

April 14, 2024

Lesson 7: The Golden Rule For All

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, “Encounters in Prayer and Love,” where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God’s presence in our lives. Today we continue our unit titled “Empowering Spirit,” as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today’s lesson will focus on how to decide what someone who is “not far” from the kingdom of God should do next.

The scripture lesson for today comes from the gospel of Mark. The context surrounding the passage is Jesus having a conversation with those who call him “Teacher.” In the passage, the scribe puts together a kind of question which was often used in Jewish circles as a means of capturing the essential thrust and flavor of a rabbi’s mind and teaching.¹ Jesus is asked one of the biggest questions one can ask: what are the most important of all the commandments.

This question could either set Jesus up for greatness, or it could be used by his adversaries to bring him down. There are two interesting components to the answer Jesus gives. One focuses on his historic roots and the ties to the Triune God. The second is how Jesus shifts the faith to a verb and not just a noun.

When Jesus responds to the question, his initial response ties to the Old Testament. The Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4, was a central hallmark of the Jewish faith: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”² As Jesus used this verse, he was affirming his Jewish heritage and pointing to how God was one, promoting monotheism to the prevailing polytheism of the day. While this would have spoken to Jesus’ original audience, this also speaks to the early Christians to whom Mark is addressing as they discover their identity. As Jesus ties himself to God as found in the Jewish scriptures, he is pointing the people to the understanding of the Triune God.

The second shift Jesus makes after naming the Shema is response to how the Shema plays out in daily life. The greatest commandment ties to the second with an action verb; love, which is placed in the imperative.³ The text indicates three objects of love: God, neighbor, and self.⁴ This concept ties to a larger theme Jesus demonstrates during his ministry. Jesus taught by precept and example how a proper self-esteem and self-fulfillment is to be found in devotion to God and service to others, a life of love to God and neighbor.⁵ Jesus then tells the scribe who has

¹ Williamson, Lamar. Jr. “Mark.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009.), 226.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁵ Ibid. 228.

answered this way, “you are not far from the kingdom of God,” pointing to how this scribe is coming to know more about following Jesus. Religion is not simply a matter of ritual and nor is it focusing solely on the individual as the center of the universe.⁶ Jesus pushes us to see religion and faith as driven by the ultimate question, “what is love,” and then to seek one’s whole life in finding the answer to the question.

Application

What does love have to do with it? While Tina Turner immortalized this song back in the 1990s, a hit which stayed on the radio for years, the name of the song comes from this ancient question asked of Jesus when he had curious religious folks asking about the most important things in life. Yet initially love was not at the center of the question. Instead, the focus was on the commandments, conjuring up images of laws and rules, a checklist to keep about one’s purity before the Lord. For Jesus though, love is at the center of those looking to follow the Kingdom of God. Jesus contends how all commandments stem from the understanding of loving God and loving others.

It sounds so easy doesn’t it? Yet if we do a deeper dive, we also understand the inherent challenge in loving God and loving our neighbor. For something which sounds so easy, it can also demand something of us. Every day we are invited to consider the challenge of what does it mean to truly love God and love others. And if we are trying to answer the question, what should one do next for being in the Kingdom of God, we might be surprised as to what the Holy Spirit is inviting us to do.

Most Christians I know try really hard to love God as best they can. They attend worship, participate in small groups, try some form of self-control in their behaviors, read scripture, and pray. To a degree, loving God can come easily because we can look around and see everywhere where God is at work in our lives. It is only natural to worship the one who is the giver of life, and to praise the Lord for all which we have in our lives with a healthy dose of reverence at one who is more powerful than we could imagine.

What I have discovered though, much like our scribe leads onto, is how the translation of loving God leads to a transformation in how we live and move around with others. The loving our neighbors as ourselves is where the challenge comes as this means we will have to get in the mess of being in relationship with people; and it may not always be the people we like or want to be around.

If you’re around long enough, you’ll discover how loving others is indeed a verb, an ongoing activity. And sometimes it is hard as we will have to ask ourselves big questions about whether we truly love someone or see them as an object, whether it is romantically, as a family member, a co-worker, or a friend. What does it mean to love them someone fully as they are and where they are on this journey of life?

A friend and I were once discussing some harmful actions of another friend who did some things to betray our confidences and told some hurtful lies to cause miscommunication and slander. Instead of discussing the situation, they would just repeat, “I love you,” when we saw them. It was hard to respond because all you could wonder is, “Is this love? Lying and then not telling the truth. If this is love, I do not want to see what it means to hate!” The realization for all parties is how love invites us to truly look at others and ask the question if we see or

⁶ Ibid. 230.

acknowledge them as other human beings, or just as objects whose lives only really matter when it is of consequence to us.

We never hear what happens to the scribe who asks the question of Jesus and is told he is near the Kingdom of God. Perhaps he did indeed become a disciple of Jesus and then a member of the early church. One would hope the moment was one of both translation and transformation.

Yet perhaps the open-ended frame of the question is more for us to consider. What does it mean for us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves? The answer for us might come about in different ways. It might mean we pick our words more carefully in how we communicate. Or it might mean we express more, being honest with people in how they make us feel and seeking a further strengthening of the relationship. It could mean we have our opinions and prejudices challenged; instead of judging or writing others off, we might ask ourselves how God wants us to love or be in relationship with them. God is the one who at work constantly in people's lives. Our job is to be conduits of God's grace and to walk with all those we meet as companions for the journey.

How have you seen the focus of loving God and loving neighbor transform your life? Why do you think love is a verb? Who is God calling you to love more deeply? Where have you seen God at work to strengthen ties and relationships? How do you understand love and the Kingdom of God?

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