

## **Not Far from the Kingdom of God**

October 31, 2021

### **Mark 12:28-34**

*<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup> 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.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

*<sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; <sup>33</sup> 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,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.*



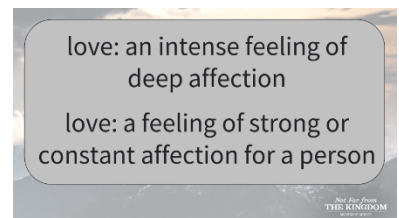
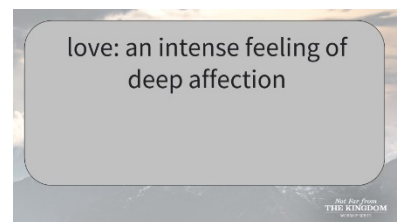
Today we begin our new worship series, "A Life That Matters". As we draw to the end of the church calendar, we pause for a few weeks to remind ourselves of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. These last eighteen months have been tumultuous, difficult, and abnormal. As we have worked our way back to "normal" we have come to realize that our new normal is not going to ever be the same.

Transformation remains the business of the church, so during this series we will lean into the unsettledness that comes during times of transformation. Doing so we will seek to reexamine our practices and our patterns in order to move into the new world that is taking shape around us, in order to be the church that is needed today and into the future. To be such a church, we need to be disciples that lead a life that matters, a life that brings transformation to ourselves, to our families, and to our communities. Over the course of these four weeks, we will discover some elements or markers that point us towards living a life that matters. As we prepare to delve into the first two today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Today's passage centers on love. As I began to consider this message, it occurred to me that this word – love – is one of the most overused words today. I love ice cream. I love pizza. I love the Vikings. I love the Bulls. I



I love that shade of nail polish. I love that flannel shirt. I love hiking. I love going for a drive. I love a gentle rain. I love a powerful thunderstorm. There are many other things that we could put into the love category, aren't there? One online definition of love was this: "*an intense feeling of deep affection.*" This definition would eliminate my affinity for ice cream, pizza, the Vikings, and so on from the "love" category. Another online dictionary describes love this way: "*a feeling of strong or constant affection for a person.*" For the time being, this will be our working definition of love.



Turn with me to Mark 12. Our passage begins with a scribe coming near Jesus and some other religious authorities as they are "*disputing with one another.*" As the scribe watches this interaction it was probably a series of questions aimed at trapping Jesus. This was the normal interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees. These religious experts knew the Law inside out and had come to see Jesus as a rival, as one that must be put in his place or maybe even eliminated altogether. I wonder how these religious experts would define the word 'love?'

To me, the religious leaders of Jesus' day were much like the religious leaders of John Wesley's day. The Anglican church that Wesley grew up in was one that would not welcome the illiterate, the poor, the downtrodden, the addicted. Those in the lower levels of society were not made to feel at home in these churches. As John Wesley studied the scriptures while at Oxford University he came to a different understanding of God's love. He and the fellow members of what became known as the "Holy Club" visited those in prison, brought food and clothing to orphans and widows, and cared for the sick. Wesley and his friends took the church to those in need, loving them however they could.

As the scribe listens, he is impressed with Jesus' answers. So, he decides to ask Jesus a question himself. The scribe's motivation was not from the same place as that of the religious experts. We will see in his response to Jesus' answer that he is truly seeking an honest answer from Jesus. The scribe would be quite familiar with the scriptures.

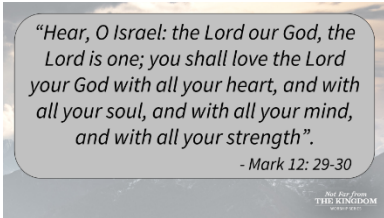
To this point his adult life has been spent each day copying the scriptures by hand. That is what a scribe did. Day after day he painstakingly produced another page or two of scripture as he copied one word at a time.

Although the scribe spent his time copying the scriptures, that does not necessarily mean that he knew the scriptures. One can certainly go through the motions of performing a job or task without becoming knowledgeable about the object you are producing. For example, do you think that writing "I will not talk in class" a hundred times on the chalkboard ever really taught a student why they shouldn't talk in class? Going through the motions is something that we are familiar with in our faith. How many times have you recited the Lord's Prayer on a Sunday morning without really thinking about what the words really mean? When was the last time you read a devotional in the morning and could not recall a thing you read just minutes after finishing your reading?

As the scribe listens to the interaction between Jesus and the religious leaders we can infer that he was following the questioning and the responses. We can also infer that he did not simply copy word after word mindlessly but took the time to consider and meditate on what he was writing down. How else would he come to the conclusion that Jesus answered the questions well? Deciding that Jesus was one worthy of his question, the scribe asks, "*Which commandment is the first of all?*" It is a straight-forward question. There is no pretense, no games being played. He simply wants to know what Jesus thinks. This is a question that was hotly debated among the religious. This scribe, the man who seems to know the Law asks Jesus a big question.

It is big because at this point in time there were just over 600 commands in the Law. The Torah had grown and grown since the giving of the Ten Commandments. Jesus has no difficulty in answering the question though. Jesus' answer comes in two main parts.

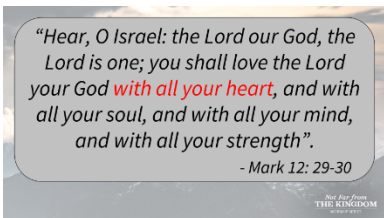
In verses 29 and 30 Jesus says, *"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength"*. This is a



*"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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".*  
- Mark 12: 29-30

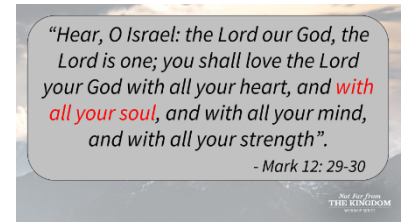
very well-know passage. Today it would be equivalent to something like John 3:16 – *"For God so loved the world..."* Yes, you can finish it. Jesus is quoting here from Deuteronomy 6, verses four and five. Observant Jews would recite this verse twice daily as part of the *Shema*, a prayer offered morning and evening to God. *"Shema"* translates to 'listen'. This command found in Deuteronomy corresponds to the first part of the Ten Commandments, which dealt with our relationship to God. The oneness of God is central to both Judaism and Christianity. The belief in one God and in one God alone is one of the primary foundations of our faith.

This commandment has four areas of focus. Each area is important to our faith. We are to love God *"with all our heart"* – in our way of being. Our heart is the center of what we are as Christians. At our core are our ways of understanding peace, hope, joy, compassion, empathy, love, understanding, forgiveness, and generosity.

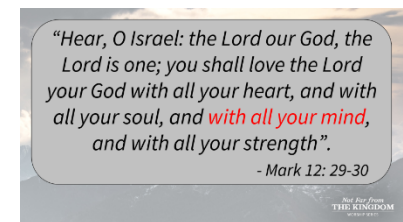


*"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength".*  
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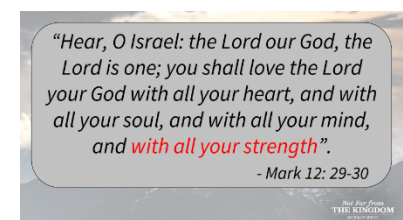
We are to love God "*with all our soul*" – in our desires and feelings that lead us to live a life of faith. In our soul resides the "why" we live out the peace, hope, joy, and so forth that is found in the heart of Christ. Our connection to God is made manifest in the world in the ways that live out our faith. Loving God with all of our soul is fueled by our connection to God and to one another. Loving God with all our soul drives us or is our 'why' we live as witnesses to Christ's love in the world.



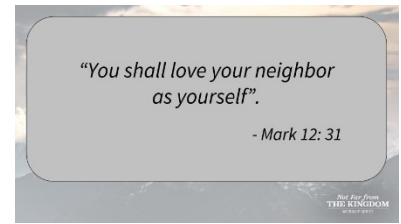
We are to love God "*with all our mind*" – in our understanding and in the ways that we function in the world. We are who we are because of our minds and because of our vocations. Some are pastors, some are nurses, some are ranchers, some are teachers, some are bankers, some are engineers. Our vocations are a big part of who we are in the world, even after we retire. Yet within our vocations we are also called to live as Christians. In this way we are all called to be "ministers". We all have a charge to live out our faith as part of who we are at work, at home, and in all other places.



We are to love God with "*with all our strength*" – with power and energy. As followers of Jesus Christ this power and energy comes from the Holy Spirit. The divine presence that dwells within each of us gives us the strength to witness to our faith in our daily lives. This Holy Spirit power and energy is 'how' we practice our faith in the highs and lows of life and in every place in between.



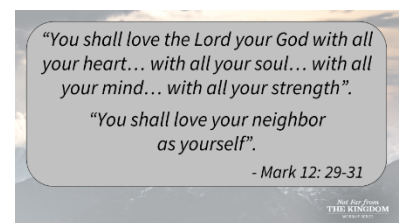
The second commandment comes from Leviticus 19 and corresponds to the second part of the Ten Commandments, which dealt with our relationships with one another. In verse 31 Jesus says, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* As Christians, this concept is very ingrained in us. While we might not always practice it, we do know this commandment quite well.



Throughout Jesus' teachings and throughout the remainder of the New Testament witness, the concept of loving neighbor takes center stage.

This is necessary because our natural inclination as a human being is to look out for ourselves. To be reminded of the call to love God and to love neighbor is needed to counterbalance this natural inclination toward loving self. We need to be reminded that love is not about things being beautiful or perfect. Love is not about having all of our needs and desires met. Love is not about being happy or in a pleasant state of mind.

For the Jews and for Jesus, the two commandments to love God and to love neighbor were intimately associated as basically one command. To me there is a definite connection between loving God and loving neighbor. Even though the world may tell us otherwise, loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength widens the scope of our love. Living this way makes love into a commitment. To raise our commitment to love God to this level means that God takes priority in our lives.



When we truly love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength we find that God does become our priority. With God as our priority, we learn to love deeper and we grow into Christians who better love others.

To love God with all that we are leads us to love others as God loves them. As we grow in our faith, we begin to love others more deeply and more honestly as we grow in our understanding of how God in Christ loves us. This growing understanding will lead us to make intentional choices about how we treat someone, about how we respect someone, about how we hear someone, about how we respond to someone, about how we interact with someone, about how we extend grace to someone.

Often our love of God is expressed in how we extend grace to others. Despite the fact that we ourselves are happy to receive God's grace, we are not always the best at extending God's grace to all other people. At our lectionary study this week, as we discussed this passage, Pastor Kori shared this quote. Many of you know Pastor Kori from her short time serving Grace United Methodist Church.

Here is the quote: *"Nothing in the church makes people in the church more angry than grace. It's ironic: we stumble into a party that we were not invited to and find the uninvited standing at the door making sure no other uninviteds get in. Then a strange phenomenon occurs: as soon as we are included in the party because of Jesus' irresponsible love, we decide to make grace "more responsible" by becoming self-appointed monitors,*

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"Then a strange phenomenon occurs: as soon as we are included in the party because of Jesus' irresponsible love, we decide to make grace "more responsible" by becoming self-appointed monitors, guarding the kingdom of God, keeping the riffraff out (which, as I understand it, are who the kingdom of God is supposed to include)."

- Mike Yaconelli

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*guarding the kingdom of God, keeping the riffraff out (which, as I understand it, are who the kingdom of God is supposed to include)."*

Going back to the beginning of the passage, we become like the religious leaders who were arguing with Jesus. They wanted to keep the circle tightly drawn in. This Jesus who was interacting with the blind and the tax collectors, with the deaf and the prostitutes, well, he did not fit within their circle. So... they tried to find fault with him. They tried to trap him. They tried to discredit him. When we encounter those who are different from us, those who maybe don't fit our neat little boxes, then we too can want to draw the circle tighter. We can forget that we were once sinners saved by grace. We can forget that we were once lost. And we can become gate keepers, monitors of who "*deserves*" God's grace.

I share this quote because I believe that the first step to truly loving others is to recognize the ways that we can struggle to truly love others. We need to be aware of our tendencies to want to have things our way, to create times and situations where we are comfortable, to maintain the status quo instead of exploring possibilities. To begin to live into this commandment we must first ask ourselves, as individuals and as a church community, "What does it look like to really love others as God loves them?"

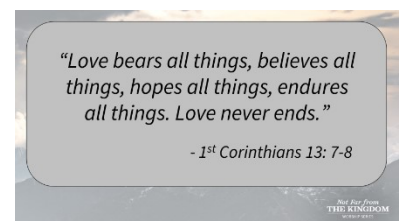
To love God and to love neighbor is quite often about choosing to live in faithfulness even when we do not want to. This takes great effort. To live as a witness to Jesus Christ is a high calling.

It is a calling to live with a deep and abiding love, to a commitment to living life the way God calls us to. This connects back into both the commandment to love God with all that we are and to the commandment to love neighbor as self. Do you see how they are interconnected?

In verse 32 the scribe says, *"You are right, Teacher."* He acknowledges that Jesus' answer is absolutely correct. The scribe goes on to share that following these commands are *"much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."* The religious leaders who were still probably hanging around the periphery of this conversation must have gasped at this statement. Jesus acknowledges the faithful spirit of the scribe, saying to him, *"You are not far from the kingdom of God."* What a powerful affirmation!



In closing I turn to the love chapter, to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. In verses seven and eight we read, *"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."* This is the kind of love that



God has for us and it is the kind of love that we are called to embody for the whole world. God's love is a love that will fill our hearts to the point where we have more than enough to give away. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. On your journey of faith, which has been the hardest - loving God with your heart, soul, mind, or strength? Which has been easiest?
- 2) *Pray*. Who comes to mind when you think about who you or who the church might try to keep excluded or outside the gate? Pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work softening hearts and minds.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 22: 34-40. A lawyer asks Jesus the same question. His response is basically the same. But verse 40 is quite different than what we read in Luke 12. What spin does this put on Jesus' teaching?