

*Loving God, Loving Neighbor: Mark 12:28-34*  
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It's a great passage we come to this morning in our study through the Gospel of Mark, and it's a great morning to come to this passage. It's Easter Sunday, Resurrection Sunday, and we're celebrating the fact that our Savior lives! The grave could not hold Him. Death could not conquer Him. Satan could not defeat Him. And so we worship Jesus Christ this morning because He died in our place on a Friday and then rose again on Sunday morning.

This is a well-know text that we're going to look at in Mark 12, and I want us to consider how the resurrection of Jesus is so crucial to our understanding of what Jesus is talking about here.

### **Resurrection, Regeneration, and Radical Love**

It's very dangerous, and very tempting, for us, as we come to verses like this, to say, "Yeah, I'm gonna do that," like it's a new-year's resolution. How many of those are still on your radar screen in April? You were so committed in January, and you can't even remember them now in April. I'm gonna lose weight, organize the basement, learn Chinese, and memorize Leviticus. And you could read a passage like this, and just add it to the list. Yeah, I'm gonna love God better, and love my neighbors better. I want to do that. I'm gonna work hard at that.

Beware of thinking in that way about these commands. Because, let me tell you something, you cannot do it! I don't want to burst your bubble—but, then again, I do want to burst your bubble. You might think that you're inherently a loving person. You just exude kindness and compassion toward everyone you meet—of course, except for those occasional lapses when you're so angry you want to swear at people and throw things—but aside from that, you view yourself as a loving, caring person. It's just a joy and a blessing for those who have the privilege of knowing you. I do want to burst that bubble.

We're not loving people. You are not a loving person, by nature. Every one of us in this room, because we were born as descendents of Adam, are by nature unloving—unloving toward God and unloving toward others. That's how we're wired, and it's been so ever since Adam and Eve sinned against God in the garden.

So please don't listen to these words and say, "I like those verses, 'cause I'm pretty good at that, and I'm gonna try to do those things even better." That's what we would all like to think about ourselves. But it's simply not the case. We're wicked sinners who are so self-absorbed that we can't even comprehend

the idea that anyone else in this universe might have a need or a concern.

That's who we are by nature. That's our depraved condition. We're so messed up, we don't have the capacity to love God or neighbor in a genuine way.

### **Resurrection**

Well, what are we to do with this, then? What do we do with these commands if we don't have the ability to keep them? This is where the resurrection is so important. This is where we have to understand the Gospel. If we approach the commands of Scripture and say, "Yeah, I can do that," then we're missing the Gospel.

Instead we need to approach these commands and recognize, "I cannot do that, because I'm a wicked, depraved, messed-up, self-absorbed sinner who only looks out for himself." And instead of trying to delude ourselves into thinking that we can change ourselves, like a sumo wrestler who thinks he's going to become a marathon runner, we need to come to terms with who we are. We need to recognize this fundamental thing about our condition as human beings in this fallen world. We are so sick and twisted that we are utterly incapable of doing God's will. Romans 8:7-8 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." That's who we are by nature. That's who we are in the flesh. And that's the bad news. OK, you come to church Easter Sunday morning, and the preacher is preaching bad news. Maybe you think you came into the wrong church.

Well, I have to preach the bad news before the good news will make any sense. The Good News (The Gospel!) is that Jesus Christ died for our sin and rose again so that we might become new creatures in Him. We're sick, selfish, sinners by nature. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we die to that old self and walk in newness of life. Two weeks ago Rob Myroniuk was baptized, and this is what I explained about the symbolism of baptism. It's a picture of *our* death and resurrection. As Paul writes in Romans 6:4, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Do you see the connection between Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection? Jesus was raised from the dead, and because of the redemptive work He accomplished, sinners like you and like me are also raised from the dead. By God's grace we are born again to new life.

### **Regeneration**

So here's the important theological connection between Jesus' resurrection and our passage in Mark 12. Please follow me here. The resurrection is the basis for our regeneration. In His resurrection, Jesus assured that His elect would be born again. This is what I just read in Romans 6:4, "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." We also see this in 1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again [that's regeneration] to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." Jesus was raised from the dead. We are raised from the dead. We are born again. We are regenerated, by God's grace.

And it's that regeneration that then bears the fruit of radical love. This is the sequence: resurrection, regeneration, radical love. This is the theological connection I'm making as we celebrate Resurrection Sunday and consider these commands for radical love. And this is where we see the Gospel. We don't have it in us to love like this, unless God first does a miraculous work within us to give us new life. And we can be raised from the dead only because Jesus was raised from the dead.

Let's look now at this radical love that Jesus commands of us.

### **Radical Love—for God and Neighbor**

Loving God, loving neighbor. In this section of the Gospel of Mark we've been seeing some intense opposition that is coming against Jesus, challenging His authority. At the end of chapter 11 there were the chief priests and scribes and elders who came and questioned Him about His authority after His righteous rampage in the temple. Jesus then made them look stupid and then insulted them further by telling a parable in which they were the bad guys. So then some Pharisees and Herodians came and tried to trap Jesus in a question about taxes. And then Sadducees came with a bizarre question about the resurrection, with that crazy story about the woman who was married to 7 different men. In each case so far the questioners have come with evil intent, wanting to bring Jesus down. And in each case Jesus has put them in their place and sent them away with their tails between their legs.

But with the question we come to this morning the attitude is a little different. And Jesus' response is different. The scribe who now comes to Jesus is not antagonistic, but sympathetic. He recognizes that Jesus has answered well, and he asks an honest question. And after Jesus answers, this scribe agrees with Him. When the scribe says in verse 32, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one . . ." there's no hint of manipulative

flattery like there was with the Pharisees and Herodians, who said in verse 14, “Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone’s opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.” They didn’t mean that at all. They were trying to butter Him up in order to lure Him into a trick question, but to no avail. This scribe is different, though. He’s asking an honest question, and he is considering the teaching of Jesus with an open mind. And he understands that loving God and loving neighbor is the essence of having a relationship with God. It’s not just about the outward demonstrations of piety like offering sacrifices.

Jesus’ response is very encouraging. In verse 34 Jesus tells the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” That’s a remarkable statement! Contrast that with the Sadducees in the previous passage, where Jesus told them two times, “You are wrong” (verse 24), “You are quite wrong” (verse 27). Also contrast this with the rich young ruler in chapter 10 who asked a somewhat similar question, but because of his wealth did not respond as he should have to Jesus’ instruction. “He went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (10:22). Do you remember what Jesus said of that man? “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (10:23).

Now we encounter this scribe who is actually teachable. He has a measure of humility and openness to really listen to and heed what Jesus says. He may not be in the kingdom quite yet at this point, but he’s on the right track. God is drawing him.

If you’re an unbeliever here this morning I hope you find yourself in the place of this scribe—with an openness to hearing the teaching of Jesus, with a desire to know who Jesus is and the things He said and the great things He has done. I pray that you are listening right now with an attentive heart. If that’s the case, then God is doing something great within you, and you should be very encouraged. I hope you will talk to one of us after the service with any questions you may have. We would love to talk to you more about what it means to repent of sin and trust in Jesus.

Others of you may feel more like the rich, young ruler or the Pharisees and Herodians and Sadducees who came to Jesus with nothing but skepticism and hatred and disgust. Maybe in the past you’ve been burned by the church, or you’ve been burned by folks who call themselves Christians. And you’re bitter. Maybe you have some precious sin in your life that you’re unwilling to let go of, and you don’t want to let Jesus tell you how to live your life. You’re sleeping with your girlfriend, or you like looking at porn, or you’re dishonest in your business practices, or you have some kind of addiction, and you’re unwilling to submit to Jesus’ authority. So you attack Him. You come against Him, and against

the Bible, and against the church, with a vengeance. You're like Gollum who will try to kill anyone who attempts to take away his precious ring. That sin, whatever it may be, has such control over you, that you're not even willing to consider who Jesus is or His sacrificial love toward sinners like us.

I hope God will do something this morning to put a crack in the wall that you've built around your heart. I hope that wall will crumble. I hope the defenses will go down. I hope the resistance will cease, and that you'll be like this scribe who is willing to listen with an open mind and an open heart and to consider the greatness of the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

### **Loving God**

Well, now let's consider these two commands Jesus cites in response to the scribes' question. The scribe asks, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" And Jesus answers first with loving God, and second with loving neighbor.

So, first of all, loving God. Verse 29, "Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.'"

Now, there's so much that could be said about this, and I'm sure the Puritans could have turned this into a 12-part sermon series or more, and they probably did. But I just want to make a couple points here and then a couple points related to loving neighbor.

Look at how comprehensive this command is. Jesus is quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6—the word shema coming from the first Hebrew word in that verse ("hear"). The command is that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. The command is to love God with your whole self, with everything you are, with every aspect of who He created you to be. Now, think about this. God created us: heart, soul, mind and strength. And He has redeemed us: heart, soul, mind and strength. Do you think He would say, then, that we are to love Him in some compartmentalized way? God created us, owns us, redeemed us, loves us with a covenantal love. It's only appropriate that our allegiance to Him and love for Him should be whole-hearted, encompassing every facet of our being.

So, for instance, we should not be seeking to honor God and love God merely with our minds. The kind of attitude that says—I think deep theological thoughts about God, and that's the nature of my love for Him. I don't *feel* that excited about Him, but I sure do *know* a lot about Him, and I can get the upper hand in a theological debate. People fear me in the theological blogosphere,

because my mind is so filled with knowledge about God and the Bible. I love God with all my mind.

Or, on the other hand, there's the attitude that says— I love God with all my heart. I get all emotional and teary-eyed when I hear certain Christian songs (they just touch my soul, listening to KLOVE in the car and have to pull over because I'm crying my eyes out), but thinking theologically makes my head hurt, so I try to avoid that. I love God with all my heart.

Or another type of person might say—I love God with all my strength. Kind of the stoic guy who's not theological or emotional, but he's committed. And he'll work hard at whatever he's asked to do in the life of the church. But he says—I don't *feel* that excited about God, and I'm not interested in *thinking* deeply about who He is. I just work for Him. I put in my time serving the church, and that's how I express my love for God.

What I hope we can see is that all of these things need to come together. We can't isolate one of these to the exclusion of the others. We need to love God and pursue God and enjoy God in all of these ways. There should be a passion in the heart that reaches down into the depth of one's soul (the very core of one's being). And that passion should also grip one's mind in such a way that we're drawn to study God's Word carefully and consistently in order to know our God better and delight in Him more. And as we have this passion for Him that encompasses both our emotions and intellect, it will also work itself out in actions. The strength and energy and creativity and financial resources God has given to us will all be poured out for the purpose of showing the greatness of God. We are to love Him in all of these ways.

And then we ask—well, how do we get there? You might be saying, I don't feel *any* of those things. It could be that you're not yet a Christian, and you need to cry out to God to change your heart. Or you might say, I see glimmers of these things in my life, but I have so far to go. And that, brothers and sisters, is the fight of faith. That's the Christian life. We have a new heart, but the sinful nature is still with us in this fallen world.

The question for every one of us, no matter where you're at spiritually, is—where is your treasure? In Matthew 6:21 Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Where's your heart this morning? Where's your treasure? What are you putting your hope in? We are so prone to wander. We are prone to making idols out of so many things in this world. And that's why it's so crucial that we spend time in God's Word and in prayer and in fellowship with other believers. Because if we listen to the world, if we listen to our sinful nature, we will make other things our treasure. We need to be reminded daily (and throughout each day) that God is more glorious than anything else we can

imagine. I pray God will give us that kind of passion for Him that transforms us in every way—heart, soul, mind and strength.

### **Loving Neighbor**

The second part of the command, then, is loving neighbor. There's the vertical dimension of loving God, and then the horizontal dimension of loving neighbor. And it's very important that it goes in this order, too, because you will never genuinely love others if you do not first have a true love for God. When God changes our hearts and gives us a love for Him—when He becomes the treasure of our lives—then part of that transformation will be that we come to love the things He loves. And something God loves very much is people. So the Christian life is having a new heart filled with love for God which then spills over in love for others. In the well-known book, *Desiring God*, John Piper defines love like this, which I find very insightful: "Love is the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others" (page 103). He goes on to say, "We double our delight in God as we expand it in the lives of others" (page 121).

This is how we should think about loving God and loving neighbor. It's not merely a duty that we do begrudgingly—I better go do something loving for someone so I can fill my quota for the month. That's not how it should be. As we go hard after God in His Word and in prayer, and as we cultivate a deep delight in Him, what are we going to do with that? We'll want to expand that delight in the lives of others.

When the Steelers score the winning touchdown of the Super Bowl, you don't want to be sitting on the couch all by yourself with some nacho chips. You want to be with some other Steelers fans, preferably a whole living room full of them, or even better yet, in the stadium with thousands of them, so that you can turn to the folks around you and say, "Did you see that? That was awesome!" You want to draw others into your enjoyment of that victory. And if the person couldn't see the play, you'll show them the replay. And if they don't understand why the play was so spectacular, you'll explain to them some of the basic rules of football so that they can appreciate what happened (this is often the scenario in our house). And if someone in the room is cheering for the wrong team, you'll lovingly try to convince them of the error of their ways. I'm not sure how much more I can stretch this analogy, but I'll let you ponder that maybe over your Easter dinner this afternoon.

But I hope you get the point. This is how loving God and loving neighbor works. We have such a delight in God and such an excitement about what He has done for us in Christ, that we find further delight in making these things known to others and

demonstrating these things to others in our Christ-like love for them.

Now, there's an interesting question that comes up in this verse when we come to the words, "as yourself." You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*. What does that mean? What kind of self-love is this referring to? Is this a self-esteem text? Maybe Dr. Phil has this verse on a placard above his desk—see, the Bible says you're supposed to love yourself. No, this is not a *command* to love yourself. It's certainly not intended to be understood in terms of self-esteem.

It's a simple assumption about who we are as human beings, and who God made us to be. He made us with an intuitive, instinctive desire to care for ourselves, to make sure that we have food and clothing and shelter. We desire happiness and peace. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. It's part of how God made us. There's a similar command in Ephesians 5 where Paul exhorts husbands to "love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body."

It's not a sinful, self-centered, love for self that Jesus or Paul are presupposing. Nor is it a self-esteem boost that they're commanding. Instead, they're presupposing the fact that we all care for ourselves (we want to live, and we desire happiness, and there's nothing inherently wrong with those desires), and we're exhorted to show concern and care towards others in similar ways.

Let me talk about this a little more, because this is an important part of understanding what it means to love one's neighbor. Is there a fundamental conflict between love for neighbor and love for self? Or do the two fit together somehow? In one sense, it seems curious that the command reads, "love your neighbor *as yourself*," rather than saying, "love your neighbor *instead of yourself*."

Here's the thing: There are two different ways that self-love can manifest itself. One that seeks satisfaction in God, another that seeks satisfaction apart from God. When self-love is disconnected from God, that is the essence of sinful pride. When we are seeking our happiness, our satisfaction, our treasure, in things other than God, that's sinful selfishness. And those other things can look so good sometimes, that we think they're going to bring us more joy than God can offer. That's the deception of sin. And that pursuit of pleasure will always breakdown, because sin can't follow through on its promises. It entices us with the promise of some pleasure but then leaves us sad and frustrated shortly thereafter.



This week I saw an amazing illustration of sin. Over the years I've thought about different ways to describe this, but I think this was the most vivid portrayal of it I've ever encountered.

It was our kids' spring break this past week, so we went to a cabin we've gone to before out in the middle of nowhere in West Virginia. You might think that all of West Virginia is out in the middle of nowhere. Well, this is really out in the middle of nowhere. And we really enjoy this place because there's no cell phone reception and no TVs or internet or anything like that, and we just hang out as a family and play games and go on hikes and enjoy being together. And we hadn't been there long—Stacy and I were still unloading some things and the kids were playing outside—and our older kids (Milaina and Noah) found our 2-year-old (Annalyse) trying to eat a muddy stick. I don't know what came over her to make her want to taste this thing, but apparently these kinds of things happen to 2-year-olds from time to time. And sure enough, she had dirt around her mouth, and Stacy and I brought her inside to clean her off. And we were telling her she shouldn't eat sticks. Then it was time for her to sit on the potty, which is an exciting part of our lives right now. Many of you can identify. I think the fact that parents have to potty-train their children is part of the curse. And I was there in the bathroom supervising (I guess it was my turn). And we have some good talks while Annalyse is sitting on the potty sometimes. And I said to Annalyse, "Why did you put that muddy stick in your mouth?" And she said, in all seriousness, "I thought it would taste like candy." I'm not even making this up. It was all I could do not to burst out laughing. But I said, "*Did* it taste like candy?" And with almost a surprised and perplexed look on her face, she said, "No?!" Then she told me, "And my brother was telling me, 'No, don't put that in your mouth.'" So I told her, "That's because your brother loves you and doesn't want you to hurt yourself."

When we were hiking later we talked about how that muddy stick is a lot like sin. We think it's going to taste like candy, but we end up with dirt on our faces and a bad taste in our mouths. And when our brothers and sisters in Christ call out to us, "No, don't do that," we better listen, because they're doing that out of love for us.

The point of this for our passage this morning is that there is sinful self-love which seeks pleasure outside of God and ends up being limited to one's own confined interests.<sup>1</sup> And that kind of self-love will leave you empty and miserable. But contrast that now with another kind of self-love that is good and necessary. The self-love that seeks one's joy and satisfaction in God will produce much sacrificial love for others. Love your neighbor as yourself.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Desiring God*, page 98ff, and especially quote from Jonathan Edwards.

You love yourself. That's a given. You yearn for happiness and pleasure. And when you pursue that pleasure in God, you will enter a whole new universe of pleasure. You will experience in a profound way the truth of the statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

I was talking with Steve Schumacher last Sunday, and he was sharing with me about the Bible study he leads in the Allegheny Jail. And he shared with such passion and emotion about the excitement of preaching the Gospel and leading people to Christ. So should I have said to Steve, "You know, you really shouldn't be having that much fun preaching the Gospel—it sounds like you're just doing that for your own enjoyment"? No, because his joy in serving others by proclaiming the Gospel to them is an overflow of his joy in God. He is doubling his joy in God by sharing that joy with others. And this is why love for God and love for others will always go hand-in-hand.

Resurrection, regeneration, and radical love. I hope today you will think of these commands in this context. Jesus is risen, which is the basis for our regeneration. And it's only when we are regenerated (born again) that we will have the heart, the desire, to love God and love others. I hope you'll meditate on these things and examine yourself and pray to God to give you a heart to love Him and love your neighbor.