



Speaker:  
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## How to Love God

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 44 of 44

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And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, “Which is the first commandment of all?” And Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is, HEAR, O ISRAEL: THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD. AND THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THY HEART, AND WITH ALL THY SOUL, AND WITH ALL THY MIND, AND WITH ALL THY STRENGTH. This is the first commandment. And the second is like *it*, namely this, THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR AS THYSELF. There is none other commandment greater than these.”

And the scribe said unto him, “Well, Master, thou hast said the truth. For there is one God, and there is none other but he. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” And no man after that durst ask him any question.

Last time I spoke to you, two weeks ago, we were speaking about Jesus in the temple.

I was talking to someone the other day about the pros and cons of books as opposed to the films based on them. One of the advantages of the written word is the author can describe what was going on in the minds of the main players, something which is difficult to do when something is acted out.

So in a way, reading through Mark’s gospel gives us some advantages over the people who were present when Jesus was interacting with the religious leaders. It’s sometimes revealed to us what Jesus and the others were thinking.

We come today to the third of the challenges faced by Jesus on this particular day. We’ve seen him approached by Pharisees, then some Sadducees, and now it’s the turn of a scribe. Had we been standing around while this last conversation took place, we may have concluded this scribe was sincere from the outset. But God’s word tells us his real motive. Like the others, he approached Jesus in the hope he’d trip him up and get him to say something incriminating.

Who were the scribes then? We’re not to think they were a separate sect of Judaism like the Pharisees and Sadducees. Some belonged to one of those two sects, while others belonged to neither.

The scribes were men talented in reading and writing. Their skills were of such a standard that they could be found in both civil and religious positions. Some were even priests and Levites.

This one had been listening to the proceedings, and realised Jesus did show real wisdom. He decided he'd approach Jesus to test his orthodoxy.

When you realise this type of question had been vigorously debated within Judaism for many years, it's not surprising he asks this question. Many of the greatest rabbis had considered it. They obviously knew some commandments were more important than others, but they'd always looked for one principle from which all the others flowed. If there was one great commandment, what would it be?

Jesus's response is interesting. He quotes from Scripture, but it's not just any Scripture. What he quotes is the *Shama*, a Jewish statement of faith taken from Deuteronomy. And traditionally, this would be recited morning and evening as part of Jewish worship. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...*

This scribe openly agrees with Jesus. *You've answered well*, he said. And as was the habit of rabbis, he repeated what Jesus said. I know in verse 33 he changed the word "mind" to "understanding", but it amounts to the same thing.

It's clear this scribe had something of an epiphany. The scriptures tell us he approached Jesus to tempt him, yet just within the time it took for Jesus to say those words, the scribe underwent a change of heart. As I read this, it reminded me of the rapid U-turn in the attitude of the thief on the cross Jesus that saved.

Anyway, Jesus's opponents had had enough. They realised they couldn't confound him. But take note: his impressive answers didn't cause them to rethink their assessment of him. The general opinion of the religious leaders was the same: they wanted him discredited or killed.

But what a display of heavenly wisdom this was! And significantly, this all took place in the temple. In just those few days, Jesus had shown the uselessness of the whole religious system practised by the Jews. He'd shown the inadequacy of the temple, the regulations, the burnt offerings and sacrifices, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees, the scribes...everything.

In his actions and words, Jesus had revealed something of his authority. For those who could see clearly what was going on, Jesus had taken over the temple. Not only was he showing his superiority to temple religion; he was setting the stage for his final act: **his victory at Calvary and his demolition of Jerusalem and its temple.**

Since this quote from Deuteronomy is central to this encounter Jesus had, I thought we could look at exactly *how* we're to love God.

## HONOURING HIS SON

I've said Jesus Christ was the real authority figure that day. Remember, he's been revealing more and more about his true character to this point. In the estimation of his disciples, he's gone from being a rabbi worth following to God's chosen one.

From a theological point of view, Jesus presents a difficulty. The grander the claims he makes about himself, the more like God he becomes. There can't be two Gods, and yet it was clear Jesus was more than a mere man. Yet the more divine his followers considered him, the nearer they would get to blasphemy.

It would take the early church a couple of hundred years to conclude that Jesus was truly divine, of the very same essence of the father. Soon after, they realised the Holy Spirit was also part of this godhead. And so it was the doctrine of the Trinity was born.

Note in Jesus's quote in verse 29, he blatantly affirms his own belief that there is only one God. If he were a pretender, who wanted to show himself as the highest creation of God's, this wouldn't be the approach he'd take. At the same time Jesus was revealing his divine nature, he was asserting the doctrine of there being just one God.

Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel and his redeemer the LORD of hosts: "I am the first, and I am the last, and besides me there is no God".

**Isaiah 44:6**

Next week, God willing, we'll hear Jesus talk about King David, who spoke about the messiah figure who would be equal with God. Do you see where all this is going? If Jesus really does have the ability to forgive sins, and is equal with God, this quote from Deuteronomy—the Shema—**is about him**. Without knowing it, pious Jews had been expressing this confession of faith day and night their whole lives, all the while unwittingly glorifying the Son.

Here's how Paul, when he writes to his brother and friend, Timothy, describes Jesus:

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh...

**1 Timothy 3:16**

We're to recognise this, and in doing so we honour Jesus, and in honouring Jesus we show something of our love to God.

We also honour Jesus by acknowledging him as the saviour of the world. We who are believers have at some point in our lives understood that the atonement carried out 2000 years ago was to do with us. Each one of us was not far from Jesus's thoughts, even while he was in agony on the cross. And when he ended his work of atonement, he announced *It is finished*. Every one of our sins lay destroyed in the ashes of the furnace which had consumed his soul.

To those viewing this I'd ask: does this apply to you? Do you know for sure your sins have been dealt with? You don't have your sins forgiven just by being a member of the human race. If you're not sure you are redeemed, persevere in your prayers to God. Keep asking for

mercy. And we pray the Lord will grant you the blessing of that wonderful assurance of belonging to Jesus Christ.

Those who preach can honour Jesus by exalting him in their messages. And their congregations, the ones who are co-workers with him in his ministry, who support him in all kinds of ways, are themselves playing a part therefore in honouring Jesus in this way.

I'll mention just one more way we honour Jesus. It's in the commemoration of his death that we remember each time we break bread together. In this time around the Lord's table, which some call Holy Communion, God's Word tells us we're signifying Jesus's death until he returns. And when he does return, this ritual will end, along with baptisms and prayer meetings. But until then we show our love to God by honouring Jesus around that table of communion.

## HEEDING HIS WORD

We see in verse 29 Jesus quoting from Scriptures. And we note how highly he valued them. He read them. He studied them. He preached from them. And he lived by them.

Perhaps then you can see how attending to God's word is also an act of love towards God. Because we value him so much, we also value what he has to say.

Let's be clear what we mean when we say the Bible is God's word. The doctrine of inspiration shows us *people* wrote the Bible. Whether it's history, prophecy or instruction, we say *men* wrote the Bible. The important point is **they were so guided by the Holy Spirit, they were kept from error and only set down the things God wanted**. I'm making this point so we all understand God used some of the characteristics of the authors to affect how the scriptures were written.

But however we describe inspiration, God is still the overseer of the whole process, and for this reason we call the Bible God's word. And if it's God's word, it deserves our respect. We show our respect primarily by reading it:

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

**Romans 10:17**

This is how God gives faith to his elect people. He ensures the words of his gospel reaches them. Some have found the gospel message through the bare reading of Scripture, although God's usual method of drawing his people in is by the explanation of this gospel by men he raises up.

And when God means to draw one of his people in, he ensures they understand this word. He enlightens their understanding so they finally get it. They determine to leave behind a life of sin and go the way of Jesus. The Bible suddenly comes alive! When they read it now, they see it's about them and the God they now have a relationship with.

## OBEYING HIS INSTRUCTION

When a person is saved; when he or she is “born again”; when God forgives their sins and promises them he’ll raise them from the dead at the last day; that person no longer searches the scriptures for salvation. Now they have this, the Bible takes on a new function for them. There are now to read God’s word *and* treat it as their guide for their Christian walk.

I’m sure some people get the impression that Jesus came to revitalise the Jews’ religion by encouraging them towards love and true obedience. The truth is the Old Testament is full of references, not only to the need to love God and love others, but that obedience to God is of far more importance than carrying out rituals.

You can see in verse 33 how even this scribe understood the importance of obedience. He acknowledges that obedience to God is better than the sacrifice of creatures. You see it’s easy for someone to join in a religion that comprises nothing but external actions. The new Testament calls these “bodily exercises” in opposition to *spiritual* exercises. Listen to what the prophet Hosea says:

For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.  
**Hosea 6:6**

We can apply this to the modern church. God *wants* people to attend places of worship. He *wants* them to sing his praises and pray to him. He *wants* them to pay attention to his word. **But people can do all those things, and do them very well, without having a shred of spiritual life in their souls.** And to those people, God tells them it’s inward obedience he wants. He’s not interested in their songs or their prayers. He’s not impressed by their regular attendance at church services. Without the heart of a true servant of God, all those things are worthless.

But for the genuine believer, all these practices in the church life are *expected* by God and *accepted* by God. And that person finds obedience a joy, not a burden. The psalmist puts it like this:

I delight to do thy will, O my God: Yea, thy law is within my heart.  
**Psalms 40:8**

I only wish everyone could experience this joy of serving God in sincerity and truth.

We’re looking at how to love God. And we’ve said one of the ways we express our love to him is by honouring his Son. We also love God by cherishing his word. And now we’ve challenged ourselves to remember that we’re not just to *read* God’s word, or merely listen to it preached, but *act* on it. And that response could either be fostering a better attitude within yourself, or it could be getting up and doing something practical for someone.

I’d like to bring out one more point from this passage, another way in which we can show our love for God.

## REGARDING OTHERS

Another point about Jesus's response here is his answer goes further than expected. He answered the question sufficiently. *Love God with your whole being*, is the overarching principle for all people.

But he went a step further. He mentioned another principle which you can see in verse 31. It was the direction to love others.

People will tell you the word "neighbour" in the verse Jesus quoted referred to the people in one's own circles. It would be family, friends, and also people in your community you have dealings with. That may be true, but it's clear Jesus broadened the definition of neighbour to include everyone. You remember he even created a parable about a charitable foreigner, a Samaritan, who showed by the actions he was a true neighbour. And of course Jesus was also about to open up this new phase of God's purpose to the Gentiles.

I tend to think Jesus deliberately threw the second principle into his answer to make them inseparable. He almost merges the two. Now this might not be at all unusual to the modern-day Christian. Loving God and loving our fellow man is a Christian motto. We know we're even to love our enemies, never mind our friends, family, and brother Christians.

But to the Jews Jesus was correcting, this was quite revolutionary. He was instructing them, not only that they should love strangers and enemies, but that their faith in God was worthless without it!

I'm looking at verse 31, and it's always fascinated me why God tells us to love our fellow man like we love ourselves! Fascinating because loving yourself is a bad thing, isn't it?

In a way, we all love ourselves, and it's quite natural. I mean we take care of ourselves. We make sure our bodies are fed and watered. We avoid unnecessary danger. We keep ourselves clean, and dress ourselves.

We're to look after ourselves obviously, but it's done without pride. If you take care of yourself too much, you risk becoming a narcissist. So God is telling us to look after ourselves in an appropriate way.

And all these things we want for our fellow man. We want *them* to be taken care of. We want *them* to be fed and watered. We want *them* to be preserved from danger. We want *them* to be able to keep themselves clean and clothed.

I had a funny thought while I was preparing this. According to this principle of God's, the more someone takes care of themselves, the greater their obligation to others. And it could be thought of as a check on our behaviour, stopping us from loving ourselves too much. The more time we think about looking after ourselves, the more we have to pray for others so they can have the same, yet the more we *do* pray for others, the less we'll be concerned about ourselves!

We're to love others, then. Anyone we encounter in this life becomes our neighbour. And we're to show love for them with our words and actions. And Jesus is clear: it's impossible to love God without loving others.

These two dangers are to be avoided. Those who spend their lives serving their fellow man through charitable works, even if done in the name of Jesus, can become useless if they neglect to pay attention to the instructions in God's word. Similarly, there are those throughout history who've been obedient to God in many ways but have lacked love for their fellow man. And they've been responsible for some of the worst atrocities against God's people.

I should add this point to you who are believers. Although your love to others should be a good example to the world, your priority is to the church of God. Jesus said anything you do to a fellow believer is treated as if you did it to Jesus himself.

Think how this would affect us if we not only sincerely believed this principle but kept it at the forefront of our minds. It'd certainly make us more careful about how we speak to others, and how we speak about them when they're not around.

So there's a fundamental difference between the people in the kingdom of God and those outside. The reason Jesus says whatever good or bad we do to the brethren we do it to him is we're all part of the one organism—the "body of Christ", it's called. At New Road, we went through the letters of John not so long ago. And the principle he emphasises above all others is love for the brethren. Here's an example:

And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.

**1 John 4:21**

John, writing under the inspiration of God the Holy Spirit, tells us whoever truly loves God will quite naturally love his brother also. And in a clear word of caution, he declares if we hate a brother Christian we don't belong to God.

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We're to honour Jesus Christ, the central character in our passage today. We're to heed the Scriptures he quoted from. We are to obey the word in the same spirit he did. And we're to love others as he did.

And as we've said, we're to do all this with our whole being. When it says in verse 30 we're to love God with all our heart, soul, etc. the word "all" is a translation of the Greek word *holēs*. The whole. It's where we also get our word "holistic" from. Holistic medicine aims to treat, not just individual symptoms, but the whole person. So our love for God should be likewise holistic. Every aspect of our existence is to be dedicated to the worship and service of God.

I couldn't help paying some attention to the list Jesus gives. Now again, we're not to dissect this list as if it describes distinct aspects of our makeup. The list simply describes the whole person.

If you look at all these references in the Old Testament, you'll find it almost always uses the phrase "heart and soul". "Strength" is occasionally added. In the New Testament, the phrase usually includes mention of strength, and Jesus adds the word "mind".

Maybe Jesus added the word "mind" simply to emphasise the entirety of ourselves that must be consecrated to God; but I also wonder whether he wanted to emphasise the importance of using our intellects to their fullest capacity in our service of God and study of his word.

Let me repeat this: the heart and soul lists are not to be understood as different sides to our nature. Commentators have tried to relate each one to either the intellect, or the emotions, or some other side to us. I think that's a mistake. Even a brief study of the Bible's use of those words will show them to be used interchangeably.

So although Jesus's list is not meant to be taken too strictly, the principle behind it is paramount. **Whatever your view of how a man is made up—the intellect, emotions, will, etc.—it is your duty to ensure that every one of these faculties is employed in God's service:**

- Whatever your level of intellect is, you're to use it to its fullest in your focus on the word of God.
- Whatever your physical strength, you're to use it in serving others, even if it ends in tiredness.
- Whatever the depth of your emotion, you're to use it in your devotion to God and the brethren.
- And whatever other faculty you can think of, you're to regard it as existing for the sole purpose of doing God's will.

Paul says to the church at Rome:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

**Romans 12:1**

*Reasonable* service. Our wholesale devotion to God, seen by outsiders as extremist, goes not in the least further than what is appropriate for such a great and glorious God.

I have to assume not everyone watching today is converted. And these will likely be people who are not averse to attending church services. If that describes you, I'd like to briefly say something to you. In verse 34, Jesus tells this scribe something quite heart-warming. He tells him he's not far from the kingdom of God.

But the harsh reality is **this means he's still outside**. The kingdom of God isn't like a mountain, where the higher you climb the more of a citizen you are. The kingdom of God has a door. And you've either gone through the door or you haven't. So although it's great this man was at the very doorway, if that's as far as he goes, he may well as being a thousand miles away.



Going through the motions is no good. You could even have the right doctrine but be apart from God. When I share the gospel with people, some have protested, *But I believe in God!* Listen to the sarcasm used about this claim, found in the book of James:

Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.  
**James 2:19**

I'm afraid your belief in the existence of God doesn't impress him. The existence of God is clear, if from nowhere else, from his marvellous creation. If what's seen under a microscope, or what's viewed through a telescope, doesn't shout the existence of God to you, I can only think you're either blind or willingly stubborn—let's say both.

If you're standing at the doorway to the kingdom today, in the place where this scribe once stood, you need to give yourself to God. Surrender to him. Tell him you *believe* him now; you realise you ARE a vile creature in his sight, regardless of how popular you are with others. Believe this gospel, that Jesus Christ died to save sinners just like you.

If you go to God and receive his forgiveness, your new life in Christ will begin. And what great blessings there are to be had!

Jesus answered and said unto him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him".

**John 14:23**

Only then, as a true child of God, will you be enabled to love God truly, wholeheartedly, *holistically*.

Amen.