

Love God = Love Neighbor

Psalm 146:4, 6 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! whose hope is in Abba God...Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.

Introduction

If we've learned anything from the gospel of Mark it's that being a disciple of Christ isn't easy and comfortable, it demands reconsideration of things familiar and comfortable, it conflicts with the way the world works and the kingdom of humanity operates, it can rupture relationships, it will force you into an inner crisis of identity. What we've gleaned from Mark's Jesus about what it means to follow him clashes with common notions that being a Christian means worldly prosperity, power, popularity, and privilege (often defined by the kingdom of humanity); it clashes with the idea that being a Christian means being nice and happy; it clashes with the idea that being a Christians means allegiance to a flag or nation; it clashes with the idea that being a Christian means doing one set of things on Sunday and spending Monday through Saturday doing whatever you want.

To follow Christ as one of the disciples—those baptized and partaking of the cup—is to render one's whole life in service to the mission of God's revolution of love, life, and liberation in the world for the wellbeing of God's beloved (you, me, us, and especially all who suffer and are heavy laden outside of these walls). There isn't one part of us that isn't claimed by the Spirit of God that descended on Pentecost and now lives in us, yoking us to God by and through our faith in Christ. Mark's Jesus takes very seriously that you are the fragile, breakable vessel of God, working through you as the epicenter of divine judgment and justice—condemning that which promotes death, indifference, and captivity and exalting that which nourishes life, love, and liberation. This is the demand on the faithful disciple of Christ (then and now); it is the pursuit of divine love that lets them know we are Christians of the reign of God. Nothing else qualifies but to love God and love those whom God loves.

Mark 12:28-34

And then the scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher! You spoke on the basis of the truth that God is one and there is not another except this one. And to love God out of the whole heart and out of the whole intellect and out of the whole strength and to love the neighbor as oneself is greater than all of the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."¹

¹ Translation mine unless otherwise noted

This entire discussion is rather banal.² Since there are (about) 613 mitzvot (separate commands) within Genesis to Deuteronomy, discussions about which commandments were seen “as more essential” and even debates about which ones were “light” and “heavy” happened regularly among the local scholarly network (Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees, etc.).³ Even a “summary” of the law—some idea that ties up the Torah—was expected.⁴ Thus, Jesus’s summary fits in with other Jewish summaries of the law (causing absolutely no surprise) and is extended to include the prophets.⁵ The only thing that is interesting (and considered unprecedented) is that Jesus links two well-known first testament texts: Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.⁶

So, why include this story in the gospel and in our lectionary? Because the most central feature of a Christian’s life of faithful discipleship is love. Full stop. Love God **and** love your neighbor. *Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord your God the Lord is one, and you will love the Lord God from your whole heart, and from your whole soul and from your whole intellect and from your whole strength.’ The second [is] this, ‘You will love your neighbor as yourself.’”* The entirety of the Christian life is defined by love that is born by the reign of God and made known in the kingdom of humanity (vertical and horizontal, divine and human, spiritual and material). Not only is the disciple exhorted to love God with their whole self, but they are also to love the neighbor (whoever and wherever they are⁷) in the same way; this is the way for the disciple of Christ. To prove this point and to drive it home, Jesus adds, *There is no other command greater than these*. Here things get a bit more interesting. Jesus has, first, not given one command but two when the scribe asked for *what command is first of all?* And, second, Jesus created a hierarchy between the love of God and the love of neighbor and the other commandments. According to Mark’s Jesus, there is a preferred way,⁸ subjecting all other commands to these two.

² Placher, *Mark*, 174. “Just as it is important to note that Mark portrays this scribe in a sympathetic light, so it is worth remembering that Jesus was not saying anything radically new or at odds with the Jewish tradition.”

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 477. “Given that there are, according to scribal reckoning 613 separate commandments in the five Books of Moses...the question of priority could not be avoided. The rabbis discussed which commandments were ‘heavy’ and which ‘light’, and sometimes ranked certain categories of law as more essential than others.”

⁴ France, *Mark*, 477. “There was a natural desire for a convenient summary of the law’s requirements, a single principle form which all the rest of the Torah was derived...”

⁵ France, *Mark*, 477.

⁶ France, *Mark*, 477-478. “But for his explicit linking together of these two very familiar OT texts [Lv. 19:18 and Dt. 6:4-5] we have no Jewish precedent.”

⁷ Placher, *Mark*, 174. “Further, we should love our neighbors, and there should be no limits on who counts as a neighbor.”

⁸ France, *Mark*, 478. The “evaluative language is not typical of the rabbis, who spoke of ‘light’ and ‘heavy’ commandments, but on the understanding that all are equally valid, and who, while they might look for summarizing principles, do not seem to have ranked individual commandments as ‘first’ or ‘more important.’”

The scribe's response—*"Well said, teacher! You spoke on the basis of the truth that God is one and there is not another except this one. And to love God out of the whole heart and out of the whole intellect and out of the whole strength and to love the neighbor as oneself is greater than all of the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"*—reveals two things. The first is implicit, the scribe gets something that the disciples are still trying to ascertain and understand⁹ and the other scribes (and Pharisees and Sadducees) refuse to get.¹⁰ The scribe affirms the fact that Jesus's words are founded on truth thus revealing his own inherent disposition toward Jesus and also Jesus's mission in the world (thus why Jesus can say to him later, *"You are not far from the reign of God."*; #notallscribes¹¹).¹²

The second is explicit, there is nothing within religiosity and religious traditionalism that rival these two commands. Nothing—no ritual, no tradition, no pilgrimage, no vigil, no quiet time, no eucharistic celebration, etc.—absolutely nothing is more important to the Christian life in the world before God and among the neighbor than love, love, love. Everything else is not only subverted¹³ to these two commands to love God fully and completely and to love the neighbor as one loves themselves but should be viewed in support of this demand for love in two directions, vertically and horizontally. Thus, for Mark's Jesus and this humble scribe, to love God *is* to love the neighbor and to love the neighbor *is* to love God.¹⁴ What is essentially and primarily ruled out here is any conception of a privatized relationship between one person and God as if that's all that matters. A disciple of Christ cannot love God and ignore their neighbor because to ignore their neighbor is to ignore God. You don't get the option to do half of the chief commandment; it's either both or its nothing.

Conclusion

⁹ France, *Mark*, 482. "In Mark's previous mentions of the kingdom of God we have repeatedly noted a contrast between the divine and human perspective, and a sense of surprise, even of shock, as the unfamiliar values of God's kingship are recognised. It is a secret given only to those who follow Jesus and hear his teaching (4.11). But here is a man who is already a good part of the way through the readjustment of values which the kingdom of God demands and which the disciples have been so painfully confronting on the way to Jerusalem."

¹⁰ France, *Mark*, 478.

¹¹ William C. Placher, *Mark, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher. (Louisville: WJK, 2010), 173. "The question is sincere, the scribe's response to Jesus is wise, and Jesus tells him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' Mark....goes out of his way to indicate that not all Jewish scholars were corrupt or were Jesus' opponents."

¹² France, *Mark*, 482. "...the scribe's reply has assured Jesus that his mind is well attuned to the divine perspective. This places him οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ, not yet a part of it apparently, but unlike the rich who will find it so hard to enter the kingdom of God...this man is a promising potential recruit."

¹³ Cardenal, *Solentiname*, 530. "I: 'But here he's not talking only about false rites but true rites. He says that love is worth more than all religious rites.'"

¹⁴ Cardenal, *Solentiname*, 529. "You can say, then, that those that obey the second, it's as if they're obeying the first. Those who don't love God, for example, because they don't believe in God, but love their neighbor, according to Christ it's as if they're obeying the first commandment."

If you've ever wondered what God's will is for your life as a disciple of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, wonder no more. The entirety of your life is summoned into a robust and vigorous relationship fueled, inspired, and sustained by God's love for the cosmos. We love because we have first been loved; we love our neighbor because God loves us, and we love God and thus love what God loves. To love God with our whole selves is a definitive mark of a disciple of Christ because it manifests as loving our neighbor as if we are loving ourselves the way God loves us (and loves our neighbor). Thus *they truly will know we are Christians by our love...*

To go further, and to put darker lines around what it means to love God and love the neighbor, it must be stressed that to love God is best expressed not only in devotion through prayer, worship, and glorifying, but specifically expressed in loving that which and those whom God loves. This means loving God's justice—God's mission of life, love, and liberation¹⁵—that seeks to right the wrongs created and promoted by the kingdom of humanity. Thus, to quote Felipe from Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname*, “To love your neighbor then is to love God. You can't love God without practicing justice. And you can't love your neighbor without practicing that justice that God commands.”¹⁶ In other words, the systems of the kingdom of humanity oriented toward injustice--those systems and ideologies oriented toward death, indifference, and captivity—are to be categorically rejected by those who claim to follow Christ by faith as his disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

I can't stress it enough that we are so very, very loved by a good, good God—a God who is love. This is worth celebrating. But if it never goes further and farther than that, then we will find ourselves distant from the reign of God. God's love can't be purchased and owned privately as if it can be just for ourselves. God's love is always on the move, always seeking the object of God's desire: God's beloved, you, me, and more importantly, those who have been cast off and pushed to the margins by the ideologically inspired actions of the residents of the kingdom of humanity. We love because we have first been loved; we strive for justice on behalf of the neighbor, because God's love strives for justice.

¹⁵ Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, translated by Donald D. Walsh (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 528. “So to love [God] is to love liberation and justice and that's the same things as to love your neighbor. To love God, then, is to love love. And therefore it's logical that the second commandment should be very similar to the first one.”

¹⁶ Cardenal, *Solentiname*, 528.

¹⁷ Placher, *Mark*, 175. Verses leading up to the Leviticus quotation should be considered in defining ethical action of love toward the neighbor, “Maximizing profit at all costs and cutting corners are contrary to love of neighbor.”