

And the Survey Says...

Mark 12:28-34, Deuteronomy 6:1-9

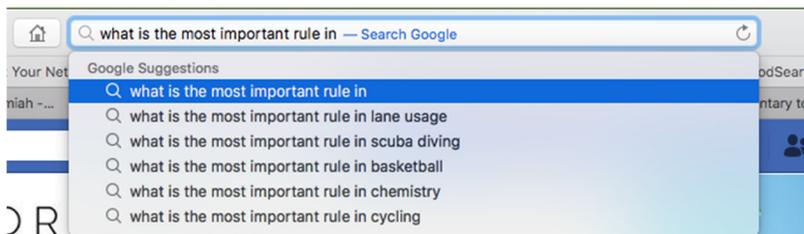
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

February 24, 2019

Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/sermon02-24-2019.mp3>*

Like many of you, my computer knows that I can be a little slow. My trusty laptop is willing to help speed things along for me. As I was preparing for this message, I typed into my search bar, “what is the most important rule in” and before I could say “my faith” or “Christianity” or even “religion”, I was offered a whole host of suggestions...



It's not really fair for you to answer *after* you've already heard the Gospel, but if someone would have asked you an hour ago, “what is the heart of the message of scripture? What is the Bible about?”, how might you have answered?



I thought recently about a neighbor that Sharon and I had when we lived on South Graham Street many years ago. There was an elderly woman who lived nearby who had become, for some reason, quite embittered with the world. She knew that I was some sort of a professional Christian, however, and so one day as I washed my car she accosted me. “Listen,” she said, “I see you spending all your time over there at the church, and I wonder if you really know what’s going on. Tell me this, young man: what is the core message of the New

Testament? What is it that we ought to take away from that document?”

I was a little taken aback by her frankness, and I felt put on the spot. I hemmed and hawed a little bit about loving each other and loving God, and she interrupted me by saying, “No, no, no... Here’s the message of the New Testament: if you spend your whole life loving other people, if you forgive people when they hurt you and trust people with what’s important to you, and if you try to help other people with no expectation of what you might get in return, then don’t be surprised when they crucify you.”

I think she is wrong, but the older I get, the more I can understand her. What is the core of the Gospel, do you think?



¹ Jesus has been spending all day dealing with one religious expert after another. If you’ve been here this month, you know what I mean: we’ve had scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and more, all having come to Jesus to test him

in one way or another. And, as you may recall, he replied to each challenge with distinction and wisdom.

He did so well, in fact, that near the end of this conversation, an apparently un-aligned teacher of the Law approached him, not with malicious intent, but with respect and curiosity. He noticed that Jesus had answered well, and so he came to Jesus with a question that was not uncommon at the time. When he asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”, he was echoing a conversation attributed to the legendary Rabbi Hillel a generation earlier. A

¹ *The Pharisees Question Jesus*, James Tissot (between 1886-1894)

man asked the Rabbi, “Teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” The old man replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others. All else is commentary. Go and learn.”

So this man is an earnest inquirer, and he asks Jesus a genuine question. Jesus does not exactly push the bounds of accepted teaching when he starts by quoting Deuteronomy. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is one...” Any Jew would have recognized this immediately – it was the call to worship at the temple every morning and every evening. If there was one verse that had been etched into the consciousness of the children of God, this was it...

“What is the most important commandment?” “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength...” You can almost feel the tension in the crowd melt away. His followers and friends might have thought he was going to say something unusual (he had a real knack for that); his critics and opponents might have hoped for a hint of impropriety, but there was nothing... It was the “safe” answer. I mean, who’s going to argue with that one, right? There are affirmative nods all around, and then Jesus draws another breath and says, “And the second is this...”

“Wait, what? Come on, Jesus, there is no ‘second’. There is only the *Shema*, there is only the Oneness of God.”

And in that moment, there was probably a little panic in the eyes of his closest friends. You know that feeling of apprehension – when someone opens their mouth and you’re not at all sure what’s coming next... Maybe you’re the parent of a toddler who has declared, “Do you want to know what else mommy said?” Maybe you’ve run into someone you don’t know very well, or you haven’t seen in a while, and that person says, “Well, I just had surgery, and I was really

surprised by how long the scar was... do you want to take a look at this—” and you scream “Noooooooooo!”

“The second is like it...”

What is Jesus going to say. I mean, there is only one... Come on Jesus, don't mess with us here...

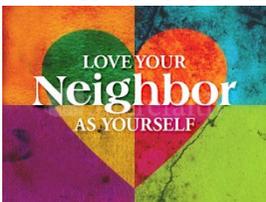
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Seriously, Jesus? *That's* what you're going to go with? A passage from Leviticus 19?

Look, if you're at my house, and you say, “Dave, I need the best rolling pin you've got”, I'm gonna reach into the drawer and give you a great one. No problem. Because I have one really good rolling pin. But if you say “I'd like a second...”, well, we're gonna have some issues. Because there isn't a second one. I mean, I'll root around in the drawer, and I might bring something out, but it would probably surprise you...

Look, the “greatest commandment” we all know. Hear it all the time. Sing it, in fact. But when Jesus starts rooting through the scripture bin looking for the second one, it's a little surprising. He grabs hold of Leviticus 19:18 and holds it up: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Listen, folks, that's a fine scripture, but it's not exactly a pronounced emphasis in Leviticus. I mean, the very next verse says, “Do not plant your fields with two kinds of seed, and do not wear clothing woven from two kinds of material.”



Let that sink in for a moment. How different, how much less complicated would the world be today if Jesus had only said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind and strength; and, oh, yes, don't wear that cotton/polyester blend.

That has *got* to go... Seriously.”

That’s it? Love God? Wear wool? All right! We can do that!

But he said it. He chose, of all the things he could have chosen, to hold up Leviticus 19:18. Why would he do that?

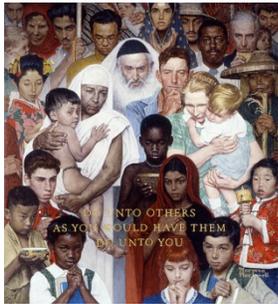
Because he could see that the religious leaders of his own day assumed that it was possible, acceptable, and maybe even desirable, to love God *without* loving one’s neighbor. As if we could divorce the two of those things somehow!

One of the great tragedies of religion is that professed followers of Jesus have not realized that these two commandments are inseparable. We cannot say that we love God, and then love only the people who believe the same things as we do. We cannot say that we love God, and then love only the people who have the same skin tone, or language, or orientation, or income level as we do.

Our primary response to the creation of the world and our place in it is to love God with everything that we have and are. One of the ways that we demonstrate the sincerity of our love for God is by our willingness to show our neighbor the same respect and tenderness that we show ourselves.

In commenting on this passage, Dr. Ernest Thompson writes, “Love to God finds its only adequate fulfillment in love to one’s neighbor. Nonetheless this is the second command and not the first. Love to one’s neighbor must be rooted in love of God, if it is to be wise (not mere sentimentality), if it is to endure (even when we meet persistent unfriendliness, or sheer unloveliness), and if it is to be universal (excluding no

race, no class, and no individual.”²



³It seems to me that there might be no challenge more difficult for the church of Jesus Christ in the United States of America in 2019 than to love everyone without exception. Not “agree” with your neighbor. Not “tolerate” or “put up with” your neighbor. Love them. Love *each of them*. You, the brown-skinned person wearing a hoodie. You, the old white guy in a MAGA hat. Her, the lady smoking with her kids at the bus stop. Him, the grumpy police officer, and her the screeching seven year old. Those two over there, who you’re not even sure what to call because they don’t like any of the pronouns currently used by the English language. The fundamentalist Christian, Muslim, Jew... The one who denies his creator, and the one who praises God every day. The veteran who is wearing her uniform proudly, and the one next to her who kneels during the anthem.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. When Matthew is telling this story in his Gospel, he notes that Jesus concludes by adding, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.”

Listen, this scripture was chosen for this day a long time before I knew we’d be baptizing little Arya Jane this morning. But isn’t this the goal? To raise a generation who live this way? That’s what it says in Deuteronomy, right? Tell this to your children. Remind them. Do something to remember it! When Jesus and his friends were little boys they were given little boxes to put on their foreheads and wrists. When Joe

² *The Gospel According to Mark and Its Meaning for Today* (John Knox Press, 1968), p. 198-199.

³ *Golden Rule*, Norman Rockwell (1961).

was younger he received a confirmation class cross. Our lives are filled with symbols of that which we love and which we want to be.

May it be love. May we desire to be love.

At the end of their conversation, Jesus commends the scribe. Mark notes that “Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely...” Do you know that this man is the only teacher of the law in the Gospel of Mark to be recognized and commended publicly in this fashion? I think that matters...

And then, Jesus concludes the interaction by saying, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Jesus didn’t say, “Welcome home, friend.” He didn’t say, “Now go away, son, you bother me.” He didn’t even say, “Follow me.”

We are left wondering: what happened to this guy? I’ll tell you this – this isn’t the first cliffhanger in the Gospel of Mark, and it’s not the last, and it’s certainly not the biggest.

But this man had a choice: would he walk in the way of love, welcome, service, and humility? Or would he stay where he was? He clearly had to decide.

And so do we. Thanks be to God, we can decide today. Let us follow in the way of the Christ and in the way of the Kingdom. One of the most influential Christian minds in the last century was a writer named G. K. Chesterton. He once said, “Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.” May we engage our faith, those around us, and indeed ourselves not only with a doctrine that is respectable, but with the holy, burning love of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.