consists in doing that act that brings about the greatest balance of good over evil for the greatest number of people.¹⁰
 - iii. **Rule-Deontological ethics** – The question of rule.
 - 1. A theory of moral reasoning within deontological ethics that declares that the rightness or wrongness of a moral act is determined on the basis of whether it is in keeping with or violates a set of rules or moral principles. The ethical life, in turn, consists in obedience to such rules or principles¹¹
 - 2. Don't complicate it. → Do the next right godly thing.
- c. What orients love for me? → We all need a compass.**
- i. What Jesus is getting at in this passage is that God is our compass.
 - 1. **Do I know God's truth?** – If God's essential nature is love, then what he reveals about himself in the truth of Scripture helps us to understand what is most loving.
 - 2. **Do I trust God's character?** – I can know God's truth, but distrust his character and not desire to follow his truth. Have I encountered the goodness of God so that I am willing to trust the truth of God?
 - ii. **Again, we need to really examine, what orients love for me?**
 - 1. Lack of pain? – For me or others?
 - 2. Promotion of individual uniqueness?
 - 3. Perceived moral right? – I.e., I am in the right.
 - 4. Increasing of prosperity?
 - 5. God's truth?
 - iii. The question that is posed to Jesus is for his audience, the ultimate question. It is the question of what will orient their lives and influence every decision and interaction.

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 35.

⁹ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 109.

¹⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 124.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 105.

3. Loving God – The Command

- a. What does it mean to love God?
 - i. Prov. 1:17 – The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.
 - 1. What God said to Israel is essentially the same thing he says to every believer in Christ: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Egypt of your sin, out of your slavery to Satan.” Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, God is our sovereign Lord and very own Savior, and thus he has the right to claim legal authority over us. The law comes from God, who is our Savior and our Lord.¹²
 - 2. The law always reveals the character of the lawgiver. This was especially true at Mount Sinai, where every one of the Ten Commandments was stamped with the being and attributes of Almighty God. So what does each law tell us about the God who gave it?¹³
 - ii. Four times in v. 30 the word “all” is repeated, emphasizing the necessity of a total response of love to the lordship of God. God is the one and only Lord, not only of Israel but of every individual as well. God lays rightful claim to every facet of human personality: heart (= emotions), soul (= spirit), mind (= intelligence), and strength (= will). Each of the four commandments is prefaced by the Greek preposition *ex*, meaning “from the source of,” rather than “by means of.” Thus, we are commanded to love God not simply *with* our whole heart, but *from* our heart.¹⁴
- b. Here is what Jesus says: With **all** your...
 - i. **Heart:** Emotions (Peace, comfort, contentment, hope.)
 - ii. **Soul:** Spirit (I.e., Energy and relational connectedness. ...)
 - iii. **Mind:** Intelligence (Am I growing in my understand of God’s character?)
 - iv. **Strength:** Will (I.e., Commitment & Endurance... don’t give up easily)
- c. **How do we love God with our everything?** (cf. Exod. 20:1-11)
 - i. **No other gods or idols.** – Don’t mistake the gift for the giver.
 - ii. **Honor God’s character.** – Don’t mischaracterize him, because to see him clearly to is know the one who offers life. I.e., He is Holy and is to be recognized as such.
 - iii. **Receive rest as a gift from God.** – This goes back to the idol principle. How we view rest is a direct correlation to how we see God.
- d. **“Life-defining” – Our mission as a church.**
 - i. Jesus’ words here are no complicated, and it doesn’t take much for us to understand what he means or even the implications of them. Even our mission statement as a church is not complicated or difficult to understand. However, Jesus’ words and the idea of “life-defining” is difficult to implement. Why? Because the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. (cf. Matt. 26:41).
 - ii. This is why Jesus gives a follow-up to the command. Those listening then and us today, need a rubric or a measuring line to help us understand if we are truly loving God with our everything.

¹² Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 525.

¹³ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 525.

¹⁴ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 371.

4. Loving Others – The Application

- a. v. 31 - The scribe asks for only one commandment, but as in the response to the Pharisees and Herodians in the temple earlier (12:17), **Jesus goes the second mile** in his answer by adding the commandment from Lev 19:18, “ ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”¹⁵
 - i. Jesus’ answer avoids the danger of mysticism, which results in a detached and disembodied love of God; as well as the danger of humanism, which acts toward humanity without reference to God and without the understanding that human beings are inviolable creatures of God.¹⁶
 - ii. The order in which Jesus declares the commandments implies that love of God is prerequisite to loving one’s neighbor. → **Whoever does not find the source of love in God will fail to exhibit God’s unique love to one’s neighbor. Love of God is prior to love of neighbor and establishes its possibility.**¹⁷
- b. **How do we love others?** (cf. Exod. 20:12-17) - The first four commandments govern our relationship to God; the last six concern our relationships with one another.¹⁸
 - i. **Resist comparisons, envy, and jealousy.** – Comparisons only serve as a thief of joy.
 - ii. **Do not cause harm.** – A basic reality for moral virtues.
 - iii. **Be honest and truthful.** – A need for relationships to flourish.
 - 1. Consider 1 Jn. – “**Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.... We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar**” (1 John 4:11, 19–20).
- c. **Let’s build out of something we talked about last week – A received identity.**
 - i. Identity given by grace not through works. That is an identity that cannot change based on our successes or failures.
 - ii. **A received identity** – This is an identity that is established by having the esteem of someone that you esteem.
 - 1. This is the Bible’s message the whole way through. Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, David → Received identity.
 - a. Their successes and failures were all defined by a received grace of God. That is, they were never nearly as good as their successes because apart from God, they weren’t strong enough. Nor, defined by their failures as God is the God of restoration.
 - 2. The point of the law was to remind us of our need for a received identity and that the God of the universe not only loves us but can redeem us.
 - 3. This changes everything for us and positions us to be servants and to love freely.
- d. **How does this help me to love more freely?**
 - i. **My identity doesn’t change when my love is rejected.**
 - 1. If my identity is secure in Christ and I am rooted in God’s truth, then when I extend love that works for someone’s greatest good, and it is rejected, it is not me that is being rejected.

¹⁵ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 372.

¹⁶ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 372.

¹⁷ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 373.

¹⁸ Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 526.

2. This doesn't mean that it won't hurt or be hard, it means that it doesn't have to be debilitating or cause me to feel the pressure to earn love.
3. This allows me to offer grace.
- ii. **I am able to extend a non-anxious presence.**
 1. If my identity is stable, even in the face of rejection, I am able to always give the gift of a non-anxious presence. And with that, to offer perseverance in love.
 2. This allows me to persevere.
- iii. **I am able to love with a love that is greater than myself.**
 1. Just as Jesus ordered the commands, loving God is the prerequisite for loving others. And actually makes it possible. So then, when my love is an overflow of what is received it is not rooted in my ability to love alone.
 2. This allows me to extend tenderhearted mercy.
- iv. **I am free to truly consider the needs and health of the person I am loving.**
 1. If my identity is not threatened or at risk from another's response, then I am set free to see the forest through the trees. That is, I can discern between what is urgent and essential for long-term health.
 2. This allows me to extend benevolence that works for their greatest good.
- v. **I am able to consider the long-term impacts of short-term actions.**
 1. This is an extension of the ability to consider the real needs of a person in my life. Even if I am able to see where they need to go, I need to be able to not misstep in the short run so as to negate long-term health. And when my identity is not at risk, I don't have to merely worry about minimizing pain immediately to then delay or deter long-term health.
 - a. We understand this reality in the phrase, "Sometimes it gets worse before it gets better."
- e. If we truly want to love others well, we need to operate out of our received identity of grace. Because, **as Christians, love received is always the motivation for love extended.**