

Loving God (1) – the Mandate and the Motive

Mark 12:28-34 *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?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. '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. "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 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. "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." Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.*

What is the most important verse in the Bible? Some might suggest Genesis 1:1, John 3:16. I believe Jesus partly answered that question for us in this Scripture. The scribe asked Jesus, what is the first commandment of all? He did not mean chronologically; he meant in order of importance. Which command, contained in Scripture tops the list of all commands? What is the ultimate priority for human beings according to God's self-revelation?

Quite a question.

Now think about who the scribe is asking. He is not simply asking a great teacher of the Bible. He is not asking merely the greatest living expert on the Bible. He is, unbeknownst to him, asking the author of the Bible. Jesus is the living Word. It is His Word we hold in our hands. This scribe is asking the biggest and best question from the best source.

Jesus' answer is to say – the greatest commandment is... and then He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Now we read Deut 6:4-5 earlier and the interesting thing is that passage doesn't say anything remarkable about itself. It doesn't alert you to its own importance. But Jesus, the ultimate interpreter of Scripture, confidently tells the scribe that the most important command, and therefore the most important verses in all of Scripture are those in Deuteronomy which say Yahweh alone is God and you are to love Him supremely.

Loving God is the ultimate purpose of life. Loving God is why you were created. Loving God is why you were saved, born again, justified. Loving God is why you continue to be sanctified. The aim of the Christian life is not ultimately missions, or evangelism, or ministry, or discipleship. The ultimate aim of the Christian life is to love God wholeheartedly. If discipleship and missions and evangelism and ministry flow out of love for God, fine. But if they do not, you run the risk of being addressed by Jesus as He did to the church at Ephesus.

Revelation 2:2-5 *I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; "and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place -- unless you repent.*

Indeed, what is it that we will be doing and growing in doing for all eternity? We'll be growing in love for God.

Jesus, as the Son of God tells the scribe that the great command is loving God, and upon it 'hang all the law and the prophets'. That was a Jewish way of saying, the whole Tanakh, the Old Testament, the revealed Word of God until that time, all came down from and descended from and emanated

out of that fundamental idea – loving God.

The scribe's response is interesting – he agrees with Jesus, and puts it a little differently. Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom.”

This incident, which occurred more than once in Jesus' ministry, is recorded in Luke 10 and in Matthew 22. Therefore, the great command is found four times in Scripture, in case we missed it. But miss it we do. How often are we found like Martha, clanging and banging the pots and pans of service and ministry, and neglecting to love God. How often is it that our devotion seems to be the first casualty of our busy lives? Other things seem to shrivel from the outside in; the spiritual life seems to be the opposite.

In science, measurements need to be exact. If scientists want to know how much a kilogram weighs, how do they know? If you simply compare this kilogram with an existing kilogram, you are going in a circle. How do you know that one is truly a kilogram? So scientists have what is called the International Prototype Kilogram. A kilogram of a metal alloy is made and stored in very special conditions, to avoid even the weight of dust. It is stored in Paris. That is the standard of the kilogram, from which other standards are made, from which the measuring devices must be calibrated.

The Great Command is the standard that we are to measure our lives by. Not by church attendance, biblical knowledge, evangelistic contacts, personal habits, or any such thing. The ultimate standard to test if we are living as we ought, if we are living as we were designed is right here. This is what you test your life by. This is what you use to look back on the year and decide if it was good or bad. This is what you use to evaluate your ministry, and your job, and your family. Very importantly, it is what you use to evaluate your salvation. The best assurance of salvation is that you have a heart which knows and senses that loving God is your ultimate joy. Anyone can want to go to heaven. Anyone can want to escape hell. It doesn't take a new heart to want those things. But when regeneration has taken place, you will want God Himself.

Now, the matter of loving God is in some ways what we are always talking about. But it won't do to just say that and never deal with it explicitly. Because when we read this, we should ask things like, how do I do this? What will it mean for me to do this? With what means can I do it? What is the method I use? What will it look like to love God this way? What will be the manifestations?

Today I want us to simply answer the question, why? Why must we love God with all our heart, soul and mind? Why should it be the absolute priority? And why would I want to love God this way, and not something or someone else. The answer to the question of why loving God should be the priority is also the answer to the question of what will motivate us to love Him in this way.

Let's look at Jesus' answer to this scribe and notice something interesting. The scribe asks him what the great commandment is. Does Jesus reply by jumping straight to the command? No, He first quotes, “Hear, O Israel...” Now you will notice that that is a statement, not a command. The command follows the statement. Why do you think Jesus would have included that statement in His answer?

Because the command is based upon that statement.

If you understand Deut 6:4, or Mark 12:29, you are going to understand the basis for the greatest commandment of all. If the greatest commandment of all hangs on this statement, what does that

make this statement?

Let's examine it a little closer.

In Deuteronomy, it reads, *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*

The Hebrew is not so much trying to say that God is a singular person, as some have tried to say. The Hebrew could well read like this: Hear, O Israel, Jehovah is God, Jehovah alone.

You can see that is true by the scribe's response to Jesus. When the scribe paraphrases the Scripture in verse 32 he says, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He."

Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is God, Yahweh alone.

In that statement we are going to find the reason to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Two simple, but immensely weighty truths come out of that statement.

Why must we love God wholeheartedly? Why is loving God the supreme priority of life?

I. Because All Other Gods are False Gods.

Jehovah is God. He is the only true God. For that reason, He is worthy and deserves our ultimate devotion. Now He is the only true God. That doesn't mean He is the only god because false gods abound. Every human on the face of this earth worships other gods. Now that doesn't mean that every human bows down to a little golden or wooden image. Because what is a god? A god is whatever a human worships. We are capable of turning anything – an object, an activity, a relationship, anything into a god that we worship.

How do we know a person has made a god of something, and that they are worshipping it? Here is a simple definition: when that thing or person or activity has become something you live for. It is when that thing or person, or activity, or experience is not a means to something else – it is an end, it is a goal, it is something I seek satisfaction in itself. For example, loving your wife is a good thing, God tells us to do it. But God wants me to love wife children in such a way that it still leads me to love Him. I love wife and children for His sake. I love my wife as God's gift to me. I love my wife as another means to further know God Himself.

But what if I choose to make my wife the terminus, the final focus, the end-point of all my satisfaction, hope and desire? Do you know what I have done? I have placed my wife where only God is supposed to be. I have treated one of God's gifts as God Himself. I have taken one of the means God gave me to further know and enjoy Him, and put it on the throne of my heart and tried to make it the god I live for and seek and serve.

Many people make a god out of a relationship – a boyfriend, girlfriend, wife, and 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, and some make gods out of drunkenness or drugs. Some make gods out of their appearance, or their intelligence.

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 myself for this, and live for this, it will bring me satisfaction. I will pursue this and live for this!"

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? Do you respond with submission, knowing this is simply a means to knowing God, and therefore He has the right to take them away if He wants to? Or do we snap, lash out, grow grasping and angry, refusing to give this thing up? That is a sure sign that that thing has become an idol. Surely one of the reasons God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was to bring out of Abraham's heart – who is your god?

The Bible says, Jehovah is God. That is simply the most fundamental fact of reality. You can make anything into a god, that doesn't mean it is God. God is not asking to be crowned best God of all; He is saying that nothing else deserves the true status of God in the human heart.

False gods are always jealous, treacherous and destructive. Every god is jealous, and wants you to love it with all your heart, soul and mind. The ancients knew this. The Greek mythologies are filled with gods warring with each other to gain the devotion of humans. Jesus, in fact, taught this. He said:

*“**Matthew 6:24** No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.*

You take a man, or woman who has made a god out of his or her appearance and out of money. To get money she has to work long and hard hours, toiling away. The god of money does not let her spend much time improving her appearance. However, the god of her appearance demands she spend much time in the mirror, in the gym, at the cosmetic section, reading magazines. So she does, and limits how much time she spends at the office. When she serves one, she cannot serve the other. Both gods war for her time. And in fact, in order to pursue appearance she must use up some of her money. She must rob that god to satisfy this god. When she gets money, she cannot be on a sun bed or on a treadmill. Her gods are jealous.

It is in this tension that we polytheists live. We try to balance the various gods in our lives, knowing they are jealous, and doing our best to resolve the tensions. Sometimes the solutions people come up with to end the tension are criminal. A man decides that to serve the god of his drug habit, therefore he must rob a bank.

It is not only that the true God is Jealous. Any god in the human heart is jealous, and permits no rivals. False gods are not only jealous, 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, their development and education. She loved her husband and loved God, but she lived for her children. They were her god. And one day her children 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 is taken from him, or it betrays him with its inability to bring lasting satisfaction. The immoral relationship betrays you; the honing of a perfect body 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. Ever wonder why God is the **true** God? Because a true God will not turn out to disappoint in the end.

False gods are also destructive.

Psalm 135:15-18 *The idols of the nations are silver and gold, The work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; Nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them are like them; So is everyone who trusts in them.*

What do false gods do to you over time? They make you as hollow, shallow, empty as the things you worship. You have spiritual eyes, but you see little. You have spiritual ears, but you don't hear much. Idols shallow us, dull us, and dilute us. One of the potent effects of idolatry is to make us satisfied with so little. The one who has made trashy soap operas her god, finds her heart shrinking. Eventually, she is not tempted by the thought of seeing glory; she just wants to see if Electra is going to finally get together with Blain. C.S. Lewis said we end up like children who want to keep making mud pies in a slum, because we don't understand what it means to have a holiday by the seaside.

Why must you love God wholeheartedly? 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. There is only one God who deserves to be worshipped. There is in fact only One Being in the Universe who must be loved for Himself and for no other reason. All other things must lead to Him, which is why He made them. "Every good and perfect gift..."

But this is the sad history of God's people. Seldom do people replace God, or substitute God with one of their gods. They usually just add their god to their existing gods. Do you realise Israel almost never forsook the worship of Yahweh, in all those years when God indicted them for idolatry? The Temple still stood. They still knew who Yahweh was. But they gave him status equal to other gods.

And that is what this verse brings home to us – there is only one Being worthy of living for. There is only one Being who you should make the end point, the goal. There is only one Being who should be the terminus of your pursuit of happiness and satisfaction. There is only one Being who will not betray you, destroy you or disappoint. He is the only qualified God. Therefore, it is Him that you love with all your heart, and all your soul and all your might.

Do you know the starting point of returning to God as first love? It is to discover and destroy your idols. Find out – why do I do this? Why do I enjoy this? Why do I want this? Why am I pursuing this? Why is this important to me? Why am I protective of this? Where you find that something has become an end in itself, something you have assigned absolute value to – it is an idol. It needs to be smashed, or put back on the altar, and given to God. Only then is it safe.

That is usually a very painful thing. Idols do not easily surrender their space. But ask God to apply the powerful work of the cross to your heart. Reckon yourself dead to all Christ died to, and yield to His power. Repent of giving a created thing the space that belongs to god alone.

Why must we love God wholeheartedly? Why is this the great priority? Because only God is the true God. The other reason is found in the second part of the statement, "Hear O Israel"

Let me help you understand it this way: you could see the Great Command as having a negative and a positive side. The negative side is actually the first of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Yahweh is God; therefore do not make a god out of anything else. Positively then – once you agree that there is no other God, you must set your heart and affections to love and adore the only true God.

II. Because God Alone is Worthy of our Worship

Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is God, Yahweh alone. God stands supreme and unique. Love Him wholeheartedly, because no one is like Him. He is supreme.

Up to now we have defined this negatively. False gods usurp God's place. False gods betray us. False gods destroy us. But let us ask it positively. What does the true God do? The nature of the true God is that He deserves to be loved with all our heart, soul and mind.

Why is that? Because He is lovely. God in Himself is more beautiful than anything you have ever admired. God in Himself is more fascinating to study than anything you have ever thought about. God in Himself is more to be admired than anything you have marvelled about. In fact, God's beauty is a kind of beauty with which not even the most beautiful created thing can compare.

That word 'compare' is the bottom line. God can't be compared because He can't be compared, he must be loved supremely. Since there is no one like Him, nothing must be loved the way we love Him.

Exodus 15:11 *"Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?"*

2 Samuel 7:22 *"Therefore You are great, O Lord GOD. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears."*

Psalms 89:6 *For who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the LORD? God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, And to be held in reverence by all those around Him. O LORD God of hosts, Who is mighty like You, O LORD? Your faithfulness also surrounds You."*

Isaiah 40:18 *To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?*

Isaiah 40:25 *"To whom then will you liken Me, Or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One.*

Have you ever simply sat down in prayer and the Word and thought about the attributes of God. What makes this God so unique?

Have you ever just spent some moments thinking about His Eternality? Have you ever pondered how God could be self-existent? He did not come from anyone or get His life or His being from anyone. He is His own source. He lives because of Himself. He is the source of His own life.

Have you ever taken some time to consider the size of the universe, and thought about His power, which make a nuclear bomb look like the static electricity spark on your finger.

Have you stopped and thought about His omnipresence, so that if you travelled for 14 billion years at the speed of light, and came to the coldest, darkest, loneliest region of the universe – you would not have reached the edge of God, you would not even have moved a millimetre as far as God's

presence is concerned.

Have you thought about the tri-unity of God, that there have always been three uncreated Persons sharing the one essence of God, three persons delighting in one another, communing with one another, before even the universe came to be?

Have you considered His mind? Has it ever occurred to you that nothing ever occurs to God? That in one blink of His eyes He knows all knowledge – every fact of the created universe, past, present future, actual and potential, without any struggle.

Have you considered His authority? That all the combined power of all the rulers of the earth rejecting His Lordship according to Psalm 2 causes a booming laughter in heaven, as silly, or sillier than if some ants on your kitchen table declared independence of you and your kitchen. That He works all things, including the actions of His enemies according to the purpose of His counsel.

Have you considered His wrath? Violent storms, waves, earthquakes are just Him clearing His throat. His rage is unsupportable.

Have you considered His splendour? He has never had to do anything to His appearance. He has always possessed such splendour and majesty as to cause seraphim to cry out day and night, Holy, Holy, Holy.

Have you considered His grace? That from such a position, He stoops down. He pursues His enemies for their good. He arrests them before they plunge off a cliff of their own making.

Have you thought about His holiness, His transcendence, His unchanging nature, his faithfulness, His justice, His mercy, his patience?

Well, we could keep listing His attributes, and quite frankly, if those things do not move you in any way, get on your knees and ask God to take away the hardness of your heart. Beg God to give you a taste for His glory. Beg Him to remove the blindness and deafness that your idolatry has brought you.

You cannot love Him if you don't know Him. You cannot know Him if you don't seek Him. It is by seeking Him as the one and only God of your fascination, your admiration, your satisfaction, the One you seek as an end, that you will come to know Him.

The point is this – God in Himself is what we were made for. Nothing less than God's glory can satisfy the human heart, which is made in God's image.

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.

Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you"

So the love of God is contained not only by destroying your idols, but by making God the direct and personal pursuit of your heart.

The more a person grows in the knowledge of God, the more they want to know Him. The more you know of His goodness and greatness, the more you grow in your desire to love Him.

"We love Him, because He first loved us."

God is the only true God. God is Unique and Supreme above all God. That is the fundamental fact of reality. Out of that comes the fundamental duty of reality – love Him with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind.