

Be Astonished II: About Life's Greatest Priorities

Mark 12.28-34

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David Henderson

I was reading a book about owls recently and I came across a quote that really stopped me in my tracks. This is what it said.

There are two important days in your life:
the day you are born,
and the day you find out why.

David Johnson

I'm pretty sure we've all experienced the first of those days.

But have you experienced that second day yet? Have you found the answer to the question of why you were born?

That's what today's passage is about.

This morning we wrap up our spring series in which we've been focusing on the amazing things that Jesus said and did in Mark's gospel.

We're looking today at what Jesus said in Mark chapter 12, beginning in verse 28.

It's his answer to the question: why are we here? Let's look at it.

Mark 12.28

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating.

We've obviously landed right in the middle of the action. Let me stop here and catch us up.

Two days before this conversation, Jesus rode into Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds hailing him as the promised king.

One day before, he came through the temple grounds flipping tables and driving away the money changers and animal traders.

We're told in Mark 11 that as a result, the chief priests and teachers of the law were furious.

So the next day, according to Mark 12, the day of this passage, all the leaders of the Jewish religious establishment confront Jesus and ask him by what authority he did these things.

Jesus tells a parable that exposes the evil intentions of their hearts. They became even angrier and scheme to arrest him. They try to corner him into saying something offensive and give them a reason to get rid of him.

First they send some of the Pharisees and Herodians to try to catch him in his words. But Jesus amazes them by his teaching and silences them. Then they send in some Sadducees with more questions, trying to trip him up. He silences them too, telling them they are mistaken “because they didn’t know the Scriptures or the power of God.”

That’s when this teacher of the law steps in.

Mark 12.28

Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

You may be aware that there are 613 commandments in the Jewish Scriptures, the part of the Bible that we call the Old Testament.

Every teacher of the law, every rabbi, had a way of prioritizing those commandments. Each one of them developed what they called their “yoke.” That was the one or two commandments that they believed came ahead of and provided a framework to understand all the rest.

Every rabbi had a different yoke. Most of them emphasized obedience and purity and ritual as the most important of all the laws, things like tithing and ritual cleansing and keeping the Sabbath.

This rabbi comes to Jesus and says, “So what’s your yoke? Of all the commandments, which do you consider to be most important?”

Mark 12.29-30

“The most important one,” answered 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.’

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6.4-5, one of the most familiar parts of all the Jewish scriptures, a passage which devout Jewish people recited every morning as the day began. It’s called the *Shema*, which is the Hebrew word for “hear.”

According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it." (Matthew 22.38-39).

Then he tells the rabbi the other commandment in his yoke.

Mark 12.31

"The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Where the first commandment in Jesus' yoke was familiar to every Jew and central to Jewish life, this one was much more obscure. It comes from Leviticus 19, in the midst of a hodge-podge of different commands. It's the last of ten verses that focus on specific ways God calls his people to honor and respect and serve those God has placed around us, including those who inconvenience us and those who are different from us and those who wrong us.

Love God, love neighbor.

Mark 12.31

"There is no commandment greater than these."

In Matthew's gospel he adds, "All the Law and the Prophets – in other words, the entirety of the Old Testament – hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22.40)

Love God, love neighbor. Every other command is less important than these, and every other command is an expression of these.

Mark 12.32-34

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, 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."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

What Makes This So Astonishing?

What I'd like to do now is to notice with you four things that made these words so astonishing to the rabbi to whom Jesus first spoke them, and that made them so astonishing to the crowds who first heard them, and that make them just as astonishing to all who have heard them since.

1. With Jesus, Our Love is a Response to God's Love, not God's Love a Response to our Love

In the ancient world, there was a nearly universal way of thinking about how to relate to the gods. I as a worshipper do some act, offer some gift, make some sacrifice for the gods. If it is pleasing, the gods will respond with some gift in return: protection or provision, the gift of a healthy crop or a healthy child.

The worshiper does something to please the gods; so the gods do something to please the worshiper.

It would be tempting for us to think of this command in the same terms. Do this – love God, love the people God places around you – and then, if God is pleased with you, he will love you in return.

But Jesus reverses all of that. As he makes clear in his teaching, and as the rest of the New Testament loudly reiterates, the life of love that Jesus calls us to is only ever a *response* to the love God already has for us.

Jesus loves first. We love in response. In John 13.34, Jesus says

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

Jesus tells us in John 14 and 15 that the Father loves us. In love he creates us. In love he provides for us. In love he sends us his son.

And he tells us that the Son loves us. In love he comes to us. In love he reveals the heart of God to us. In love he lays down his life for us.

And Jesus tells us that the Father and the Son give us the Spirit. In Romans 5 Paul tells us that the Spirit pours the love of the Father and the love of the Son into our hearts.

We are on the receiving end of a divine conspiracy by the Holy Trinity to love us. Before we have done anything, we wake into the day loved by God. We are the beloved.

There will never be a time when our love for God *brings about* the love of God for us. It is always and only a response of our love to his love, giving expression to our belovedness.

Listen to John's reminder in chapter four of his letter to the church:

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. . . . ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

We are the beloved. Think of the freedom with which we are able to live the Christian life because that's true!

Instead of scrambling to please and appease the gods, ever striving, never knowing if we've done enough, we can live a life of joy, gratitude, peace, and freedom.

A few years ago Sharon and I were out for dinner at a splurgy sort of place that we rarely went to. During the meal we ran into someone from the congregation and had a great conversation with him. When we got to the end of the meal, as I was pulling out my credit card and wincing at the likely amount, our waitress walked up to our table and said, "That's it. You're all set. Someone paid for your meal. You guys must really be loved."

Bill paid. No outstanding debt. No scrambling or striving. Just a life of love in response to being loved. That's the Christian life.

2. With Jesus, Love Equals Obedience and Obedience Equals Love.

Jesus is King. He calls us to obey him, to place ourselves under his loving rule. In John 14.15 he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commands."

But it turns out that a life of obedience to Jesus is a life of love – loving God, loving others. That's what it means to keep his commands.

As he tells us in this passage, "There is no commandment greater than these" and "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Everything else he calls us to is an expression, an outworking, of one of those two loves.

That makes his words in John 13.35 hit us with even greater force:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Our king commands us to live a life of love. And that life of love will be *the* compelling evidence to the surrounding world that we belong to him. It is the one thing this world has the right to expect of every one of us who claims to be his follower. It's the one thing our lives should all have in common. Our love for God and for others.

In the wonderful quirky movie *Princess Bride*, whenever Princess Buttercup gives her servant Wesley orders, he always responds with "As you wish."

One day she was amazed to discover that when he said "As you wish," what he meant was "I love you."

That's the Christian life in a nutshell. "As you wish" and "I love you" are two ways of saying the same thing.

Our king is not a tyrant. His rule is a loving rule, and the law of the land, as James puts it, is the royal law of love.

3. With Jesus, We're Called to Love God and Love Others, but the Worst Thing We Can Do Is Get Confused About Which is Which

It's true that Jesus says in Matthew 22.39 that the second commandment is like the first commandment. That's true in two important ways: they both are commands to love, and they both are overarching commands that all the rest of the commands fit underneath. All the vertical commands fit under the first one, and all the horizontal commands under the second.

But our love for God and our love for others are vastly different. Jesus describes our love for God as "the first, the greatest, and the most important" commandment. There is not any sense in which it is equal to our love for others. It always comes first, and should always have the last word.

Augustine, who wrote in the late 300s, put his finger on the difference. Writing about this passage, he wrote: "We love God for what he is in himself, and we love ourselves and our neighbors for his sake."

When we think of love, we might think in terms of words like respect, value, hold in high regard, feel affection for.

But Augustine rightly presses us to understand our love for God in a much deeper way. He says the love we have for God is meant to be an *enjoyment* of God, finding all of our desires met in God, discovering in God our fulfillment and satisfaction and rest and peace as the one for whom we were made.

When this passage speaks of heart, soul, mind, and strength, it isn't describing four different quadrants of a person that, when combined, make up the whole person. Love him with your mind, with your emotions, with your will – that sort of thing.

This is actually four different ways of saying essentially the same thing: "Love God with the whole of your being, with everything you have. Make your whole life an expression of your love for him." Does that characterize your love for God? Not just bits of you, but your whole life given over to God?

Augustine says that the love we have for others is to be of a different sort. We actually get into lots of trouble if we try to find our fulfillment or our satisfaction, our rest and our peace, in another human being, loving them with the whole of our being.

I understand there's a movie in which Tom Cruise says to some woman, "You complete me." That's ridiculous. No human being is capable of satisfying us. We will always come up empty if we love them for our sake, to satisfy our needs or complete us.

Instead, we are to see others with reference to God and to love others *for the sake of God* – seeing them as gifts from God to us, and us as gifts from God to them, receiving the gift and giving the gift without ever losing sight of the Giver.

Augustine goes on to make a really important connection. If God made us as human beings to find our satisfaction and our rest in him, then the best way I can love my neighbor is to lead my neighbor to God. He says,

Whoever loves his neighbor aright ought to urge upon him that he too should love God with his whole heart, and soul, and mind. For in this way, loving his neighbor as himself, a man turns the whole current of his love both for himself and his neighbor into the channel of the love of God. (*On Christian Doctrine*)

For the past five years, we've been encouraging our church family to love our literal neighbors, the people who live on either side of us, in front of us and behind us. And you have been doing this in incredible ways. Getting to know your neighbor's names, reaching out to them, getting to know them, finding ways to spend time with them and serve them and be there for them.

This summer, we want to encourage you to think about what next step you might take to love your neighbor in such a way that you are helping your neighbor find his or her satisfaction in God.

What might God have you risk saying or doing or giving? Take them a meal? Have them into your home? Invite them into a book group? Ask them for some help? Open up a spiritual conversation?

What is a next step, a deeper step, a riskier step, you might take to help them come to know the God who loves us both?

4. With Jesus, Love Isn't the Thing We Do on Our Way to Finding Our Life Purpose; Love *Is* Our Purpose

This brings us back to where we began this morning. In these commands Jesus gives us an incredible invitation to a life of meaning and purpose.

This week I embarked on the unenviable task of trying to find meaningful graduation cards. I looked at dozens and dozens of cards, all filled with the same inflated nonsense. "You're the most amazing person on the planet! You can do anything! Chase your dreams! Shoot for the stars! Change the world! Alter the course of history! Be the pivot point of the aeons!" In other words, "It's all about you!"

The Bible operates on the understanding that, apart from the gracious intervention of God, all of us as human beings start in the same troublesome spiritual condition. The starting point of every human being is to be curved in upon ourselves in a very small life of self-concern and self-importance.

In *Theologia Germanica*, a wonderful spiritual classic from the 1300s, the anonymous author says,

All who do not have the True Light are ***bent in upon themselves***, and think much of themselves, and seek and propose their own ends in all things, and whatever is most pleasant and convenient to themselves they hold to be best.

Then along comes Jesus. He lovingly places his hand on our shoulder, and invites us to live into the purpose for which we were made. He rescues us from a life bent in upon ourselves and invites us to open our lives up toward God and out toward others.

This is why we were born. Not to be bent in upon ourselves in self-seeking and self-important self-concern, but to live a life of love.

Jesus has already defined a neighbor as anyone we come upon who has a need. When he says, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*,” he doesn’t mean “love your neighbor too, in addition to yourself.” He means “think about your neighbor in the same eager way you are used to thinking about yourself; meet their needs with the same careful regard you show when it comes to meeting your own needs; be that eager to love the person before you.”

With these two commands Jesus invites us to open our lives up toward God and out toward others. This is why you were born. You exist, God created you, to live a life of love.

Graduates, don’t go chasing your dreams. Go live a life of love. Love the God who made you. Love the people God placed around you. Your schooling is important. Your vocation is important. Your spouse and your family are important. Your goals are important. But this is why you were born.

That’s true for all of us.

There are two important days in your life:
the day you are born,
and the day you find out why.

Have you discovered the reason you were born?

Have you said yes to Jesus’ invitation to live a life of love?