

The Greatest Commandment

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[0 : 00] All right, thank you, Elliot. One more public service announcement to make before I jump into the sermon today. So last week, we had record-breaking numbers in our kids' ministry, which is like exciting, but also it means that, guess what?

We need more kids' ministry, teachers and helpers and all that good stuff. And so if you're looking for a place to serve, if you're needing a place to serve, that is a great one.

If you wanna sign up, you can go to the welcome desk after the service, fill out a card, and yeah, one of our kids' ministry folks will reach out to you for that, all right? Those of you who don't know me, my name is Jesse.

I'm one of the pastors here. And those of you who are new to us, man, we are so glad that you're here with us. Those of you who are listening online, hello.

If you got Bibles and you're here, turn to Mark 12, verse 28, the text we're in today. Before we kind of jump into it, I just kind of wanna place us in the story of Mark.

[1 : 01] And we find again ourselves with Jesus in the temple. And Jesus for a while has been disputing important matters with some of the religious leaders of the day, matters of the law and how to live it out.

But what we've seen so far is that Jesus isn't just another voice in the crowd with the latest kind of hot take on religious matters, like you might see on Instagram or something.

He isn't shifting the faith, so to speak, via deconstructing it. No, he is actually shifting it through fulfillment. What he is saying is this old temple and its sacrificial systems, they are insufficient, but good news, the perfect fulfillment of all those things has arrived.

And the fulfillment of all those things is about to happen. And Jesus, he never, in any of these disputes with the religious leaders, he never denies the necessity of God's presence dwelling in temples or that atonement for sin through a substitutionary sacrifice.

He never denies that those things are necessary. He is simply declaring the coming shift that God has planned from the beginning of time. And today our text brings us into what that means for the law of Moses.

[2 : 16] And it's 613 commandments that God's people were beholden to keep. All right? And so here we are, Mark 12, verse 28, it says this, and one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another.

And seeing that he, Jesus, answered them well, asked him, which commandment is the 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 and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And the second is this, you shall love your neighbor as oneself. There is no other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said to him, you're a 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 and with all the understanding and with all the strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

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.

[3 : 28] This is God's word. So in this interaction, we have a scribe, and this scribe approaches Jesus in the temple. He's waiting and he's watching.

He's been seeing Jesus dispute and spar with the other religious leaders up to this point. And in verse 28, it says that he likes what he hears. He's pretty impressed. And so he wants to ask Jesus his own question.

Now, let's make this personal to you and me for a minute. Right? If you were able to have an audience with your own personal hero, someone whose opinion you highly, highly respect, and in that time, you got to ask one question, you'd make sure you asked the most important question, the one that is burning in your heart, right?

So I remember being at a Gospel Coalition conference years ago, I think it was 2014, and I ended up in an elevator all alone with a guy named Tim Keller. You might've heard of him.

And if you don't know him, that's okay. Just think of him like he's like the LeBron of the evangelical world, okay? And if you don't know who LeBron is, he is the Yoda of like our modern generation for like Christianity.

[4 : 41] That's who he is. Hopefully I covered all the bases now that you guys kind of get who this guy is. So there I was all alone with this hero of the faith, his books I have read and many other people have read, and he has been so formative in my own walk with Christ.

There he is. Most people would have like paid money, big money to be in that position that I was in. And I had 15 seconds in this elevator, and the doors were gonna open, and we were gonna part our ways never to see each other again.

And here is the bummer. He never bothered to ask me a question. I'll let that seek in a little bit, yeah. You guys got it.

No, no, the bummer is I said nothing to him. Like I froze. I had a lot of things going on in my head at the time of like, oh, man, here's this dude.

What is the question to ask him? Or maybe I shouldn't ask him. Maybe he's just tired and just trying to get away. And so all those things are going on. But I just hadn't prepared for a moment like that. This guy had.

[5 : 45] What do you ask a guy? What do you ask a guy that has so much wisdom if all you got is one shot? And that is what this scribe does. He goes to Jesus and asks Jesus his best question.

Now, to understand what is behind this scribe's question, we have to place ourselves in first century Judaism. Jews all lived according to the law of Moses.

See, it wasn't just a religion for them. It was a way of life. It was a part of who you were. It was a national identity. Like you had no other choice.

And so a scribe's job was to know the law of Moses, all those 613 laws, and to understand or interpret how to apply them, both in religious and civil life.

So think of this. A scribe is akin to a lawyer and a policeman all at the same time. Law, Moses's law, is this guy's life.

[6 : 46] And now with the proliferation of so many laws, what they started to realize, it was necessary to consider, man, which ones were to be like heavily prioritized and policed, and which ones were kind of light or less important.

And so various rabbinical schools began to rank which commandments were more important than the others, and they also started to create these broad categories of the laws and how they fit into these broad categories.

And by this time, everything was condensed into two major ones, two major commandments, let's say, which means Jesus in his answer didn't just suddenly make this up on the spot.

Jesus is telling them when he says, oh, you want to know what the most important commandment is? Here's the two. He had heard that already from these schools of thought, and Jesus is telling them, hey, guys, you know what?

You're on the right track. Good job. Which tells us something about the law of God. And it's this. The law of God trains us in love. The law of God trains us in love.

[7 : 49] Now, for many of us whose journey in Christianity has been swinging from legalism into grace, this might be confusing. In fact, you might even be worried about my salvation right now, having just said what I said.

But there is a misguided theology that believes grace, that believes the grace of Jesus, that he earned for us, and that it made an end to the law, and that the law is what trains us in legalism. But the law of God doesn't train us in legalism. Legalism is a result of our sinful use of God's law. We distort it and try to use it to make ourselves righteous and superior to others through our rule following.

That is our sinful use of the law. But our sinful use of the law doesn't make God's law bad, no more than me using my phone to look at porn doesn't suddenly make my phone a morally compromised

digital rectangle, okay?

The issue isn't with my phone, it's with me and my heart. But when we understand what the laws of God are, and what they are really about, we can appreciate them and use them for what they were intended for and why God gave them to us.

[9 : 00] And here we see Jesus summarize all those laws into two easy-to-remember categories, loving God and loving people, which proves that when you condense the law down, what it is doing, it is training us in love.

But it also teaches us something pivotal about the nature of God's love. And firstly, love is not self-referential. As one pastor puts it, love has a mind full of someone else.

Whether that is in reference to God or to your spouse or to your friendships, to your kids, to your neighbors, love does not ask the question, well, what is best for me?

How will I benefit from this? Think about it. How did God show us his love? How did he do it? The father sent his son into the world to accomplish our salvation because the father and the son had a mind full of someone else.

They both had a mind set on you and me. Now, having said that, let me give this warning. You can live your life for the sake of others.

[10 : 12] A lot of people do. A lot of people that aren't Christians live their life for the sake of others. But you can still fall short of love. Jesus doesn't say if you love your neighbor as well as you love yourself, that's good enough.

And let's be honest, what does that even mean? What does it mean to love others like I love myself? When we stop to think about that more deeply, that little phrase, we realize that is fraught with failure.

And let me give you a couple of reasons why. One, we will love ourselves more than others at any given moment in our lives. Let's be honest. We are very good at that.

But the second thing is, and probably even more important now to realize, we don't really have a healthy love of ourselves to begin with. So if Jesus is saying, go and love others like you love yourself, the problem is our frame of reference.

We love ourselves so imperfectly that to do that, we're gonna start on the wrong trajectory from the get-go. And I think that is why Jesus said the first and greatest commandment isn't love your neighbor as yourself.

[11 : 18] He says the first, most important commandment is 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 this gets to the second pivotal truth in helping us understand love.

And it's this, we can't learn to love on our own. You and I, we just have to reckon with this. On our own, we have a total inability to be able to love correctly.

See, the modern wisdom propagated today is that we got to look to ourselves first and figure out how to love ourselves. That's where we're told the fix begins. You need to get right with you.

So in other words, what modern culture says to me is Jesse. You know what? No one should love Jesse like Jesse loves him since Jesse. That's what they're telling me.

And there are some basic assumptions behind this cultural maxim. There are. And here's the basic assumptions. We are able to, the assumption one, we are able to truly know and understand ourselves fully.

[12 : 24] Maybe. Assumption number two, our modern understanding of love is complete. We've got love totally figured out. But how can we be sure either of those assumptions are right?

Evolutionary-based psychology and biology says love is this. Love is a construct that man formed out of necessity to survive.

Meaning, our ancestors, tens or twenties or millions of years ago, manufactured love out of thin air in order to meet the instinctual need to perpetuate the species.

Isn't that romantic? But according to this perspective, love isn't something that happens in your soul. It's your brain synapses firing in a certain way and millions of atoms colliding in just the right way to bring about a sensation or instinct that guides our behaviors to the most altruistic results.

My respectful disagreement with that view is that it's clever and you can say that out of one side of your mouth, but you know what is also true that we're saying out of the other side of our mouth in our modern moment is that most would agree that the greatest form of love is laying your life down for someone, especially the weak and the vulnerable.

[13:53] You see the incompatibility there between the two positions. I think most everyone would agree that self-sacrifice is probably the highest expression of love and yet it runs counter to the evolutionary survival instinct of survival of the fittest.

Now, let's say that's not you. Maybe you don't hold to an evolutionary take on love. Then what happens is you are forced to go beyond the scientific and beyond the natural and you must step into the metaphysical, aka the supernatural, which would mean you would have to accept that love preexisted man's instinct to survive and perpetuate the species, which would necessitate that love preexisted mankind altogether.

And the Bible says yes and amen to that. And I would argue for what the Bible says. And it says that love is not an energy in the universe.

It says that love is a person. In fact, I would argue that love exists because the God of the Bible preexisted all things as a loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

See, think about this. If God was just one solitary person, then love could not exist. He couldn't say, I am love.

[15:19] But he is a community of three and has always been a community of three, which means that he can say that. We can know that he is love. And not only that, it means that his love is complete and completely selfless.

See, think about this. It's one thing for two friends or two people to share love between themselves. But it can get tricky when you add another person to that equation, can't it?

There's a tendency for jealousy. There's a tendency for now I'm not getting enough of my time with that person. There's a tendency for misunderstanding and hurts. And there's also a tendency to just feel that the friendship that once existed is now kind of diminished.

But God's love doesn't diminish just because he is three. It actually gets elevated. Think about it.

When you can delight to see love shared between two other people outside of yourself and not have any sense of jealousy or missing out, in fact, when you look at that, you actually, it heightens your delight and joy in seeing those two people share love between themselves.

Now you've reached a perfect form of love. Now you've reached an others-oriented form of love.

See that? And that is the loving dance of the Trinity.

[16:42] And that's a beautiful thing. And so the command Jesus gives here is to love God like he does. Okay? And if that's true, and if that's what Jesus commanded us to do, hey, I want you to love God like I love God.

Well, how did Jesus show us? How did he do that? Well, he did that in total obedience to the Father, in total submission to the Father, and in total union with the Father.

In John 5, verse 19, Jesus says this, the Son does nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.

And he says again in John 6, verse 38, for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. And then in John 10, 30, he says, I and the Father are one.

How did Jesus show how this dance of the Trinity worked? Total obedience, total submission, total oneness. Jesus wants us in on that love.

[17:45] He wants us in on that love that he knows and has always known. He wants us with him and with the Father and with the Spirit. In fact, he prays for that in John 17, that we would experience that and live that out.

And that is the whole point of the gospel. The whole point of the gospel is like, from Genesis all the way to Revelation, is God doing what he needed to do in his perfect plan of redemption so that he could bring us in and get us enmeshed in the divine love of the Trinity and all that they are experiencing.

And that's what we get. Now, to know that and to know the gospel is about that as one thing, but to live in it and to live it out is another. And see, this is a part of the gospel that is both beautiful and is very humbling for us because you and I really can't correctly love until we can love God with all our heart.

We can't. Now, that's a bold claim. You may even have some objections to that claim. But let's consider how this passage proves it to be true.

What did the scribe say to Jesus after Jesus rattled off those two commands? The scribe looked at Jesus and he said, hey, you've answered well. You're right.

[18 : 59] Then he goes on to reaffirm what Jesus said. He just rattles back to Jesus the same answer. Now, you would think, based on the past conversations that Jesus has had in the temple that have been more like sparring with some guys and they're trying to catch him in his own words, you think Jesus would take the win with this guy, right?

It seems that him and the scribe are on the same team. And yet Jesus turns around to him and says this, you are not far from the kingdom of God. Which is like, oh man, Jesus, you know you could have said, you got it right, buddy, you're in.

You're in the kingdom. He doesn't. He says, you're not far. Why does Jesus say that? Did this scribe miss something? No and yes.

And let's look at the scribe's response to Jesus because it's really interesting. Verse 33, he's talking about, he's talking about these two great commandments and he's talking about, man, and to love him, to love God with all the heart and with all the understanding, with all the strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Now in one sense, the scribe is right in saying that loving God with all our being and loving your neighbor as oneself is greater than burnt offerings and sacrifices. But where it falls short and where it falls short of God's kingdom is that everything in his statement starts and ends with what man must do.

[20 : 32] That's the problem. See, before you can love God, before I can love God with all our being, God had to love us first.

He had to make the first move. He had to initiate and he did that by sacrificing himself for us. First John 4.10 actually says this. In this is love.

In this is love. You wanna know love? Check it out. Not that we loved God, but that he loved us. He loved us first. How did he do that? Sent his son to be the propitiation, to be the sacrifice, the atoning sacrifice for our sins in our place.

Why did Jesus say the scribe was so right, yet not quite in the kingdom of God? Because before we can love God, we have to believe and receive his love for us.

Friends, the first step into love, into knowing love, into knowing even how to love correctly and perfectly begins this way, believing that Jesus came to die in your place.

[21 : 44] And that you would be hopelessly lost without him and deserving of God's wrath. But you can't just believe in that as a truth. You must receive it.

And you can't just receive it as a truth. You have to receive Jesus as a person as well, not just his sacrifice. And that is why the Bible talks about union with Christ.

It is not just that we assent mentally to this understanding of theology. It's that through that, we are united to him in a mystical way that we are one with him, that we are brought into that dance of the Trinity.

And it's a mystery and it's beautiful. And this is what God is on about. This is what he's always been on about. We are this new creation that he makes and his presence comes into us.

We are this living, walking, new temple of the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God. And Jesus made the way for that. We didn't have to earn it. He did it for us. And in this way, God makes it possible to love him in response to his love.

[22 : 55] And where the scribe put priority and emphasis on what man must do, Jesus, the gospel puts all priority and emphasis on what God has done.

And through what God has done, we can love him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. And it is also how we can truly love our neighbor.

See, John 4.10, right? It said, and this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us. And then in the next verse, it says, beloved children of God, if God so loved us that way, you know what?

We also ought to love one another that same way. See, the gospel just doesn't tell us what to do. What's also in that good news is that we learned that we now have the ability to do what God desires.

God enables us, empowers us to be able to do that. See the difference? In the gospel, we become who we truly should be and therefore we learn who we truly are.

[24 : 03] All of it is in reference to what God has done and who he says we are. We are objects of his love, reborn, remade, redeemed by his power.

And so we approach loving others in the same way God loved us, which is radically different to what comes natural to us. Until God intervenes, we cannot love people that way.

An old pastor said it this way, because God himself is love, we cannot love anything as we should without God. True love will align with others such that when they rejoice, we rejoice. When they weep, we weep. We can't weep for another family. You can't weep for another family when your family benefits at their expense. You can't rejoice with another nation when they defeat yours.

You can celebrate your colleague's promotion, but you feel the sting when it means you've been passed over. That's why we need a higher love, a true virtue, merely natural virtue, which superficially may look very similar, is ultimately motivated by humans' natural inclinations to love themselves and their own kind.

[25 : 28] See how easily our good deeds, our good intentions get corrupted. It is so simple. We love our own kind. We put our own first, don't we?

We look at these things, and our best efforts, they are tainted even a little bit with how it's gonna benefit us. We do those things out of reference to ourselves.

We say, and we may think we don't, but we do. But when you've experienced God's love, it means you serve others for very different reasons. Tim Keller, he wrote this book, *Generous Justice*, about how the gospel transforms us and it changes why we love and serve others.

And he says this in there, it's not to get a good reputation anymore, or it's not even about feeling better about yourself. It's not because it may benefit your business.

It's not because it may pay off for your family in creating a better city to live in. You do it, you serve, you love, because it pleases God.

[26 : 40] And honoring and pleasing God is a delight to you in and of itself. See? It begins, everything begins, awakening to the love of God and loving him in response with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.

And because of that, because that is the most important thing in your life, you begin to love what God loves and you begin to live others-oriented. You begin to live a life that has a mind full of other people.

And then you're able to go to your neighbors and to love them correctly. So where does that leave you and I? Where do we start with trying to live out these two great commandments?

And as the band comes up, this is how we can respond. I wanna say this. We don't start by looking out. We don't start by looking at ourselves. We don't start by making a list.

We start by looking up. That's where we start. We start by beholding him. We start by leaning into God's love and experiencing his love.

[27 : 56] See, I wanna say this to us. There is a difference in knowing something with the mind and knowing something through experience. Let me explain it this way. I can go to college and I can learn all about the laws of thermodynamics.

I can learn all about how fire can be used and manipulated and turned into energy and power. I can learn all those things. And those things can be great theory and very helpful to me.

And I can know to some degree the power of those things. But you know what? When I put my hand into the flame, I begin to understand fire in a very different way, don't I?

Because I experienced it. The flame has touched me. That is the essence of God's love. We know about it, but it is a love that comes and it touches us.

We experience it. We experience it because we are filled with it. It is something we know in that way. And so I wanna say to us, man, God holds this out for us.

[29 : 01] We get to experience this anytime we want to because you know why? Jesus, in his death on the cross, and as he ascended into heaven, he promised his disciples this before he left.

He said, I gotta go away and I need to because you know why? If I go away, someone better than me is coming. And you're just like, wow, Jesus, who's gonna be better than you in the flesh?

What was the Holy Spirit? He was speaking of the Holy Spirit. And as he ascended into heaven, we know a few weeks later at the day of Pentecost, he released the Spirit on his church.

And he's been with us ever since. And we live in that age where we get to know the mind of Christ. We get to experience the truth of Christ. We get to behold his glory. The Spirit's job is to exalt Christ in our hearts.

The Spirit's job is to communicate the love and the goodness and the mercy and the grace and all the realities of who God is into us. Not just in a mind way, but we get to experience it deep within our soul.

[30 : 04] We know it because it comes and it touches us. He comes and he touches us. And so, man, my thing to us is why wait?

Let's go to God right now. Let's do that together. Let's ask him to baptize us in the fire of his love. Would you stand with me?

We're gonna pray. And I'm gonna lead us into this time of prayer. And I wanna say this and remind us that this isn't about you trying harder.

It's about simply you opening yourself to the Holy Spirit. That's it. The Bible just encourages us to earnestly desire, to say like, you know what? Yeah. This is your promise.

This is your gift to us. It's free. So spirit, come and fill me. Spirit of God, come and fill me. He is the very presence of God. Perhaps you've never put your faith in Jesus.

[31 : 17] And I wanna say to you today, man, he's calling you to himself. He loves you. He came and he wants you to know that he died for you on a cross for your sin. And your first step is faith in that, believing and receiving and coming to him in repentance and saying, man, forgive my sins.

Be my Lord and my savior. Take control of my life. There's gonna be a prayer up on the screen if that's you to pray. But for all of us right now, I just want us to close our eyes, to open ourselves and just say, you know what?

And God, I want all that you have to give me. I want to know you. I want you to come and touch me with your love. Let's do that right now.

Let's do it right now.