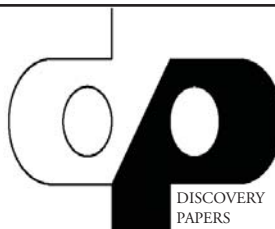


# WHAT DOES GOD WANT US TO DO?

*SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK*



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I once overheard a lovers' quarrel. A man was on the phone, arguing with his girlfriend. I wasn't trying to eavesdrop; I just happened to be in the room when the conversation began. Once it turned into an argument, I moved to another room, but the man's voice was not to be denied: I heard it anyway. He kept barking into the phone, "Just tell me what you want me to do." He must have repeated that demand more than thirty times. I couldn't hear the woman's voice on the other end of the phone, of course, but it was evident that she wasn't responding to the man's concern. He became increasingly frustrated and increasingly demanding as the argument escalated.

Perhaps our relationship with God seems like a lovers' quarrel at times. We want God to just tell us what to do, and he doesn't seem interested in addressing our concern. Then again, he has spoken to us in the Scriptures, his word. But it's a big Bible, with hundreds of commands. If we ask what God wants us to do and look for answers in the Scriptures, it seems as if he wants us to do hundreds of things, and who's up for that?

So, what does God want us to do? Listen to Jesus as he speaks with a scribe in Mark 12:28-34.

## The greatest commands

Mark 12:28-31

**One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL 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, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."**<sup>1</sup>

After rebuffing two collections of opponents by responding to their questions and putting them back on their heels, Jesus encounters a scribe who also approaches him with a question. In some ways, Mark makes the scribe out as an opponent as well: the scribe's question comes in a series of antagonistic questions; scribes, experts in the Jewish law, have opposed Jesus up to this point in Mark's account; and this scribe uses no title such as "Teacher" in addressing Jesus. On the other hand, in not using a title, the scribe is not feigning deference, in contrast to the

Pharisees and Herodians (Mark 12:13-14). Furthermore, Mark portrays him as having "heard" previous arguments and literally "seeing" that Jesus had answered well. Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, has used the faculties of hearing and seeing as metaphors for spiritual perception (Mark 4:10-12, 8:18). Yes, the scribe approaches as an opponent, but as an honest opponent with spiritual attentiveness.

The scribe asks Jesus to answer a common question of the day: What is the most important commandment? Jesus answered the two previous groups of opponents truthfully but cryptically to avoid arrest and to provoke repentance. Jesus, however, rewards a scribe who asks an honest question with a straightforward answer. Approaching Jesus with honesty and spiritual attentiveness helps us apprehend the truth. What does Jesus have to say to the scribe—and to us?

Jesus recites Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel!" He reminds a scribe of Israel who "heard" his interaction with opponents that Israel's most important task is to "hear" what God says. Hearing precedes obedience. How can one obey any command unless he hears the command? In fact, the Hebrew (Old Testament) word for "hear" (*shama*) can also be translated "obey," and the Greek (New Testament) word for "obey" (*hupaku*) contains the word "hear" (*aku*). Most importantly, Israel needs to hear not a command but a statement: "the Lord our God is one Lord." God's commands proceed from who he is. Similarly, before issuing the Ten Commandments, God said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:1). He is "one," not many. He has also chosen Israel as his people: he is "our" God. As such, he is relational and personal. Therefore as the God of Israel, who loves his people, he demands the undivided allegiance of Israel and the individuals who constitute it.

What does God want from Israel? For her own sake, he wants her love. Love the Lord your God, says Deuteronomy 6:5, love the Lord your God, says Jesus, with your whole being.<sup>2</sup>

Having answered the question, Jesus answers a question that the scribe didn't ask—as a bonus for someone who approached him openly. He recites Leviticus 19:18, which calls for Israelites to "love your neighbor as yourself"—to treat your neighbor as you want to be treated. In the context of Leviticus, one's neighbor was a fellow member of Israel, the covenant community, including resident aliens (Leviticus 19:34). Jesus, however, has been expanding the boundaries of the covenant community to include those who were normally excluded, such as tax collectors, non-

observant Jews, and even Gentiles. For him, a neighbor was not simply a fellow Israelite.<sup>3</sup>

The two commandments to love God and to love one's neighbor sum up the Ten Commandments, which themselves constitute the core of God's covenant, or partnership, with Israel. The first four commandments concern love for God, and the final six commandments concern love for neighbor.

Jesus, though he gives the scribe a straightforward answer, is doing more than answering a question. He is also suggesting, as he has throughout the Gospel of Mark, that the kingdom of God is coming, new covenant and all. The Lord, when he gave Israel the law, told her that his commandments "shall be on your heart," but for the most part God's people hardened their hearts against him and his commandments (Deuteronomy 6:6). Even in Deuteronomy, however, the Lord promised to circumcise the hearts of his people so that they would love him with all their hearts and souls (Deuteronomy 30:6). In the prophets, he attaches the promise to the new covenant. God will put his law within his people and write it not on stone tablets but on hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). He will cleanse them, remove their hearts of stone, give them new hearts, and put his Holy Spirit within them so that they might respond to him (Ezekiel 36:25-27). Jesus is saying that the new covenant, which brings about obedience from the heart and thereby fulfills the law, is imminent.

When Jesus answered the questions of previous opponents, he silenced them. The scribe, however, responds to Jesus' answer.

## A scribe indeed

Mark 12:32-34:

**The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE'S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.**

The scribe, unlike the two previous groups of opponents, addresses Jesus with the respectful title "Teacher" after Jesus has answered his question. The scribe literally pronounces Jesus' answer "good," recognizing that he has answered "truly." The Pharisees and Herodians, however, tried to butter Jesus up by calling him a "truthful" and impartial teacher in order to trap him. At first, the scribe was disrespectful, but honestly so; now he is respectful—

again, honestly so.

The scribe agrees with Jesus' answers and draws out their implications. He interprets the statement that God is one based on Deuteronomy 4:35, a fiercely monotheistic text that declares that "there is no one else besides" God.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, the scribe sees the commandments to love God and neighbor not only as the most important commandments but also as greater than "all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

First, Jesus suggested, based on the imminence of the new covenant, that the law was becoming fulfilled. Now, a scribe, an expert in the law, intimates that the temple is irrelevant. Some passages in the Hebrew Scriptures lend support to the scribe's conclusion (1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 51:16-17, Proverbs 21:3, Hosea 6:6). Really, if the focus of the law is to generate love for God and others, and if such love is evidenced in a deeper way, who needs the law? Furthermore, if love for God and others supersedes the temple, where whole burnt offerings and sacrifices are made, then who needs the temple? A whole burnt offering, after all, represented the offering of one's entire self to God, and Deuteronomy 6:4-5 called for God's people to love him with their whole selves. Jesus has redefined both the law and the temple in his teachings and actions, which is one of the reasons Jewish leaders consider him a threat. The new covenant, which cures hardness of heart, fulfills the law and bypasses the temple.

After Jesus answered his question, the scribe literally responded, "Good, Teacher ..." Earlier, a wealthy landowner approached Jesus and addressed him as "Good Teacher," but Jesus pushed back, as if to say, "Don't call me good until you hear what I have to say." After the landowner heard Jesus' challenging answer to his question, he walked away in sadness (Mark 10:17-22). The scribe employs words similar to those of the landowner, but only after he has heard Jesus' answer.<sup>5</sup> Jesus, instead of pushing back, recognizes the scribe's wisdom and tells him that he is "not far from the kingdom of God."

Jesus has already proclaimed that the kingdom of God is "at hand," or "near" (Mark 1:15). He also said that the kingdom of God would remain a mystery to those who don't accept him or his words (Mark 4:10-12). Now, he tells an erstwhile opponent that he is close to the kingdom of God. Why? Because the coming of the kingdom is imminent and because the scribe has heard and accepted both Jesus and his words. The scribe has been obedient to the command that precedes the commands: he, as a member of Israel, has heard. The scribe not only accepts the words of Jesus, he also draws out their implications. He is a scribe indeed: a scribe who knows the law. He demonstrates what Jesus wants from his disciples.

The scribe demonstrates what Jesus wants from us: authenticity; a hearing heart; immersion in the Scriptures; and an inclination to connect his words to the biblical story, draw out their implications, and relate them to our

setting.

In Mark 11:13-12:34, Jesus either leaves his opponents speechless or he wins them over. No wonder no one ventures to ask him any more questions.

What can we learn from the interaction between the scribe and Jesus? What does God want us to do?

## The Lord our God is one Lord

The spiritual life begins with hearing. Or, because we are hard of hearing, perhaps it begins with asking God to give us ears to hear. David literally told God; “My ears you have dug” (Psalm 40:6). We need to hear, first of all, what God says: we need to hear the word of God. The word of God speaks to us, first of all, about God. Most importantly, it tells us who he is. The first book of the canon begins with the words “In the beginning, God ...” The last book of the canon begins with the words: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ ...” From first to last, the word of God is about God. Therefore, every biblical text should be approached with the question, “What does this tell me about God?” If we are made in the image of God, to reflect who he is into the world, then we must, of course, know who is.

A.W. Tozer writes of the importance of accurately understanding who God is:

*What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ... Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, “What comes into your mind when you think about God?” we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. ... I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God. ... The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long. ... Before the Christian Church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, “What is God like?” and goes from there. ... The heaviest obligation lying upon the Christian Church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of him—and of her.<sup>6</sup>*

We must keep the Scriptures ever before us, lest we fall for wrong ideas about God. Hear what the Scriptures tell you about God, and orient your life around what you hear.

The most important description about God is that he is “one.” When I was counseling Hindus who had visited our medical clinic in India, I discovered, to my surprise,

that they were eager to “accept” Christ. But they could not, without great difficulty, forsake the gods of Hinduism. I soon began telling them that the Bible says there is only one God and that the only way we can know him is through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus, in his first recorded words in the Gospel of Mark, told his listeners in Galilee not simply to believe in the gospel but to repent—to forsake other gods—and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15). The gods of the West are more subtle than those of Hinduism. They go by such names as Money, Power, Sex, Success, and Individualism, and they beg for our allegiance in increasingly sophisticated ways. Therefore, the message that there is one God looms larger than ever in our world. God, and God alone, deserves our allegiance—God for who he is, not for who we want him to be.

The second most important description about God is that he is “our God.” First, the word of God is about God. Second, the word of God is about humanity in relation to God, especially the church of Jesus Christ in relation to God, for God has chosen the church to mediate his blessing to the world. He has committed himself to us and to our welfare. Based on his knowledge of us, he relates in ways that are unique to each of us, opening our minds and hearts to receive his love and helping us to realize that he alone deserves our allegiance.

Therefore, because these are the two most important descriptions about God, I make it my ambition to teach first of all theologically and second of all relationally. That is, I consider first what the text under consideration tells us about God and second what it tells us about how God relates to us so that we might understand who God is and worship him. Perhaps you have wondered, in reading my comments, “What is this guy trying to do?” Now you know.

## Love the Lord your God

The Scriptures command us to love this God, the Lord your God, with your whole being, with everything you’ve got, holding nothing back. To love God with your whole being does not mean loving him perfectly, for no one can do that. We are broken creatures. To love God with your whole being does not mean fixing your brokenness or even letting God fix it. To love God with your whole being means, not least, presenting your whole self to God, brokenness and all. He deserves your whole life, and you need to give it to him, especially your brokenness. You cannot present what isn’t there; you can only present what is there. You can’t present who you’re not; you can only present who you are. Many of us don’t want to present our whole selves to God. We want to hide certain parts from him—our sexual brokenness, for example—because we’re afraid that they are unacceptable to him or that he will demand something of us that we don’t want to give him.

In the new covenant, God forgives sins decisively and sends his Holy Spirit to soften our hearts. The Holy Spirit

is prompting us to enter God's presence, brokenness and all. Follow his lead. Go to God with your brokenness. Let him have all of you. And when you appear before him, stay for a while. Don't hide. Don't run. Stay. He wants you—all of you—there with him. One of the most important spiritual lessons that I have learned is to let God embrace me in my brokenness.

Mike Yaconelli, the former editor of *The Door* and the co-founder of Youth Specialties, writes:

*I knew I was broken. I knew I was a sinner. I knew I continually disappointed God, but I could never accept that part of me. It was a part of me that embarrassed me. I continually felt the need to apologize, to run from my weaknesses, to deny who I was and concentrate on what I should be. I was broken, yes, but I was continually trying never to be broken again—or at least to get to the place where I was very seldom broken.*

*Then he heard God tell him, "Michael, I am here. I have been calling you, but you haven't been listening. Can you hear me, Michael? I love you. I have always loved you. And I have been waiting for you to hear me say that to you. But you have been so busy trying to prove to yourself you are loved that you have not heard me."*

Yaconelli concludes:

*Finally, I accepted my brokenness. . . . I can only tell you that it feels very different now. There is an anticipation, an electricity about God's presence in my life that I have never experienced before. I can only tell you that for the first time in my life I can hear Jesus whisper to me every day, "Michael, I love you. You are beloved." And for some strange reason, that seems to be enough.<sup>7</sup>*

The command to love God with your whole being should not be taken as yet another reason to feel guilty for not measuring up to what God supposedly demands of us. Instead, it should be taken as an invitation to bring our whole selves to God.

## Love your neighbor

As you learn to love God in your brokenness, you also learn to love others in their brokenness, in fulfillment of the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." For when you experience God's love in your brokenness, you realize that brokenness is not a reason to withhold love from anyone.

The command to love your neighbor as yourself is not a command to love yourself. The assumption is that we do, in fact, love ourselves: we feed ourselves, clothe ourselves, shelter ourselves, etc. Because we cannot see God, the command to love him comes to us, in some ways, as an abstraction. How do you love whom you cannot see? One

of the ways is to love whom you can see: your neighbor. In the musical *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean unites love for God and love for neighbor in one memorable line: "To love another person is to see the face of God."<sup>8</sup>

You love your neighbor as yourself by doing things, not by feeling things, for you love yourself by doing things for yourself, not by feeling things for yourself. Even if you want to feel a certain way, you do something to feel that way. You love your neighbor by doing something for him: by communicating with him, by serving him, by praying for him.

Your neighbor, by biblical definition, could be anyone, but it can't be everyone. Whom to communicate with, whom to serve, and whom to pray for requires attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. Keep in mind, though, that it could be anyone, which makes for edge-of-seat excitement. If you don't know where to begin, you might take the command at face value and start with the person who lives next to you: your neighbor. For many of us, myself included, it's easier to go halfway around the world on a short-term mission trip and love people we'll never see again than it is to walk next door and love our neighbor. When you go halfway around the world, you can love 'em and leave 'em. When you walk across the street, however, there's the possibility—the threat?—of an ongoing relationship.

You enact love for God—and sometimes even discover that you do, in fact love God—by loving your neighbor. Vertical love (love for God) and horizontal love (love for neighbor) intersect in the vertical and horizontal beams of wood that Jesus hung from—Jesus, who showed us what love for God and love for neighbor look like. He enacted love for God by loving us.

Our world appreciates us for loving our neighbor but doesn't much care whether we love God or not. Let us, therefore, love our neighbor and let our world trace that love back to its source: God.

I have a friend who, earlier in his life, courted a woman who said she needed to tell him something before the relationship proceeded any further. The woman informed my friend that, a few years earlier, she had been raped, became pregnant, carried the baby to term, and gave the boy up for adoption. My friend, in explaining his reaction, said, in his typically folksy manner, "It didn't seem like a reason not to marry her." Twenty-five years later, a young man contacted his wife and identified himself as the son she gave up for adoption. My friend met the man and then wrote him a letter. "With your permission," he wrote, "I'd like to accept you as my own son." The man called my friend in joyful disbelief. "How could you do this?" he asked. My friend's answer included these words, "Because of this man, Jesus."

You never know who your neighbor might turn out to be—and how you might be able to put love for God into action.

## Simply beautiful

What does God want us to do? If you boil it down to what matters most, first, he wants us to hear that he is one—the one and only God, who loves us more than we can begin to know. Second, in response to him, he wants us to love him, to offer him our whole selves, brokenness and all. Third, as an expression of our love for him, he wants us to love others in practical ways.

Simple, right? Yes and no. Think back to the lovers' quarrel. I suspect that the woman on the other end of the phone wouldn't—or couldn't—tell her boyfriend what she wanted him to do because they weren't connecting. My guess is that she didn't feel that he was listening to her. In premarital counseling, I walk couples through Ephesians 5:22-33, the section on marriage. For the men, I emphasize Paul's commandment, "Husbands, love your wives ..." Simple, right? Yes and no, I tell them. A relationship is complex. You can't boil love down to a set of commands. The question for husbands is, how do I at this time love this woman?

The biblical commands—love God and love others—are simple. But we have to listen to God—really listen to him. How the commands get worked out, then: that's art. Art involves creativity, and creativity makes love not mechanical but beautiful.

What does art look like? It might look like this, from writer Anne Lamott: "Again and again I tell God I need help, and God says, 'Well, isn't that fabulous? Because I need help too. So you go get that old woman over there some water, and I'll figure out what we're going to do about your stuff.'" That's good art.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A Scribe (literally) "seeing" he answered well, asked, "What commandment ...?" (28)
  - B "The Lord our God is one Lord" (29)
  - C "And you shall love the Lord your God" entirely (30)
    - D "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (31a)
    - E "No other commandment greater" (31b)
  - B' "He is one ..." (32)
    - C' "To love Him" (entirely) (33a)
    - D' "To love one's neighbor as himself" (33b)
      - E' "Much [literally] greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (33c)
  - A' Jesus saw he answered intelligently, said to him, "You are not far ..." (34)
- <sup>2</sup> Jesus adds to Deuteronomy 6:5 the admonition to love the Lord "with all your mind," emphasizing the intellectual faculty, a possible extension for the sake of the scribe, whose mind was central to his vocation.
- <sup>3</sup> The Parable of the Good Samaritan, which Luke includes as a response to the scribe's question, makes precisely this point. In the story, the injured Jew, to his surprise, discovers that a Samaritan is his neighbor (Luke 10:30-37).
- <sup>4</sup> Also, whereas Jesus embellishes Deuteronomy 6:4-5 with the command to love the Lord with all one's mind, the scribe collapses Jesus' words concerning loving God with soul and mind into loving God with understanding.
- <sup>5</sup> The words translated "good" in Mark 10:17 and 12:32 are different, though they can both be translated with the English word "good."
- <sup>6</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), 1-4.
- <sup>7</sup> Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress Publishing Group, 51-53).
- <sup>8</sup> "Beggars at the Feast," *Les Miserables* (London, England: Cameron Mackintosh Overseas Limited, 2010).
- <sup>9</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 120.