

Loving God Ultimately

Mark 12:28-33 ¶ Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments 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, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. ³¹ "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. ³³ "And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

If you had lived in the time of Jesus, and had been allowed to ask Him just one question, what would that question have been? Maybe some would ask him to describe heaven, or to explain election and free choice, or explain the fall of Satan. But I'm glad that living at the time of Jesus was a scribe who asked Jesus what I would have asked Him, and what I'm sure many others would have asked Him: What is the most important thing? What is the big idea? What is the grand priority? What sums up our reason for existence? What is the number one duty of life? This scribe asked Jesus which command in Scripture is the most important. This was actually a favourite debate amongst rabbis. The question is not, which is the first command chronologically, but which is first in order of priority.

On that day, Jesus told the man what the big idea is. He used His divine authority to summarise the most important idea of all Scripture by quoting Scripture. And surprisingly, He didn't quote John 3:16, or Genesis 1:1, or the Great Commission. Instead, he quoted a Scripture which is still prayed by Jews around the world.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 ⁴ ¶ " Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵ "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

When God Himself is amongst us in human form and is telling us what the most important Scripture in all Scripture is, that ought to get our attention like nothing else. If there is any verse in the Bible we should have underlined, highlighted and bookmarked, it is the one which Jesus tells us is the most important one of all. And as it turns out, the most important verses in the Bible have to do with who God is, and how we should love Him.

Here we find one of those summary verses which tie together so many of the details of the Christian life. Reading the Bible can be an intimidating thing, can't it? There is a huge amount of information, a bewildering amount of doctrines. Sometimes you can find yourself several years down the line as a Christian, and feel like shouting, "Stop the train! I still don't understand what the big idea is! I got on, and I got busy, but I don't really know what the priorities of the Christian life are!"

You've already seen that the first and greatest priority is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. We could say that this means we must love God **ultimately**. But what does that mean? This Scripture aims to answer that, in part. As we study this passage in Mark, we'll see three things about loving God ultimately: The Motive for Loving God Ultimately, The Meaning of Loving God Ultimately, and the Means of loving God Ultimately.

I. The Motive for Ultimate Love

Now you already know that Jesus is going to answer the scribe's question by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5. But there is something remarkable about how Jesus answers the man. The scribe has asked

for the most important commandment. A command contains an imperative – an action – do this, or don't do this. The commandment would be “You shall love the Lord your God...: But Jesus does something strange. What does Jesus begin his answer with? Does He jump to the commandment? No. He does not begin quoting at Deuteronomy 6:5. He begins by quoting from verse 4: “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Verse 4 is not a command, it is a statement. It does not tell you to do anything (besides pay attention to its statement), it tells you something about God. Why would Jesus have done that?

Jesus began with verse 4 of Deuteronomy 6, because it is the foundation of and basis for verse 5. The statement about God is the reason for the response to God. The doctrine, the teaching about God is the basis for the duty. To put it another way, only if you understand the significance of the statement “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”, will you understand what it means to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul and strength. Remove verse 4, and all you have is a command to love God intensely. But verse 4 explains who this God is, what it is He deserves, and what it means to love Him with all your heart, soul and strength.

If verse 5 is the most important commandment in the Bible, what would that make verse 4? The most important statement in the Bible. Ultimate love is based upon the statement of verse 5.

Let's read it again: *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*

Now that translation is accurate and fair. Yehovah is our God, Yehovah is one. But equally valid, and I think more compelling would be to translate it this way: Hear O Israel, Yehovah is our God, Yehovah *alone*.

In fact, we know that that is how Israel understood it because of the scribe's response.

Mark 12:32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.

The scribe doesn't say, “You're right Jesus, there is one God and He is one Person.” The scribe says, “There is one God, and there is no other besides Him. He is unique. There is one God, our God, Yahweh, and no one else but Him.”

There are two profoundly important statements in there.

- 1) There is only one God.
- 2) Jehovah is that one God.

You've heard of the fundamentals of the faith. Well, this is the most fundamental of all the fundamentals. Only one God exists, and He is Jehovah. Ultimate love is based upon that statement. Once we understand what that means, we'll understand why we should love Him with all the heart, soul and strength.

I come to you and say, you should love me with all your heart, all your soul, all you mind. What are you going to say? “Why?” You want a reason. So God comes to us and says – love Me ultimately. And the rational part of us says, why? Because there is only one God, and that God is Jehovah.

Why must you love God ultimately? Because that's how you love a god, and there is only one God. Quite simply, because there are no competitors. There is nothing in the universe which deserves the status of a god, except Yahweh. There is nothing and no one else that the human heart should trust

in and worship and honour as a god. It is not simply that Yahweh doesn't want competitors, in the real sense Yahweh doesn't have competitors!

While anything can be worshipped, not everything deserves to be worshipped.

But what does that mean, that He is the only God, or that we love a god with ultimate love.

To answer that, we are going to have to do a bit of theology. In particular we're going to have to do a theology of gods. If we know what a god is, then we will know what it means to love a god – which is always ultimate love. If we know why He is the only God, we will understand why He alone is worthy of the kind of love we give a god.

So let's begin with this question: what is a god?

The simplest answer is, a god is what a human being worships. Whatever you worship, whether it is one thing or many, those things are your gods.

That leads us to another question. What is worship?

The problem is the Bible never defines worship for us, it expects us to already know. We already have a clue in those words of Deuteronomy: all your heart, all your soul, all your strength. The way you relate to a God is not half-hearted, not double-minded, not ambivalent. The way you relate to a god is an ultimate kind of love.

We worship something as a god, when we regard that thing or person as an ultimate end, not just as a means to something else.

Let's illustrate. Let's say there is a man who loves a particular brand of car polish. Does he love car polish in an ultimate sense? No. He loves what it does. He loves it instrumentally. When it is used up, he throws away the can. He loves what it does. What does it do? It makes his car shiny. He loves a shiny car. Does he love his shiny car as an end in itself? No, he loves what a shiny car does. It attracts stares, glances, admiration from other people. Does he love stares as ends in themselves? No, he loves what those stares mean. You could say he loves that attention because of what it says about his status. What is the end point of his loves? His status. He loves his name as an end in itself. He does not go further than that. If you asked him, why do you love your status, he would not say, because it is a means to something else. He would probably just shrug and say, because I love it. His status is an ultimate love to him. It is his god.

Four-year-olds are excellent in the *why* game. They ask you one question, and you give an answer, and they ask, “why” again; you give an answer, and they ask, “why?” Eventually you reach an end-point where there is no longer a reason related to some thing's function or usage, it just is. You can do the same with loves. Why do you love this? Because it does this for me. Why do you love that? Because it does that. Why do you love that? Because it means that. Why do you love that? *Because I just do*. Once you reach that end-point, that “I just do” where the thing or person or activity is no longer valued as an instrument, as a means to something else, but simply because it exists, you have reached the human being's god. To that human, such a thing has value in itself.

Many people make a god out of a relationship – a boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, husband. Many people make gods out of their children. Some make gods of having more money. Some make a god out of a car or a piece of jewellery or a computer, or a sport. Some make gods out of succeeding, some make gods out of sexual pleasure, some make gods out of drunkenness or drugs. Some make gods out of

their appearance, or their intelligence. Some make gods out of computer games, their gardens, their holiday homes, their prize collection. These things or people or goals become things they live for.

The human heart is an idol factory. Our sinful natures make it possible for us to seize upon anything, and say, "This, this by itself will fill the void! I will give my self for this, and live for this, it will bring me satisfaction. I will pursue this and live for this!"

To be an idolater, we don't have to deny that God exists. We simply have to treat sections of our lives as unrelated to God, and treat them as ends rather than means. We simply have to have something other than god, be it good or bad, that we live for.

In fact, one of the ways to test if something has become a god to us is to watch your reaction when that thing is threatened. If it looks like it might be taken away from you, how do you respond?

This is God's defence of loving Him ultimately: no other God is a rally god! Not other god exists in reality. There is only one member of the class God – and it is Jehovah. In fact, God's name even suggests this idea. "Yahweh" _I AM" suggests God is saying, I am the only one in the universe who is not simply an instrument or a means for someone or something else. I am not someone who s explained as an agent or means for something beyond Me. No, God is simply, I AM.

The first of the Ten Commandments is really the negative formulation of the greatest commandment. You shall have no other gods before Me". There should be nothing and no one else that we have give this ultimate love to.

We've begun to see what ultimate love is, but now let's take a closer look. What is the meaning of ultimate love?

II. The Meaning of Ultimate Love

Notice what comes out of the motive:

³⁰ *'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'*

To acknowledge God as the only God, is reserve for Him love which commands all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. Ultimate love, which is for God only, is this kind of wholehearted love. So what does this mean?

We've already seen some of the answer. Ultimate love is the love we give our god or gods. That's the meaning of love with all your heart, soul and might. It is when your love is not using this thing for something else. You are terminating your love on this object or person. All your heart, soul and mind loves this thing or person or activity.

And as we go through the Bible we find three themes associated with the love you give to a god: dependence, devotion and delight. A god is what you ultimately lean on and depend on.

Isaiah 42:17 They shall be turned back, They shall be greatly ashamed, Who trust in carved images, Who say to the moulded images, 'You are our gods.'

Judges 10:14 ¹⁴ "Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."

God chastened Israel because they were ultimately dependent on a false god, and not Him.

A god is what you are ultimately devoted to. You are committed to serving it, and giving yourself to it.

Deuteronomy 29:26 *for they went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods that they did not know and that He had not given to them.*

God often speaks with great revulsion at how Israel descended into human sacrifice, and gave up their children to Molech. Such was their commitment, their devotion, their willingness to serve Molech.

A god is what you ultimately delight in.

Jeremiah 2:11-13 Has a nation changed its gods, Which are not gods? But My people have changed their Glory For what does not profit. ¹² Be astonished, O heavens, at this, And be horribly afraid; Be very desolate," says the LORD. ¹³ "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns -- broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Israel had turned to idols to satisfy its soul, and God tells them that no idol can do that. Once again, this is the reason for ultimate love belonging to God alone.

Nothing and no one else is capable of giving your ultimate love. This is the motive for ultimate love for God.

When you think about it, isn't that a fair definition of love. What makes up the love between husband and wife? First trust, or dependence. Second commitment or devotion. And hopefully it will lead to delight. At root love is trust, commitment and joy. Dependence, devotion and delight. This is the love of worship: absolute devotion, absolute dependence and absolute delight. All your heart, all your soul, all your might is given when you are trusting absolutely or devoted absolutely.

God wants His people to know, He alone is worth this kind of ultimate love And whenever something other than God is put in His place, it disappoints. False gods cheat us – they promise they will do what only God can do, but they turn out to be hollow. They do not satisfy like God does. They are not trustworthy like He is. False gods are treacherous. False gods always abandon the worshipper at some point.

You see the woman who lived for her children. Everything was about her children's health, and children's development, and education. She loved her husband and loved God, but she lived for her children. That was her god. And one day her children grow up and leave the house. She is devastated, confused and feels rather betrayed. She put everything into these gods, and now they are gone. Where is her return? Where is her satisfaction?

The man who trusts in money finds it abandons him in the end. It is either taken from him, or it betrays him with its inability to bring lasting satisfaction. The immoral relationship betrays you, the honing and dressing up and of a perfect body or face betrays you, the marriage to the perfect man or woman betrays you, the attainment of a position ultimately betrays you.

You see, false gods betray you because they lead you to believe they can be to you what only the true God can be to you, and then in the end, they always fail.

That's why God said idols are like broken cisterns that can hold no water.

He alone is God. He alone is worthy. He alone can satisfy us. That's why He is justifiably Jealous. God's jealousy is not a petty rivalry. God's jealousy is a Just claim as the only rightful occupant in that place in the human heart designed to worship the only true God.

So let me take this idea of loving God ultimately to its logical end. If a god is one that we love ultimately, then we should not love God as a means to something else. Because whatever it is I am looking for beyond God is actually my god.

Ken gives Barbie a gold necklace, and Barbie loves Ken. Ken gives Barbie a house by the ocean and Barbie loves Ken. Ken gives Barbie an unlimited credit card and Barbie loves Ken. Ken stops giving things to Barbie, and Barbie stops loving Ken. What does Barbie love?

God gives me health, and I love God. God gives me a job and enough money, I love God. God gives me healthy children, and I love God. God protects me and my loved ones, and I love God. God gives me a certain quality of life, and I love God. And if God takes any or all of those things away, then what?

And it's not hard to see that around us. Some people want God to be their Cosmic Cash Cow. Some people want God to be their Prescription-free Prozac pill. Some people want God to be their good luck charm.

The Christian life is sold as the means to fix up your marriage, help with your finances, help you budget your time, help you achieve financial freedom, give you personal peace and happiness, make you a successful person. The Christian bookshop shelves is groaning under the weight of the tonnes of garbage churned out of Christian book publishing houses that make man the centre, and God the supplier.

Again you pick it up in the songs today. Some one said, count how many of our modern hymns and choruses begin with I or me.

Think about the approach of the average person to corporate worship. "I didn't get much out of that service." Why would you think that that is at all relevant?

"I didn't get much out of my quiet time today" Why would you think that that is the main point?

"If we love not God because he is what he is, but only because he is profitable to us, in truth we love him not at all." - Jonathan Edwards

Loving God ultimately is loving God for Himself. To love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is to not seek to use God for some other end beyond Himself. We love God for His excellence, for His beauty, for His reliability, for His desirability.

To ask, what's the point of loving God is to miss the point.

When you see a beautiful sunset, you don't ask, what's the point? You don't look at a full-moon and say, what can I do with this? You enjoy a beautiful sunset or waterfall or flowerbed not because it gets you something, but because of what it is.

To love God ultimately is to love Him for who he is. He alone is God. He is delightful. He is trustworthy. He is covenant-keeping. Therefore we love Him.

There is a hymn we sing in our church.

My God, I love Thee; not because
I hope for heaven thereby,
Nor yet for fear that loving not
I might forever die
But for that didst all mankind Upon the cross embrace;
For us didst bear the nails and spear,

And manifold disgrace.

Not with the hope of gaining aught,
Not seeking a reward,
But as Thyself hast lovèd me,
O everlasting Lord!
E'en so I love Thee, and will love,
And in Thy praise will sing,
Solely because Thou art my God,
And my eternal King

Does Deuteronomy 6:5 make more sense now? You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength. What does that mean? It means since there is only one God, and He is the God of the Bible, then treat Him and Him alone as your God – as the one to whom you are ultimately devoted, the one on whom you are ultimately dependent, the one in whom you ultimately delight. Your love is total, ultimate, absolute, terminating on God and on nothing beyond Him. You love God for God's sake.

That's the meaning of ultimate love for God. That's the motive for ultimate love for God. But how do we do that? What is the means or the method of ultimate love?

III. The Method of Ultimate Love

The method for ultimate love is not found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, but it is found in the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live

Circumcision was the physical act by which a male Israelite was brought into the Abrahamic covenant. God uses that image and says, I will do a work on your inner man. I will take away the hardness of heart in you, I will cut away your unbelief, your stony heart, and I will enable you to love me this way.

God is telling Israel that they cannot reach the greatest commandment without a work of grace. God has to do something to them, before they will be able to meet this commandment.

The act of regeneration is where God begins new life within a person. He applies the atoning work of Christ to that person, wakes him up from his spiritual death. He justifies him. God removes the alienation and the condemnation that makes loving God impossible. He grants you a new heart that is inclined towards Him. He grants you His indwelling Spirit that cries out, Abba Father! He removes the guilt, and the shame, and the fear that went with it.

When does He do this? He does this at the time when we repent of living life for self. We repent of our idols, of our sin, and embrace Jesus Christ as our life and love. We look to Him to reconcile us to God and grant us a new heart.

To put it in New Testament terms, you need the gospel to fulfil the great commandment.

In fact, when the scribe questions Jesus, he is asking about the Law. But no one can meet the requirement of the Law without the gospel. If you could keep the Great Commandment, you wouldn't need to be saved. You would be a just person. You would not be a sinner. It is precisely

because you don't and can't keep the Great Commandment that above all things you need a new heart from God. Only God can unite your heart from its divided ways. Only God can purify your heart. Only God can incline your heart towards Himself.

But let me finish with a word to the believer. There is something you can do, believer to grow ultimate love for God. Stay in Deuteronomy, look in chapter 10:16.

Deuteronomy 10:16 ¹⁶ "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.

Wait a minute. Didn't God say He would do that? Yes. But God calls on us to become what we are by faith. He calls on us to do what we cannot do without grace. It is God who gives you a new heart at the moment of conversion. But God also calls on you to keep renewing that heart of ultimate love.

In other words, what should form part of your everyday life as a Christian is what Kevin Bauder calls radical monotheism. You keep discovering and destroying your idols. You wake up in the morning, and you come to the Lord, and however you say it, you say to God, my life is yours. My life is not about me. My family, my goals, my ambitions, my desires, my plans, my career, my health, my reputation – it is yours. I will not seek ultimate dependence in these things. You are my Rock and my high tower. I will not be devoted to any of these things ultimately, good as they may be. You alone are my Captain, My King, My Lord. I will not seek ultimate delight in your gifts, but I will use them as means to delight in the Giver. Isn't this what Jesus was teaching is at the heart of discipleship?

Luke 9:23-25 Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. ²⁴ "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. ²⁵ "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?

Every day – it is not about me, it is about God. I will live as dead to my own way. I destroy my idols. My life is God's, for God is my all.

The question before us all is not will I have ultimate love for someone or something. It is, where are you placing your ultimate love, and, will you place it on the only One who deserves it.