

LOVE THE LORD GOD AND LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR



**LOVE THE LORD GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOUL,
MIND AND STRENGTH; AND NEIGHBOR AS SELF.**

Scripture:

Psalm 146

Praise for God's help

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
The LORD will reign for ever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Mark 12

The First Commandment

28. One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?'
29. Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;'
30. 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."
31. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'
32. Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other";'
33. 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 oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.'
34. When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.



LOVE THE LORD AND LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

I should have the wisdom of Jesus because I get asked a lot of questions, especially when I'm teaching. It seems that during class the students ask the regular information questions. "What is your grading scale?" "How many absences can I get away with?"

After class, they ask questions with some

philosophical ramifications. "What do you think about the death penalty?" "Were you a hippie in the 60s?"

Those asking the questions really want an audience of one. They want the teacher to be focused on them so they can get a chance to build a relationship. It doesn't really matter what the answers are.

I wonder if the scribe in Mark 12:28 is doing that. He really wants to get Jesus as his sole audience, to have a one-on-one with the master. He knows the right answer. Every Jewish person in that day and age knew the Shema. “Shema Yisra’el, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.” It means “God is one; God is the only one.”

WHO ARE THE SAINTS?

This is All Saints’ Week. All Saints’ Day came right after the eve of All Saints’ Day, Halloween. In the New Testament, Saints are those who aspire to the holiness of the Holy God whom they serve because the Holy Spirit dwells in them. They, too, are made holy because of the holiness of the Spirit within. A saint, therefore, is one who reflects the sanctity of the God he or she serves. To be a saint in this sense is not a sign of perfection, but it’s a sign of fidelity, a sign of faithfulness, being faithful to the God we love and serve.

So you know that the first and best commandment, “Hear O Lord, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.” That’s our great challenge. How do we go about that, being human as we are?

MIND

Especially at this stage of life, I’m finding my mind doesn’t work as well as it once did. Let me just give you an example of how this happens.

“I’m at home and I decide I need to water the lawn. So as I turn the hose on in the driveway, I look over at my car and decide my car needs washing.

As I start toward the garage, I notice there is mail on the porch that I brought up from the mailbox earlier, and I decide I need to go through the mail before I wash the car. I lay my car keys down on the table and put the junk-mail in the garbage can under the table. I notice that the garbage can is full of all the previous junk-mail, so I decide to put the bills back on the table and take the garbage out first.

But then I think since I’m going to be near the mailbox when I take out the garbage anyway, I might as well pay the bills first. And so I take my checkbook off the table. I see there’s only one check left and my extra checks are in the desk in the study, so I go inside the house to my desk where I find a can of Coke that I had been drinking.

I’m going to look for my checks, but first I need to push the Coke aside so I don’t accidentally knock it over. I notice that the Coke is getting warm, so I decide I should put it back in the refrigerator to keep it cold.

As I head to the kitchen with the Coke, a vase of flowers on the counter catches my eye; they need to be watered. I set the Coke down on the counter and I find my reading glasses that I’ve been searching for all morning. I decide

I’d better put them back on the desk where they belong, but first I’m going to water the flowers.

I set the glasses back down on the counter and I fill the container with water and suddenly I see the TV remote control that someone left on the kitchen table. I realize that tonight when we go to watch TV we won’t know where the remote is and I’ll be looking for the remote and I won’t remember that it’s on the kitchen table. So I decide that I’d better put it back in the living room where it belongs, but first I’m going to water the flowers.

I pour some water on the flowers, but quite a bit of it spills on the floor. So I put the remote back down on the table and I get the towels to wipe up the spill and then I head down the hall trying to remember what I was planning to do.

At the end of the day:

the lawn isn’t watered,
the car isn’t washed,
the bills aren’t paid,
there is a warm can of Coke sitting on the counter,
the flowers don’t have enough water,
there is still only one check in my check book,
I can’t find the remote,
I can’t find my glasses,
I don’t remember what I did with the car keys,
and my neighbor called to tell me he turned off the hose that was flooding the driveway.

Then when I try to figure out why nothing got done today, I’m really baffled because I know I was busy all day long and I’m really tired. I realize this is a serious problem, and I’ll try to get some help for it, but first I need to check with my friend.

Do me a favor, will you? If I’ve already told you this, please let me know because I can’t remember.

And don’t laugh, because your day is coming, and if I’ve already told you this, well then your day has come. Stop lying to yourself!”

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Anyhow, this is “Love the Lord with your whole mind,” and where is my whole mind? I used to think I was a brilliant person and could figure things out, but I’m dealing with what I have, so I have to love God with the mind that I have. But fortunately it’s not just my mind that I’m urged by this scripture to use, but *Love the Lord your God with your mind, your heart, your soul and your strength.*

HEART

I have a heart for God. This is something that I have grown up with, something that is part of my calling.

I know that there are those of you here who have a heart for God because of all the good work you’re doing.

But sometimes a wrench gets thrown in the works and we’re not sure how best to deal with that. That’s when we need all the help we can get.

I want to tell you a story about something that happened like that.

"It was at a concert hall. When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, there was a mother in the audience who came to her seat and couldn't find her small son. The child was missing. Just at that moment the curtains opened and the spotlight focused on the impressive Steinway piano there on the stage. The mother looked up, and there she saw her son sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.'

It was just at that moment that the great piano master made his entrance and he quickly moved to the piano and whispered in the boy's ear, 'Don't quit. Keep playing.'

Then, leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed what could have been a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience.

The audience was so mesmerized that they couldn't recall what else the great master played, only the classic 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.'

Perhaps that's the way it is with God. What we can accomplish on our own is hardly noteworthy in the grand scale of things. We try our best, but the results aren't always graceful flowing music. However, with the hand of the Master, our life's work can be truly beautiful. So the next time we set out to accomplish great feats, listen carefully. You may hear the voice of the Master, whispering in your ear, 'Don't quit. Keep playing.'

May you feel His arms around you and know that His hands are there helping you to turn your feeble attempts into true masterpieces. Remember that God doesn't seem to call the equipped; rather he equips those he calls. Life is more accurately measured by the lives you touch than by the things that you acquire. So touch someone in the life that you live. It doesn't matter whether you only play a few notes or a grand symphony. It is that God loves you and will use that love to transform this world."

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So love the Lord with your whole heart.

STRENGTH

Mind, heart, strength. How strong are you? Do you have stories of things you can do because you are strong enough to stand up to adversity in life or strong enough to do what needs to be done no matter what other difficulties come along?

We get a lot of bumps in life. I'm going to tell you a story.

"A man was being tailgated by a woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The woman who was tailgating him hit the roof and she hit

the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on the window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door and she was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, 'I'm very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'Choose Life' license plate, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.'

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How strong are you in the face of adversity, and do your actions show that you are a person of faith who loves the Lord with all your strength?

There are times in our lives where we try to use our mind, we try to use our heart, we try to use our strength and we end up in some kind of mess. Yet we are urged to use all these parts of ourselves to love God. So how do we do it?

SOUL

Can we use our soul? What is the soul? This morning in the early service, I talked this over with participants who came to that small, informal service. We talked about the soul being the part of us that does the caring, the spiritual where God is in the midst, and how we try to love. Those who are parents who try to love a difficult child: "Of course I love you," you say, and the child says, "Go away."

We need to bring in love to push out fear. And it is the God of all creation who showed us love, because God gave us all of creation. We know the stories of the Bible – the story where God created Adam and Eve in the garden and gave them dominion over all of creation, and gave them some instructions that they couldn't quite seem to follow because they wanted to be like God. They ate the forbidden fruit.

We're like that as well. We know what the rules are and yet, somehow, we want to get ahead of the game and try to do something else.

The story of each of the characters in the Bible can very well be an example of very different parts of our individual selves.

- Something in me is like Adam.
- Something in me is like Joseph and his brothers.

- Something in me is like King Solomon.
- Something in me is like David on both sides of the good and bad scale.
- Something in me is like the Apostles.
- Something in me is like Paul.

I hope something in me is like Jesus, because that's what we aspire to do because God shows us human love in Jesus Christ. God has given us his son, Jesus Christ, so that we can know what the pure spirit of God is like in human form. Jesus loved the world so much, he was willing to give his life so that we can know eternity. That's the kind of love that we are shown by God through the scriptures.

So that is what we aspire to do – to love God with our strength, our mind, our heart and our soul.

We are spiritual beings, not just physical beings. So our love is that of a spirit.

Like nearly everyone I know, I have my highs and lows. I have a wife who brings out the best in me with her hope and faith and her love of my sweet slowness when I can't quite get everything done I had hoped to do. And so I'm a hero in her eyes, strong and wise and know no fear, even though I feel like there are times when I'm a champion of nothing. Ah! She continues to transform my life by letting me know that I am wonderful without my ever having done anything to deserve that title.

I reach a point in my reminiscence of my life where my life has diverged from its original course and superficial accounts can't matter as much as the shared experiences that we have in life. There is where my faith comes in. Christianity is a spiritual experience, it's not composed of material things, but it exists from within. There is more reality at a non-material level. That's an extra dimension I find myself transversing periodically, and you probably do, too, when you're in meditation or prayer or when something has inspired you. When I'm in that non-material level of reality, I see more than just a giant system made up of tiny particles of stuff plus a mysterious force-field operating by natural laws. I come face to face with a whole spiritual realm that I trust.

So I celebrate my Christian faith, knowing that there are spiritual interventions. It's not just that I have to love God and my neighbor, but that God loved me and God loves you and God gives that special way of understanding and knowing. That's enough to convince me that what happened in Jesus was conceived by the spirit of God, that light that came into life that lights up the darkness, the light

enlightening everyone, all nations.

Something new is about to happen and that's a metaphor that is my reality. What it means for me is that I'm heading into the future with confidence that I'm making a difference for peace on earth.

So when we hear this story of Jesus with the scribe and are quoted the Shema: *The Lord your God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And you love your neighbor as yourself*, we know that we have a challenge before us. We heard from Jesus when someone asked him "Who is my neighbor?", he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. The one who is in need, the one who is beaten up by the side of the road – that's your neighbor – the one who needs your help. So we reach out in love because God has loved us.

To be a saint in this sense is not a sign of perfection, but it's a sign of fidelity. We can study the history of our faith and say that we are transformed by those faithful who have taught us, who have been our spiritual ancestors in our lives. We admire the witnesses to Christ we believe are our best examples, who live the simple commands of Jesus: to love God with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves. "Those who do," Jesus said, "are not far from the kingdom of God."

Being a saint means living in hope and not in despair. Being a saint means that you are forgiving and not judging, loving and not despising, lifting up and not tearing down.

You are not far from the kingdom of God.



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