

What's Most Important to You? (Mark 12:28-34)

Amid the clamor and tumultuous events that took place during the week that ended with Jesus on the cross, a teacher of the law entered into the debates swirling around Jesus by asking a simple, but provocative question: Of all the commandments, and there are 613 of them in addition to the oral teaching of the rabbis that sometimes assumed the status of a commandment, of all of these, which is the most important?

It's a simple enough question, but it was frequently discussed and could become the flashpoint of heated debate—it was a question designed to make one choose a side and earn a label. In the fever-pitch of the heightened tension between Jesus and his opponents, among them the teachers of the law, it was a loaded question. Jesus disarmed it with an equally simple, but profound answer quoted from the heart of the law itself: “The most important one is this: Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Then he added, The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We might well ask that same question right now amid all the clamor and tumultuous events swirling around us. By asking it, we really want to know what to do. What is most important in this critical moment we're experiencing? With the pandemic lingering on and racial disharmony erupting in full throat, what is most important? I'm pretty sure that Jesus is giving us the same answer. But in hearing it, we've tended to latch onto the second piece of his answer—Love your neighbor as yourself.

That's not completely unexpected—as Christ followers we're somewhat conditioned to lean into that part of it. We hear lots of teaching about this, we have programs designed to guide us into practical ways of doing this. Actually, the New Testament has more to say on the second than the first. Even so, the call to love our neighbors, our near-dwellers, comes across as a duty, an obligation, it's almost a “chore,” something we really have to work at to accomplish. And, good intentions notwithstanding, there still seem to be limits on the extent of our love for others as we find some easier to love than others.

So we continue to wrestle with the mechanics of loving others, the evidence of which is pouring into our city centers, while the key to it eludes us. Here, friends, is where we need to carefully hear Jesus. The key that unlocks the door to easily and naturally loving others is to attend to the first command, the most important one: to love God with every fiber of our being, for the second command flows from the first.

Though I can't see you, I can imagine you saying, “Of course that comes first. We love God.” But let me gently suggest that we wrestle with this a bit, because my hunch is that we have assumed love for God as a given without giving much thought to what that really means. It wouldn't be the first time this has happened to Christ followers. The church in Ephesus, which benefitted from the apostle Paul's teaching and insight first-hand was likely shocked when they were identified in the book of Revelation as a church that had forsaken their first love. Perhaps they had assumed love for God as a given.

Wrestling with this question is important—Augustine, an early church father, realized its importance as he recognized that we are shaped by what or who we love.

And that happens for good or ill, so we need to get this right. What does it mean to love God?

A common definition for love is to promote the best interests of another, to yield oneself for the well-being of another. A simpler way to put it is to will the good of another. Definitions like this are sometimes used to explain what it means for God to love us; we understand this well enough, and we gladly receive it. As we bask in God's love, a sense of joy envelopes us, we're happy about it, we like what we're feeling, and perhaps we assume that our emotional response demonstrates or expresses a reciprocal love for God.

But let's take God out of the equation for the moment, and consider how that plays out on a strictly human level. The same definition holds—to will the good of another. Imagine yourself as the recipient of that kind of love—you understand this well enough, and you gladly receive it. As you experience it, a sense of joy envelopes you and you're happy about it, you like what you're feeling. Now imagine that your response to love is simply to enjoy the emotion it generates as you thank the person providing it. Does that qualify as an expression of reciprocal love? It certainly qualifies as appreciation, but it doesn't meet the threshold of love. It tips into love when we want for others what's best for them, even at the cost of our own interests. It becomes love when we're willing to arrange our life around them so that their joy becomes our joy. On a human level, when that kind of reciprocal love happens, it becomes heaven.

When we put God back into the equation, we may discover that what we've assumed as love for God is more like appreciation for God which, in itself, is a good starting point, but the crux of our faith, what Jesus called the most important commandment is to love God deeply. So how do we love God deeply? Here are some suggestions that come out of my life and insights I've gained from the lives of others.

It begins with investing time in getting to know God, not just to know of God. For us this means knowing Jesus well. Our primary resource for this is the gospels, which we often read for information about Jesus—make the shift into understanding Jesus as a person. As you read consider: what is Jesus like? What makes him tick? What makes him glad, sad, or mad? While reading, converse with Jesus about what you're reading, what you're learning. Ask him directly: this is what I'm getting, is it on track? What else is here? A secondary source is others around you who know Christ well. What does their life reveal about Jesus? How is Jesus alive in them? This doesn't just have to be people you know currently—you can delve into the writing and thoughts of Christ's followers in history. What insights do they offer? What did their experience of Jesus reveal about him? When you love someone, you tend to want to know everything about them—invest time in getting to know Jesus well.

Then, cultivate an awareness of Christ's presence around you. Calvin said that we live in the theater of God's glory-creation itself is the heartbeat of Christ's creative energy. Revel in the wonder of its grandeur; praise Christ for its beauty—delight in the awesome power of Christ holding it together. Sense his Spirit in the breeze. Cultivate the presence of God's image and delight in the good gifts Christ distributes in the talents and skills displayed in humankind: managers, healers, artists, musicians, craftsmen and women, writers, merchants, laborers, care-givers, protectors, leaders, visionaries. All of them and more are created in God's image and using God-given abilities to serve the common good. You are surrounded by God engaged in creation.

Next, invest in time alone with Jesus—be still in his presence, be available to him. This is, by far, the most challenging for us, and this is where the enemy of your soul will confront you: think of your schedule, your responsibilities, the people who are counting on you, what will this accomplish except to reduce precious time available to get things done? But friends, this is the tipping point of love: when you arrange your life to be with one you love. And the primary concern of Jesus isn't what you get done, it is in who you are. Tasks, no matter how pressing, are impermanent—you are eternal. Who you are is far more important than what you do, and who you are becoming is shaped by who you love. Jesus' question to Peter in John 21 is his question to you: do you love me? Time reserved for Jesus alone quiets your soul—you train your mind to be still so that you can hear him alone. It takes effort to acquire stillness—come to this time without pre-conceived ideas or expectations. It requires the sacrifice of control and the offering of openness which is the exercise of belonging where you say, "I am yours—all of who I am is yours, all of what I have is yours, all of what I can do is at your disposal: what is your pleasure? This is the expression of love.

This, then, is the threshold of loving God, for you become absorbed with what God is doing, and you are wrapped up in thought that dwells upon God. As you come to know Jesus better, your awareness of dwelling in his presence increases. As you reflect on this in time alone with him, you find your values, desires, and character aligning with Jesus. You yield your efforts to his direction, and you discover delight when the purposes of Jesus are realized in the things his grace enables you to do.

The most important commandment is still: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Get this right—pursue this, for everything else in life flows out of this. What's most important to you? AMEN.