

“The Greatest Commandment(s)”
Mark 12:28-34
February 22, 2026
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning our series in the Gospel of Mark. The Jewish leaders of Jerusalem have been challenging Jesus as he teaches in and around the Temple. This morning their challenges are interrupted by what appears to be a sincere question from a scribe. [Edwards, 370; Witherington, 330]

With that said, let's turn to our text: Mark 12:28-34.

Please do listen carefully. This is God's Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{12:28} And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ 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.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ 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.” ³⁴ 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.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, your testimonies are wonderful;
therefore our souls cling to them.
Turn to us now, and be gracious to us,
as is your way with those who love your name.
Keep our steps steady according to your promise,
and let no iniquity have dominion over us.
Make your face to shine upon us, your servants,
and teach us your statutes.
Grant all of this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:129-135]

Introduction

In our text this morning, a scribe brings to Jesus a question that was commonly discussed in their day: Of all the commands of Scripture, which is the chief commandment – which is “the most important of all?” [Edwards, 370-371; Witherington, 330]

And Jesus here answers by giving not one, but two commandments, which must go together.

And what Jesus says, essentially, is that: In response to God, we are called to love God and to love our neighbor.

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We’re going to take that one piece at a time, but we’re actually going to do it in reverse order. And so we’ll consider first our call to love our neighbor, then our call to love God, and finally how all of this is in response to who God is, and what he’s done.

But even before that, we need to ask a question.

What Is Love?

We need to start with the question: What is love?

Now, as much as this question may trigger a 1993 Eurodance hit in some of our minds, it really is a serious and important question for us to consider.

We can throw that word around a lot: “Love.” But we rarely stop to wrestle with what it really means.

Now, there are, I think, multiple valid ways to define love as it’s presented in the Bible – each valid in some way and shedding light on some important aspect of love as it’s presented to us in Scripture.

But this morning, to help us approach our text, I want to draw from a few Christian thinkers, beginning with the Christian philosopher Josef Pieper.

Pieper, after reflecting on a number of possibilities, concludes that we can define love as one person communicating to another: “It’s good that you exist; it’s good that you are in this world.” [Pieper, 164]

Now, Pieper acknowledges that that may sound a bit aloof or abstract, and so he adds that to love another, is really to say to them: “I want you to exist!” “How wonderful that you exist!” [Pieper, 164, 166, 170]

Theologian John Swinton makes this even more personal, paraphrasing Pieper’s concept of love as saying to another person: “It’s good that you are here ... I’m glad that you exist!” [Swinton]¹

This is the content of what love seeks to communicate. But how, we might ask does it communicate this message?

Well, here, John Frame is helpful to us. Frame identifies three dimensions of love. Love, he writes, “is allegiance, action, and affection.” [Frame, 193, 333]

And so, we might say that to love is to communicate to someone else our conviction that it is good that they exist, that we think it is wonderful that they are in the world, that we are glad they are here – and to communicate that conviction through our allegiance, our actions, and our affection.

And you really need all three of those dimensions. Affection alone is not enough. And, indeed, affection without allegiance and action is ultimately thin and insincere. The spouse who appears to love their husband or wife with their affections, but who then acts in ways that are unloving, or who displays unfaithfulness in their allegiance – that spouse has not truly loved their husband or wife. When we think of love, we must not think of affection alone: true love includes also actions and allegiance, as the Apostle John reminds us [1 John 3:18].

That said ... love that only has action and allegiance ... but no affection ... that too is insufficient.

Love that is only a slavish duty, without a heart-felt appreciation for the other person, without sincerely expressing to the other: “It’s good that you exist. I’m glad that you’re here. How wonderful that you are in the world with me.” – love that lacks that affectionate expression is also hollow, empty, and insufficient.

Pieper draws here from Erich Fromm, who describes both the milk and honey of love that we may give or receive from one another. Milk, Peiper explains, “is everything a person requires for [...] the mere needs of life; but honey is the symbol of the sweetness of life and the happiness of existing.” [Pieper, 175]

The “milk” of love – the action and allegiance, out of duty – may provide many good things for a person. But if the “honey” of love – the affection – is missing, if they don’t hear the other person say, in a range of ways “I’m glad that you are here. How good it is that you exist!” then something serious is missing in that relationship. [Pieper, 176]

Taken together, what we see is that to love another person, is to express to them, through our allegiance, our action, and our affection: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here.”

That’s what love looks like.²

¹ And, we might add, love is glad for the existence of the other person not just as a means to an end in our own lives, but true love desires the existence and presence of the other as an end in and of themselves – believing and communicating that it is good that that person exists. [Wojtyla, 23; Waldsetin, 23-24]

² This understanding of love is helpful, in part, because it can also in many ways define the love that existed in God even before creation. God, before he made anything, existed as a Trinity – as three persons in one God. And one of the reasons why the Apostle John could say that God is and always has been love [1 John 4:8] is because even

What we need to consider then, is: Do we actually do that well?

Let's consider that question first when it comes to our neighbor, and then when it comes to God.

Called to Love Our Neighbor

As Jesus tells us here, we are called on to love our neighbor – even to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This, Jesus says in verse 31, is the second greatest commandment. And Jesus isn't making that commandment up – it's coming from the Old Testament. Specifically, it's found in Leviticus 19:18.

We are called on to love our neighbor. Which, given the definition we have been considering, means that we are to relate to our neighbor in such a way that we communicate to them: "I'm glad that you exist. I think it's wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here."

And it's worth asking: Do we relate to the people around us in that way? Is that what people around us hear in how we speak to them ... in how we act towards them?

For some of us, affection may come easier than actions. For others, actions and duty may come, but affections may be harder. For some, initial actions and affections may come quickly, but persistent faithfulness and long-term allegiance is a struggle for us. We each have our own strengths and weaknesses. But we are each called to all three dimensions of expressing love for the people around us.

And it's when those three are brought together – when affection is combined with action and allegiance – that love is truly expressed.

It's worth asking yourself: Which of those dimensions do you tend to struggle with? Is it the efforts of loving actions? The steadfastness of loving allegiance? The expression of loving affection? Because God calls us to all three dimensions of love towards those around us.

Our loving affections should lead us to loving actions. And at the same time, we should engage in loving actions in a way that fosters loving affection – not in a way that is cold, or detached, or resentful, but in a way that seeks to grow and foster the affections of love for the other person in our hearts, and that communicates that love with our speech.

before God made anything, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were expressing and receiving their love for one another, from all eternity – each declaring their delight in the being and existence of the other. [Reeves, 19-38] Creation is, in many ways, an overflowing of the love which already existed between the members of the Trinity. [Reeves, 41-52]

And if God is love, and creates us out of love, then it makes sense to expect that what he wants from us – as his creatures, as those who are supposed to bear his image – is that we too love: that we love him and that we love one another, communicating to him and to one another what the members of the Trinity have communicated to one another from all eternity: "I'm glad that you exist. I think it's wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here."

And so, our actions, our allegiance, our affections, all together should communicate to the people around us: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here.”

But is that what we’re really saying to the people around us?

Do we live out this kind of love in our marriages? Do we love our spouse with a love that makes them confident that we are glad they’re our spouse, that we think it’s wonderful that they are in our lives, that communicates our conviction that it is good that God has bound our life to theirs?

Or, even as we fulfill our duty to our spouse in some ways, do we also communicate coldness, or a resentment, or a transactional attitude – something less than a delight in their existence, something less than an affirmation that we are glad that they are who they are, and that we delight in the fact that the Lord has put them in our lives?

When we are called to love our spouse with our deeds, with our faithfulness, and with our affections – it’s not that we chose one or two of those avenues. But we are called to all three. In what way do you need to better love your husband or wife?

Or what about our children? Of all relationships, there are few places where love is more important for a person’s future, as they need to hear from us, their parents, as God’s ambassadors: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here.”

This love is, in part, expressed through loving actions, and through providing the material needs of life – what Erich Fromm called the “milk” of love.

But also, as Fromm points out, you can often see even in adulthood, those who, as children, received all the milk of love – all the actions and resources and finances and opportunities to meet their needs – but they did not receive the honey of love from their parents: they did not receive the affection that said to them in words, and in smiles, in affirmations and embraces: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here.” And that lack of affection – that leaves a mark, often long into adulthood. [Pieper, 175-176]

Of course, we all fall short as parents. None of us are perfect. But as we raise our children, we need to consider: Do our children know that we are glad they are here? Do they know, without a doubt, that we think it is wonderful that they are in the world? Are they confident that we think it is good that they exist – that it is good that God has made them who he’s made them to be, and then given them to us? In both word and deed, do we love our children as God has called us to?

Or beyond our family, what about our fellow church members? Do we communicate to one another – and not just to our closest friends here, but to all believers here: to those much younger and those much older, those who have been here for generations, and those newly arrived, those we agree with and those we disagree with – do we communicate to one another in actions and allegiance, in affection and affirmations: “I’m glad that you are here. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this church. It is good that you are part of our congregation.”? Because that’s what Jesus is calling us to here.

And what about those outside the church? What about the non-believer? What about the stranger?

Jesus taught explicitly that this command to love our neighbor as ourselves extended beyond the covenant community, to the unbeliever, the foreigner, and even to our enemies. That’s what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Sermon on the Mount. [Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 5:38-48]

And Jesus didn’t invent this idea – we see it in the very chapter where we find this command to love our neighbors. In Leviticus 19 the implications of this commandment is applied not just to fellow Israelites, but also to the sojourner: the foreigner, the unbeliever, in their midst. [Leviticus 19:10]

From the beginning, this command to love our neighbor as ourselves extended beyond those closest to us, beyond our fellow believers, beyond our fellow countrymen, to the unbelieving outsider, living among us.

And from the context of Leviticus 19 we learn that this command is about more than how we treat our friends and family. [Leithart, 171] The command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we see in Leviticus 19:9-18 includes to command to oppose oppression and economic exploitation [19:13], to protect the weak and disabled [19:14], to refuse gossip and slander and falsehood [19:16, 11-12], to oppose injustice in the judicial system [19:15], to oppose hatred, and vengeance, and grudge-bearing [19:18a, 11b].

But also, positively, Leviticus 19 calls us to provide sacrificially for the needs of our neighbors, in an ongoing and sustained way – for both the poor and the sojourner. [19:9-10] And that word “sojourner” really just means the foreigner, the alien, the immigrant [the NASB, for example, uses all these words to translate the same Hebrew term]. By such provisions, carried out through sacrificial action, God’s people are called on to communicate to the poor and the immigrant that they are not an intrusion or an undesirable, but to say to them instead: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this land. It is good that you are here.”³

All of this is a reminder that this command to love our neighbor is both personal – in shaping out own personal conduct – and it is social and political.

Which is why the call to love our neighbors in Leviticus 19:18 is accompanied in that same chapter with demands for social justice, with prohibitions against oppression and economic exploitation of the weak and the poor, with commands to provide materially for those in need. [Myers, 318]

Now, of course, when it comes to the political aspects of this, Christians can disagree on the wisest ways to carry out those commandments – the wisest ways to love those living around us in our society.

But all Christians need to stop and ask themselves periodically: “Could my political involvement be accurately summed up as me seeking to love my neighbor – all my neighbors, and not just those like me, not just those who agree with me and vote like I do – but could my political involvement

³ The context of Leviticus 19 is also a reminder that such love is often sacrificial – and it’s not aimed at merely keeping our neighbor alive, but seeking to bless them as we are blessed.

As the historic preacher Jonathan Edwards has argued, though we are often tempted to avoid helping our neighbor until their situation is desperate, and then to only help them enough to sustain them, this is contrary to the command to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. Instead, we are called to sacrificially love others in all sorts of needs, and to care for them as we ourselves would want to be cared for. [Edwards in Keller, 98-99]

be accurately summed up as me seeking to love my neighbors as myself? And if not ... how do I need to repent and seek to follow Jesus more faithfully?"

And so, whether it's in our closest human relationships, or in our relationships with others in the church, at work, in our neighborhoods, or in our politics, we are called on to love our neighbors as ourselves – we are called on, in our words, our actions, and our affections, to communicate to them: "I'm glad that you exist. I think it's wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here."

Jesus tells us that the second greatest commandment is for us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Called to Love God

But above even that, Jesus tells us in verse 30 that we are called on to love God.

Drawing from Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus said: "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."

Notice, there's no half measures there. We are to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength – with everything that we are. [Wright, *Mark*, 170]

That means making our loyalty and allegiance to God our chief allegiance and our highest loyalty. It means in our actions that we honor and obey his commandments to us above the commandments or callings we receive from any other source. And it means that in our affections, we honor and love and appreciate God above all others. [Leithart, 170]

It means that with all that we are, and all we do, we communicate to God: "I'm glad that you exist. I think it's wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here."

Now that might sound like an odd thing for us to say to God ... but maybe it's importance becomes more obvious when we recognize that every time we sin, we are saying the opposite of that to God.

With every sin, we are saying that we wish God – God as he is, God as he has revealed himself to be: the God who gives us the commands of his Word – whenever we sin we're saying to God: "I wish you didn't exist. I wish you weren't in the world. It's not good that you are here. I wish I had a different kind of god ruling over me – or no god at all." That's what we communicate to God when we sin.

When we avoid prayer, or Scripture, or worship, we're saying that we're not so happy with God as he is. We're not so thrilled that he wants a relationship with us. It's not so good to have him in our lives.

But then, on the other hand, when we obey God's commands – even when it's hard – we're saying with our actions: "It is good, Lord, that you are my King." When we put Christ first in our lives, and make him our priority, above all else – we are saying with our allegiance: "I'm so glad, Lord, that you are my Savior, and that I belong to you." When we come to God in prayer and worship, when we read his Word, when we meditate on him and his gifts – we are saying with our words

and our thoughts and our affections: “It is wonderful, Lord, that you are in my life, that you care about me, and that I can know you.”

In each aspect of our Christian lives – in our actions, our allegiance, and our affections – in word and in deed – we are called to love God, to say to him “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. It is good that you are here.” That’s what we communicate when we love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

And as the scribe points out in verse 33, that is so much more than merely doing our religious duty – merely checking off the boxes of what is required of us.

And when we struggle to love God, so often, when we seek God, he will help us to nurture our loving affections as we engage in loving actions.

When we do not long to read God’s Word, but we come to it anyway, we may then see God more clearly for who he is, and our love for him and his Word may grow. When worship and prayer is unappealing to us, we can come to God in worship anyway, that by his grace our affections might be captured by God’s presence, and our love for him might increase. When obedience or allegiance is difficult, but we strive to obey and follow Christ anyway, asking him as we do, to increase our desire for him, then often he will answer that prayer

But whether we feel it or not in a given moment, as believers, we know, that God himself is the greatest good in our lives. And so it is only right that we love him with every part of who we are. The only proper response, if we see God aright, is to say, in word and deed, in our actions, allegiance, and affections: “I’m glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you here with me. It is good that you are my God.”

And as we love God, we love what he loves. [Leithart, 170-171] In fact, you cannot truly love God without loving what God loves. And one thing God especially loves is the people he has made, who he has imprinted with his image, and who he has then placed all around us: our neighbors. Which is why these two commandments are inseparably linked.

And so, Jesus calls us here to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. For there is no other commandment greater than these.

All in Response to God

But why should we obey these commands? Why should we love God? And why should we love our neighbors, who bear his image?

Well, Jesus here points us towards the reason. When Jesus gives the greatest commandment ... he doesn’t actually start with a commandment. He starts with a statement about who God is: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

We see the same thing with the Ten Commandments. They don’t actually start with the first commandment, but with a statement of who God is, and what he has done: “I am Yahweh your

God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” [Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6]

Which reminds us that our obedience to God’s commandments – especially the greatest commandment – is always rooted in who God is, in what God has done. And our obedience is a response.

The Apostle John explained what this means for us and for these commandments very succinctly, when he said: “We love because he first loved us.” [1 John 4:19]

Why should we love God and our neighbor? How can we love God and our neighbor? Where do we find the motivation to love God and our neighbor?

Well, we find all of those things in the fact that before he ever called on us to love him or love others, God himself has loved us.

He loved us in the very act of our creation.

By your very existence, you can know that God loves you, because he wants you here – he wants you to exist. By the very act of making you, God is saying to you: “It is good that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in my world. I’m glad that you are here.”

God loves you, and for that reason you exist.

But God’s love doesn’t stop there.

Because after we had rebelled against him – after we had separated ourselves from him – after we had put ourselves on a trajectory towards eternal death and separation from him, by sinning against him – even after all that, God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, came to earth, and died on the cross to save us ... to save you.

And by doing that, by going to the cross, for you, God himself, through Jesus Christ, as clearly as he ever could, says to you: “It is good that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in this world. I’m glad that you’re here. And I want you to always be here, with me, forever.”

That is how God has loved us in the gospel.

And if God has so loved us ... then how could we not love him in return? How could we long for a different kind of god or no God at all, when this God has loved us so much, and so personally? How could we not love the same things he loves: his people, and his creatures, and all he has made and cared for, since he has in the same way made and cared for us?

If God has so loved us giving his very self for us, then how could we not respond by loving him with our whole selves: with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength?

As we consider God’s loving work of creation, and his loving sacrifice for us in the gospel, in response to this loving God, we are called on to love God and to love our neighbor.

Conclusion

There are few things more wonderful in life than to love and to be loved.

And as we receive God’s love for us in the gospel, and as we seek to love God and those around us, in both our actions, and our affections – as we give and receive such love, we really do experience a foretaste of heaven.

Because what God promises for his people in eternity – for all who trust in him, for all who give him their allegiance as their King – is an eternity in which we will perfectly love and be perfectly loved.

It’s an eternity in which, in word and deed, in action and affection, we will over and over again communicate to one another and hear from one another the very kind of love and approval which we so often long for in this life.

But even more than that, it will be an eternity in which we will not just communicate to God, but in which, over and over again, for all eternity, in perfect love and affection and power, God will say to us: “I’m so glad that you exist. I think it’s wonderful that you are in my world. It is very good that you are here.”

And what could be better than that?

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

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Wojtila, Karol. *Love and Responsibility*. Boston, MA: Pauline, 2013.

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Wright, N.T. *Mark for Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-

Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.