

# The most important thing

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Date: 18 September 2022

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, what is the best way to live your life? How do you know? Well, in our individualistic culture, everybody assumes that they know what is best for them. But it's also the kind of culture where everybody assumes that they know what is best for other people. Everybody's got some kind of framework for what is right and for what is wrong, even if they aren't religious. And so in her book, *The Secular Creed*, the author Rebecca McLachlan argues that there are certain beliefs about what to think and about how to behave that are expected to be accepted by everybody. In other words, there are some beliefs that are, in short, a bit like a secular creed, a creed that must be obeyed with the same fundamentalist fervor as any kind of religious creed must be obeyed. But where does our understanding of what is right and what is wrong come from? Is it something that we're born with, like an inbuilt moral compass? Is it something that we're taught in the home or from school? Is it something that changes as society changes, like the shifting of opinion over the past 20 years or so and a whole load of different moral issues? What values do we live by? What ethic should we adopt?

And who decides what is right and what is wrong? Is it the government? Is it the vocal majority? Is it whatever you feel like at the time? Postmodern thinking would encourage us to say that you have your truth and that is good for you, but somebody else has their truth and that is good for them, even if those two opinions differ. So who gets to choose whether a certain kind of behavior is moral or immoral? Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Ivan Karamazov basically claims that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted.

He's making the point that if there is no God, then there are no moral laws to live by, and so human beings can behave however they want to behave. Richard Dawkins makes a similar point in his book, *The God Delusion*. He says, it is pretty hard to defend absolutist morals on grounds other than religious ones. So even as an atheist, he is saying that there's a problem when it comes to morality if you've got no basis for deciding what is right and what is wrong. Now this isn't some kind of philosophical discussion. This is about how we live our lives, what choices we make on a day-to-day basis, what we do, how we discern what is right and what is wrong. Because whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, we all want to know how we should live our lives. What should we do? What is it that matters most for me? Well, Jesus tells us in our Bible reading this afternoon from Mark chapter 12, because a man asks Jesus a question about the most important commandment. In other words, Jesus, what is the best thing for me to do with my life? What's the first thing most important? And then Jesus gives him an answer, and then we see the implication for the man, but also for us. And so this afternoon, I'd like us to look at three things from this Bible reading. First of all, a real question. Second, a remarkable answer. And third, a radical implication. So first of all, a real question. Verse 28. The question comes after a series of debates that

Jesus has had with the religious leaders, and they've all been meeting in the temple courts, back and forth, arguing, arguing, fighting. And Jesus is the one who has caught all of these religious leaders in their own trap. So there's the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders. Then there's the Pharisees, and the Herodians, and then it was the Sadducees. And each time, these religious leaders lose.

They are no match for Jesus' authority, because Jesus is from God, and indeed is God, the Son of God. And so now we get a teacher of the law who comes to Jesus, and this is what happens. One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, of all the commandments, which is the most important? So he was impressed by the answer that Jesus gave to the Sadducees in the earlier section. And he seems to be quite sincere in his question. He says, of all the commandments, which is the most important? Most important here has the sense of first or foremost. And as a teacher of the law, this man was a professional. Studying and teaching the law of God was his day job. And so he knew the commandments. In fact, Jewish teachers had discerned as many as 613 different rules in the law. Yes, 613 commandments. And they'd been categorized by pious Jews because they wanted to know how to obey God and do it well. And so this man comes to

[ 5 : 32 ] Jesus, and he's probably asking a common question, because if there are all these rules, then which ones matter most? Jesus, tell us. We can't possibly do everything. So what should we focus on? What are the most important ones to obey? What is the heart of the law? How can you summarize it in a nutshell? That's what he's basically saying to Jesus. Jesus, according to you, tell me what matters most in all of God's commandments, in all of God's law, tell me what matters most so that I can discover how I measure up before God. What do I need to do? Distill all these commandments for me into some kind of form that I can obey. And that's where he is coming from. And so even if his question is a genuine question, he still doesn't get that we will never ever manage to fully obey God. And that's what Jesus is going to show him.

And that's why this conversation is relevant for us today. Because after all, we want to know the best way to live our lives. If we're a believer, yes, we want to obey God. But even if we wouldn't call ourselves a Christian, there's still some kind of standard that we set for ourselves that we want to live up to. And we like to gauge how we're doing. And we want to know what we should do. We want to know what we shouldn't do. What is acceptable. What is unacceptable. And of course, we want to be free to do whatever we want to do. And yet, we are aware that we also need some help. And we need some guidance.

We need some direction. We need some kind of rules in order to direct our lives. We need some kind of framework to assess how we measure up, whether we're a religious believer or not.

And so while it might be nice to think that we can live our lives without any rules, because we love freedom, the reality is that we can't. It would be absolute anarchy if there was no law, no rules.

[ 7 : 39 ] And so we don't like to live with rules. But we have to acknowledge we can't live without them either. And so what should we do? Well, Jesus tells us here. But before we see this, let's not miss that we've got a religious man. He's a teacher of the law. And he sincerely wants to live a life that pleases God.

And he knows God's commandments. And he knows God's commandments must be obeyed. And so he's gone to the right place in going to Jesus. Because he, it seems, despite all his contemporaries' opposition to Jesus, he's the one who seems to accept the authority of Jesus and be willing to listen to him.

And so when it comes to where you and I stand before God, we can't just make up our own standard and measure ourselves against the standard that we set. Because what happens if we do?

Well, if we're doing well, if we're being kind and good and obeying lots of rules and being religious and all of that kind of stuff, if we're doing well, we're filled with pride, aren't we?

Because we can look around and see other people who aren't doing as good a job as we are, and a sense of pride can well up within. Or we'll be full of despair. What happens when all the other people around us seem to be doing a better job at keeping the rules of living a good, moral, religious life?

[ 9 : 11 ] Far better than we are. We sense the despair, don't we? And so what is the answer? Well, it's not to use our standard, is it? But it's to see God's standard. And that's what Jesus gives us here. He tells us what is most important. And yet what we see is Jesus' answer is far more radical than we can actually cope with. And so that's the first thing, a real question. The second point is a radical answer.

So let's look at that, verse 29 to 31. Jesus answers him directly here. So let's read verse 29. The most important one, answer Jesus, is this. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. Jesus tells him the most important commandment. And he quotes from two separate passages in the scriptures. The first is from Deuteronomy chapter 6. And the passage includes the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for hear. So hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. It was said every morning and every evening by Jews. And it also had the command to love God. So love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. And it is a command to love God with all that we are, with nothing less than the whole of our life for all of our life.

And Deuteronomy mentions three elements of this love, heart, soul, and strength. And when Jesus quotes it, he adds mind. And I think that simply emphasizes the comprehensive nature of the love that we ought to have for God. So Jesus says, love God with all your heart. Our heart is to be devoted to him, where he alone is the object of our love. Jesus says, love God with all your soul. Our soul is to be devoted to him with all our affections and all of our emotions. Jesus says, love God with all your mind. Our mind, with all of our thinking and our understanding is to be devoted to God. And Jesus says, love God with all of your strength. Our strength, our energy, our abilities are to be fully devoted to God. So Jesus is saying the most important thing for every single human being who has ever lived is to love God with every ounce of your being for every moment, with every breath of your life. Because God demands not only that, but he deserves nothing less than our all. That's radical, isn't it? But Jesus doesn't stop there because his second quote is from Leviticus chapter 19, where it says, love your neighbor as yourself. Now this was originally said to God's people where they were commanded not to seek revenge, not to bear a grudge against their fellow Israelites. Instead, they had to love their neighbors. But when Jesus says, love your neighbor as yourself, it's likely that he means neighbor in the very broadest sense, like in the parable of the Good Samaritan, that your neighbor is not just the guy who lives next door to you, but it is anyone, all the people around about you. And so Jesus brings these two commandments to love God and to love neighbor together, saying there is no commandment greater than these. He essentially boils the commandments right down to this core principle of love. Love for God, vertical, and love for other people, horizontal.

And so can you hear what Jesus is saying here? He's saying this is the most important thing in life. Not your job, not your family, not your income, not your education, but God.

[ 13 : 45 ] He's saying this is what every single human being should do, love God and others. Now in saying this, Jesus is not saying that all the other commandments don't matter, so you can just ignore them, they're irrelevant. No, he's saying the first, the foremost, is love for God and neighbor. He's not choosing love over law, because the law is actually all about love. What Jesus is saying is that the law is fulfilled by love. So Jesus' commands give definition to what love looks like. All of God's commands define love, because if we really loved God and we really loved our neighbor the way that Jesus tells us to, then we would be obeying the whole law. But we can't do it. One of you remember the encounter that Jesus had with the rich young ruler a few pages back in Mark chapter 10. He claimed, the rich young ruler did, he claimed to have kept all the commandments since he was a boy. But when

Jesus told him to give away everything that he had, he couldn't do it, because he loved his money, his wealth, more than he loved God. And so it just shows how we can be deluded into thinking that our obedience of God's commandments is good enough. We can set the measure, we can set the scale and think that we are quite impressive. Because it can look like we're keeping them, but yet we can still fail to love God as we should and love other people as we should. In other words, we might keep the letter of the law, but fail to obey the spirit of the law. In one of his sermons, Tim Keller gives a good example of this by using the seventh commandment. You know the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery, comes as a negative, doesn't it? But does obeying the commandment only mean don't have sex outside marriage? Because that is the letter of the law after all.

And yet the spirit of the law that drives this commandment is that you should love. You should love your spouse. You should be a loving spouse. And so when it comes to obeying the seventh commandment, there's far more to it than just not committing adultery, isn't there? And we can flesh the sight in other commandments, which is what Jesus himself did in the Sermon on the Mount. The sixth commandment is you shall not murder. So obeying it means far more than just not killing people. We can all manage, I'm sure, at least for a day, to not kill someone. It's not too hard. But the principle that drives the commandment is love, isn't it? Love people. One more. The ninth commandment, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. So obeying it means more than just not telling lies to or about other people. We must love our neighbor by always speaking the truth to them. And so can you see how the commandments of God aren't just dry rules to grudgingly keep? And they aren't just some kind of checklist that we can tick when we think we manage to obey them? Because they show us what it really means to love God and what it really means to love other people. And that's why Jesus' answer here is so radical, because he demands far more than we're expecting to give, because he goes way beyond just mere outward observance of God's commandments. He goes much, much deeper, doesn't he, by commanding, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. The teacher of the law wanted Jesus to boil it all down to something that he could do, something that was manageable. But Jesus boils it all down to something that is simple to grasp, and yet it is impossible to do. And so that's the second point.

There is a remarkable answer. But thirdly, let's see, sorry, it was a radical answer, and it's a remarkable implication. Those are mixed up, just to confuse you, see if you're still paying attention.

So verse 32 to 34, the teacher of the law, he is impressed by Jesus' answer. So Jesus has passed his test of orthodoxy. So let's see, 32 to 34. Well said, teacher. The man replied, you're right in saying that God is one, and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, and with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. And then after agreeing with Jesus' answer, what the teacher of the law does is he adds his own comment, his tuppence worth, by saying, this is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. And what he says also comes from the scriptures, from the Old Testament, So he is aware that love for God and love for neighbor was far more important than all these burnt sacrifices and all these offerings. Now, remember where they're having this conversation?

[ 19 : 26 ] They're having it in the temple, the temple courts, the very place where there are burnt offerings and sacrifices being made for sin. And yet the teacher of the law is aware that all of these sacrifices can't actually deal with the problem of sin, whether people generally or the sin of his own life.

Because if he is commanded to love God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength, and love his neighbor as himself, he's well aware that he falls far short of being able to do this.

And no amount of sacrifices that he could make could ever make up for how he's failed to obey this most important of commandments. And so Jesus gives his verdict on him. Verse 34, When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, you're not far from the kingdom of God.

And from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions. That's Jesus' assessment of this man's life. He's not far from the kingdom of God. Now, his heart wasn't as hardened as all the other religious leaders were, hearts were. And yet Jesus' words must have rocked him to his core. Because he was a teacher of the law, he had answered wisely. And yet he wasn't actually in the kingdom of God.

It must have given him the ultimate FOMO, you know, the fear of missing out. Because Jesus tells him he is missing out on the kingdom of God. So he has this question and response time with Jesus, and he had somehow moved closer towards the kingdom, and yet he wasn't there yet.

[ 21 : 19 ] Jesus' verdict on his life must have shocked everybody who was there. Because we read, and from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions. Jesus had been constantly challenged with question after question after question. And every time Jesus responded to these questions and answered them by showing his authority, now nobody dares ask him a single thing.

Because if that's Jesus' assessment on a teacher of the law who answered wisely, then what about everybody else? The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees?

If this man isn't in the kingdom of God, they must be thinking, oh, well, who is? Because clearly all their rules and all their rituals and all their religion that they prided themselves on so much completely missed the mark. Because none of it could earn them a place in God's kingdom. And that's why all these religious leaders hated Jesus and why they all needed to acknowledge Jesus' authority. Because if Jesus can judge who belongs in the kingdom and who doesn't belong in the kingdom, then it tells us something about Jesus, doesn't it? He's the king. He's the king who decides who is in the kingdom. And so the only possible way to enter the kingdom is by submitting to Jesus, who is the king. And so what a devastating blow to all these people who believed that keeping the commandments could make them acceptable to God. I think it's just as much of a devastating blow for people today. People who have gone to church all their lives, who've lived a good, moral, religious life, and think that their obedience, their trying hard, their good works, is what makes them acceptable to God. And yet Jesus is saying to this good living teacher of the law, knows all the commandments, thinks he obeys them, you're not in that kingdom.

So to discover what God demands of you, and to discover that not only are you not doing it, but you can't do it, is a shock, isn't it?

Because when Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, which one of us would dare claim that we have managed to do that. Yes, 100%. 100% of the time, all the time, my whole life, I've been able to love God. Nobody would dare make that claim, would they?

[ 24 : 37 ] Because no matter how hard we try, we will never manage. And that's why we've got this massive problem. Because we can't do what Jesus says is the most important thing for every single human being.

It is impossible for us to love God as we ought. And yet it's realizing this that is the first step towards entering the kingdom of God.

For the teacher of the law, for those Jesus silenced, but also for us. Because Jesus is not just the king. He is the king who came to save. To save those who know that we have totally failed to love God with our all, 100%. And failed to love our neighbor as ourselves.

He came to save those of us who failed. And that's all of us. And this is the remarkable outcome of this encounter. Because Jesus is the only one who perfectly fulfilled the law for us. Obeying all of God's commands all of the time. He is the only one who loved God with all of his heart and all of his soul and all of his mind and all of his strength. And he loved his neighbor not just as himself, but he loved his neighbor even more than himself because he was willing to die for us. Jesus is the one who lived the life that we could never live.

A life without sin and full obedience to all God's commandments. And Jesus is the one who died the death that we deserve to die. A death for our failure to keep all of God's commandments.

[ 26 : 24 ] And so on the cross, Jesus offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice to accomplish what all the other sacrifices that were carried out in the temple could never do. And that was the one sacrifice to pay for our sin once and for all. And so it's Jesus' perfect obedience and his perfect sacrifice that gives us access into God's kingdom. And so as we close, what is interesting is that we've got no idea whether this teacher of the law did ever make it into the kingdom of God.

And yet this encounter is a challenge to all of Mark's readers, including us today, because it causes us to ask ourselves, am I in the kingdom of God? Now if you've got no desire to love God with your all, then the answer is no. You can't possibly be in the kingdom of God. It's as simple as that.

But maybe you're not far from the kingdom of God. And if that is the case, then don't stop moving towards it. Don't just see Jesus as a good teacher, like this man, but recognize him as the savior.

The savior we all need. Your savior. My savior. But perhaps you know that it's time to enter the kingdom of God. Well, if so, it really is very simple. As simple as A, B, C. A, admit your failure to love God with all that you are. B, believe in Jesus as your savior. And C, confess Jesus as your king. And if we have gone to Jesus as savior, and if we have bowed before him as king, then let's grow in our love for God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and all of our mind, and all of our strength. And let's grow in our love for our neighbor. You know, if our church, Christ Church Glasgow, is to produce any fruit for the kingdom of God, then we must be people who love God, and who love our neighbor, whoever they are. So as we apply this, let's think, as we go into next week, let's be propelled by the love that God has for us. The love that meant that he sent his son into this world to die on a cross so that we can be accepted by God and find a home in his kingdom.

Let's love God with all that we are, and let's love everyone around us. They are our neighbors, and let's think of ways how we can practically do this.

[ 29 : 20 ] Let's think of ways how we can practically do this.