

“WHAT IS THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT?”**MARK 12:28-34**

Some year ago now, I read a good book entitled “Loving God” by Charles Colson. Many of you remember Colson as one of President Nixon’s staff during the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s. Colson became a follower of Jesus during that tumultuous time, served time in prison, and eventually became an influential Christian leader and author. In the introduction to “Loving God,” Colson explained why he wrote it. He’d been going through a period of personal spiritual dryness that all Christians endure from time to time. He read several books hoping to prompt his own spiritual growth. He observed that each one explained in great detail how much God loves us. But few of those books asked a question that occurred to Colson over and over again: “How do we love God?” What does it look like to love God? How do you do it?

So Colson asked a number of long time Christians how they loved God. One person stammered, “Well, by loving Him with all my heart and soul and mind.” Another person said, “By maintaining a worshipful heart. By offering myself as a sacrifice.” Colson wanted specifics and so the man described his devotional practices like reading the Bible and prayer. Halfway through his explanation, he stopped, shrugged and said, “Let me think about it some more.” Other people cited faithful church attendance. Tithing ranked high on ways to love God. Some people mentioned battles with stubborn sins they’d finally been able to defeat. Still others explained loving God as a feeling in their hearts – almost like a romantic encounter. Colson became convinced most Christians don’t really know how to love God or explain how they love God. So, how would you answer that question: How do you love God? We all know we should love God and it’s good to love God, but just how do you go about loving God?

Questions Jesus answered during Holy Week - those seven days from Jesus’ unique entry into the city of Jerusalem (we call it Palm Sunday) through His betrayal, arrest, death, and resurrection (we call it Easter Sunday). That’s the theme of our message series in these weeks leading up to Easter Day on April 1st. We’re considering several questions individuals or groups of people asked Jesus because His answers provide us insight into who Jesus is and what He accomplished. Today, we reflect on the question: “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus’ response not only answered that question but also the one we’re asking: How do you love God? Let’s read now the story of who asked this question of Jesus and how He answered it. I suggest that Jesus’ answer reveals...

THE GREATEST ESSENTIAL: LOVE GOD

Why did this man ask Jesus this question? Was he trying to get Jesus to say something foolish or embarrassing? That tactic never worked with Jesus; nevertheless, some religious leaders kept right on trying. But this man – who was also a religious leader himself – didn’t seem to be hostile to Jesus. He recognized Jesus was someone very special indeed with deep spiritual insights. His conversation with Jesus seemed to be respectful. Jesus even commended the man for his observations and said, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” (Mk. 12:34 NLT)

OK, but why ask Jesus this question, “What is the greatest commandment?” After all, the man was a teacher of all the religious guidelines – the Law - given to Moses and then passed down for hundreds of years among the Jewish people. By Jesus’ time, the Law had expanded from what Moses received from God into hundreds of man-made rules and regulations governing almost every imaginable area of life. There was constant debate, division, and bickering among the religious leaders. Some felt all the rules were equally important. Others believed the Law had become so weighed down with petty, legalistic demands that its essence was in danger of being lost. Apparently, the religious leader in our story today belonged to that second group. He wanted to get down to the essence of what it meant to have a relationship with God. When it came to relating to God, what was essential? When he asked Jesus, “What is the greatest or most important commandment?” he was really asking, “How do I love God?”

Jesus’ answer was straight out of the Bible. He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’” (Mk. 12:29-30 NLT) What can we learn from that part of Jesus’ answer? Loving God is a command I can obey. Jesus made it clear that loving God is the first, the central, the fundamental, and the foundational purpose of your life and mine. If you do just one thing in life, love God! It’s the one, great essential in life – more important than having a family, or having a successful career, or making lots of money, or making some kind of great contribution to the world.

Did you notice the repeated use of the word “all”? “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” (Mk. 12:29-30 NLT). The word “all” means to love God totally, completely, and comprehensively. You’re “all in.” You’re passionately committed to and utterly absorbed in some activity in life. Now, living here in central Ohio, we have an excellent example of what it means to be “all in.” I saw recently that someone ranked Buckeye Nation as the number one fan base in the world. In other words, fans of the Ohio State sports teams were considered the most loyal, the most committed to, the most absorbed in, and the most fanatical about their team when compared to other fans anywhere else in the world. They’re “all in.” That might be OK when it comes to sports, but when it comes to all of life, God wants you to be “all in” about Him!

Loving God is something you do intellectually. He becomes the primary focus of your mind or your thoughts. One way that can happen is to develop a mind-set for God. What does that mean? As an example, take a look around this room and find five things that have the color blue in them. Go ahead, do it! Now, I just gave you a “blue mind-set.” You have blue jumping out at you from every direction. Another example. For most of my ministry life, I’ve been trying to develop what you might call an “illustration mind-set.” Why? Early on, I discovered that most people forgot the incredibly significant thoughts and carefully reasoned arguments in my messages even before they left the church on a given Sunday morning! But, strangely enough, they could easily remember some story I told six months ago. That’s just how the human

mind works! I realized how critically important it was to find good illustrations, stories, and anecdotes to add to my messages. So I look for good illustrations everywhere – kind of an “illustration radar.” I’m sure I miss good stories every day; nevertheless, I’ve intentionally tried to develop an “illustration mindset.”

You can develop a “God mind-set” with prayer and effort. The longer you follow Jesus, the more you can become aware of God’s activities happening all around you. You become more sensitive to His spiritual presence – even in times of suffering or facing evil. You invite Him more often in making daily decisions and choices. You think about Him more. You pray to Him more frequently. You see Him showing up in the lives of other people more often. Every aspect of life can yield insights into God: your marriage, your role as a parent, your work, enjoying nature, observing politics – anything and everything. Since we know God is everywhere, part of loving Him is learning how to detect His presence everywhere and in everything that happens.

Loving God is something you do emotionally. It should impact you profoundly at a feeling level. It’s perfectly appropriate to have warm, intense feelings of love for our Heavenly Father. We have so much to be grateful for, don’t we? He created the vast universe, this incredibly beautiful planet on which we live, and He made each of us as well. He so desired a relationship with us that He sent His Son, Jesus, into this world to die on the cross and be raised again so that our sins could be forgiven. He promises His children eternal life in His presence. I’m convinced one way you and I love God is being perpetually grateful for who He is and what He’s done. Another way to love God is to admire Him. After all, God is full of majesty, full of power, full of excellence, full of perfection, full of holiness, full of grace. God is deserving of our greatest admiration.

Loving God is something you do volitionally. You surrender your will or your desires to Him fully. We live in a culture that usually defines love as an emotion over which you have little control. We talk about people “falling into love” or “falling out of love” as if love is like a car accident you can’t avoid. The Bible’s concept of love is much different. There, love is primarily a decision of your will and, secondarily, an emotion or a feeling. That’s why God can command us to love Him. Jesus doesn’t say, “Let’s try really hard to love God. Let’s all work up some loving feelings toward God.” No, love is a command here. “And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.” (Mk. 12:30 NLT)

Because loving God is a matter of your will or volition, it’s synonymous with obeying God in the Bible. To obey God is to love God. To love God is to obey God. One and the same. Learning what it means to obey God is a life-long process. When you’re developing an authentic God mind-set, you live the way God wants you to live. Your attitudes change over time; they become more godly. Your values and priorities go through a transformation. Does the Bible have some specific “do’s and don’ts?” Sure, it does! And when you live those out, you’re loving God. When you ignore them and offer excuses why you can’t or won’t live by them, you’re not loving God. The Bible’s also full of principles that can be discovered and applied to every aspect of life and living. Obeying God is an all important part of what it means to love God. There can be

many legitimate ways to demonstrate your love for God. Jesus also pointed to maybe the single greatest demonstration of what it means to love God in this story.

THE GREATEST DEMONSTRATION: LOVE PEOPLE

The question was, “What is the greatest or most important commandment?” It was like asking Jesus, “How do I love God?” Jesus quoted the Old Testament. Loving God was the greatest commandment. It’s life’s greatest essential. But then Jesus did something no Jewish teacher up to that point in time had ever done. He took Deuteronomy 6:5 – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” – and joined it with another Old Testament verse – Leviticus 19:18. That verse says, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” (NLT). Jesus abbreviated it and used it in his answer to the religious leader’s question, “The second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mk. 12:31 NLT) When you love God it can be demonstrated in many ways. True enough! But the single, greatest demonstration of loving God is loving people.

The Bible clearly teaches that every human being is sinful, broken, and marred when you compare him or her to God. Sure, some people are more broken than others, but when you compare all of us to God, every one of us is a hopeless mess. Have you ever noticed that many people today want to hold on to the idea of treating people with respect and dignity without having any logical reason for doing so? If you believe the theory human beings are the product of a random coming together of chemicals and biological processes that evolved over billions of years, then you believe human beings are essentially accidents. Now, some people take that theory to its logical conclusion. If human beings are accidents, then you can gas them and incinerate their bodies, you can abort them, euthanize them, shoot them down in schools, abuse or harass them sexually and in every other way, get them addicted to drugs and alcohol, enslave them, be prejudiced against them, deny them their civil rights, and commit all sorts of injustice against them. How can an accident - even if it results in a human being - have intrinsic value and worth? It can’t! So why be offended or horrified when human beings are treated like accidents? After all, they’re just accidents! One reason we witness such abysmal acts of inhumanity in our country and around the world is the direct result of having no rational basis for believing in people’s intrinsic worth and value.

If you accept the Bible’s point of view that every human being is someone made in God’s image and someone for whom Jesus died on the cross and rose again, now you have every reason to treat every person with love and respect regardless of how broken, how messed up, or how unlikeable he or she happens to be. Now you have justification to get offended or horrified when you see any person treated like garbage, or dehumanized, or despised. I can’t think of any logical reason to love other human beings other than what I find in the Bible: Every person is made in God’s image. Every person is someone for whom Jesus died and rose again. How I treat any person is an opportunity to demonstrate my love for God. Other human beings become loveable to you when you first love God. Mother Teresa, the Roman Catholic nun who spent her

life caring for some of the most destitute people on the planet, once said, “No, I would not touch a leper for a \$1000; yet I willingly cure him for the love of God.”

God’s the only reason to do it! Only God can give human beings significance and value. And the more we love God, the more we love other human beings. Now you have every reason to love people! Jesus suggested it’s the single, greatest demonstration of loving God. If you’re truly developing a God mindset, you will find yourself drawn toward people and becoming a channel of God’s love into their lives. Notice again that loving people is a command to be obeyed. Jesus said, “The second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mk. 12:31 NLT) If you’re a follower of Jesus, loving other people isn’t an option. You may or may not have loving feelings toward someone; nevertheless, you’re commanded to act in loving ways toward him or her.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday our country celebrated last month, had many famous quotes. I read one this week I’d never seen before. Not long before his death, Dr. King spoke to the congregation at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church: “If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I’d like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody.” When you love God, you know you have to love people and you want to.

Just like God presents us with many opportunities to love Him every day, He also presents us with many opportunities to love other people every day. We just miss a lot of those opportunities. Every arena of your life and mine is like a laboratory where you can learn how to love and how to express love to other people. Marriage isn’t just a relationship for people who are experiencing perfect love already. Marriage is a laboratory where you learn how to love your spouse. A family isn’t just a place where parents and kids love each other effortlessly. It’s a laboratory where parents learn how to love kids and kids learn how to love parents. Many people think a local church ought to be an arena where people instantly love each other deeply. They should never hurt or disappoint each other. Actually, this or any church is just another laboratory to learn how to love. The other relationship networks in your life provide you still other laboratories where you can learn how to love others: your workplace, your school, your neighborhood. And the more you learn how to love messed up, broken people in all those different arenas of life, the more you are expressing your love for God Himself.

That’s why we encourage you to love spiritually lost people by praying for them, intentionally looking to build relationships with them, refusing to reject them for their ungodly behavior and attitudes, and being ready to share what Jesus means to you. When you love lost people, you love God. That’s why we encourage you to be a homework helper to refugee kids or help refugee adults learn English at the ministry apartment at Whispering Oaks. When you love refugees and immigrants, you love God.

That's why we encourage you to read with kids at area schools or here at the church or encourage you to offer yourself for ministry with kids or students here on Sundays or Wednesdays. When you love kids and teens, you love God. That's why we encourage you to help deliver beds to people in our community who need one. When you love other followers of Jesus enough to be in a discipleship triad with them and hold each other accountable to grow spiritually, you love God. On and on we could go! When you love people by meeting a need in their lives, you are loving God. Loving other people is the single greatest demonstration of your love for God.

Billy Graham died this past week. Like many of you, I was profoundly blest and influenced by that godly man. I decided to tell a story about the Graham family today partly as a way to honor Billy's life and legacy, but even more so because it illustrates the truth that loving God always means loving people – sometimes unlovely people who've made big mistakes. Back in the 1980s there was no more sordid and shameful scandal than the one involving televangelist Jim Bakker. The way he ran his ministry and his personal conduct made him an embarrassment to Christians all over the country. He ended up going to jail for financial shenanigans involving his ministry. To say he was "persona non grata" among Christians is probably an understatement.

When Bakker was transferred to his last prison, Franklin Graham, Billy's son, said he wanted to help Bakker when he got out — with a job, a house to live in, and a car. It was Jim Bakker's fifth Christmas in prison. He thought it over and said, "Franklin, you can't do this. It will hurt you. The Grahams don't need my baggage." Franklin said, "Jim, you were my friend in the past and you're my friend now. If anyone doesn't like it, I'm looking for a fight." So when Jim Bakker got out of prison, the Grahams sponsored him by paying for a house for him to live in and giving him a car to drive. The first Sunday out, Ruth Graham called the halfway house Bakker was living in at the Salvation Army and asked permission for him to go to church with her that Sunday morning. When he got there, the pastor welcomed him and sat him with the Graham family. There were two whole rows of them —Graham aunts, uncles, and cousins. The organ began playing and the place was full except for a seat next to Jim Bakker. Then the doors opened and in walked Ruth Graham. She walked down that aisle and sat right next to inmate 07407-058. He'd only been out of prison 48 hours, but she told the world that morning that Jim Bakker was her friend. Afterwards, she had Bakker up to her cabin for dinner. She asked him for some addresses. He pulled an envelope out of his pocket, because in prison you're not allowed to have a wallet. You just carry an envelope. Ruth asked, "Don't you have a wallet?" She walked into the other room and came back and said, "Here's one of Billy's wallets. He doesn't need it. You can have it."

The man asked, "Jesus, what is the greatest – the most important – commandment?" Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." That's the one great essential in life: love God. But He didn't stop there. "Love your neighbor as yourself." That's the single greatest demonstration that you and I love God: love people. That's God's Word for today. Love God. Love people.