



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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**Don't Miss the Relationship!
Mark 12:28-34**

It was December 1903, at Kitty Hawk on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. After many failed attempts, Wilbur and Orville Wright were finally successful in getting their “flying machine” airborne. With great excitement, they telegraphed a message to their sister Katherine back in Ohio, saying: “We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas.”

Knowing this was big news, Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper. When she showed him the telegram, he glanced at it and said, “How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas.”

Sometimes it's easy to miss what's really important, especially when we get caught up in majoring on the minors. We often do that as Christians, don't we—both individually and as a church?

We focus on activities and results. And those things are important. By nature, we Baptists especially tend to be activists, at least in our mindset if not in practice. We always focus on the need to *do* something, don't we?

But when we make activities and results our primary focus, we're in danger of missing what's really the most important, what should be the center point of our focus—God and our relationship with Him.

This morning, we're continuing our look at the themes of Henry Blackaby's study, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*.¹

Now I know that this is Homecoming Sunday, and that you may be expecting something different. But I think that it's providential that I invited seven different guest preachers for today, and not one of them was available! God knew about Hurricane Florence and the schedule adjustments that we'd have to make long before she ever came into being! He knew we would need this Sunday for our Experiencing God emphasis as we're looking to the future as a congregation, seeking God to discern His plans for us as a church. And when you think about it, what better way to celebrate 95 years?

So far, we've thought together about what it means to know God, and how knowing God's nature is related to doing God's will. Last Sunday we looked at the first of what Blackaby describes as *Seven Realities of Experiencing God*, that God is always at work around us.

Today we're focusing on the second of those realities: how *God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal*.

Our text is Mark 12:28-34. Follow along as we read. *Read text . . .*

Questions and answers

This text is part of a larger section of Mark's Gospel that tells us how some of the Jewish political and religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus in something He might say.

Some of the Pharisees along with some Herodians had failed to trap Him with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. Some Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection, had failed to tie Him up theologically with a hypothetical question about the resurrection.

Mark tells us that one of the scribes, a teacher of the law, heard what they had been asking Jesus and how He had responded. Then he asked Jesus a *genuine* question, one that he *really* wanted to know what Jesus thought about it: "Which is the first commandment of all?" (12:28).²

Jesus didn't hesitate in the least to answer him. He said:

"The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (12:29-31).

Jesus was quoting the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, along with Leviticus 19:18.

The *Shema* recognizes God's sovereign uniqueness and calls His people to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength—in other words, with all that we are!

These words, this call, were a vital component of Jewish worship and prayer, both personal and corporate.

When this scribe heard Jesus' reply, he strongly agreed with Him. And when Jesus heard the scribe's affirmation, He commended his insight by saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:32-34).

What did Jesus mean?

Isn't the point of this text clear? *Jesus declared that God's greatest commandment is to love God with one's entire being—heart, soul, mind, and strength.* What He said focuses our minds and our hearts on this truth: *Our personal love relationship with God is the most important thing in life.* And it proclaims a clear warning to us—*don't miss the relationship!*

As Blackaby puts it, God continually pursues such a relationship with us in ways that are real and personal.³ That was true with Adam and Eve, with Abraham and Sarah, with Moses, and with God's people down through the ages! He has created us for *a relationship* with Him! And that personal love relationship with God is the most important thing in life!

We need to get a hold on three things about this relationship—or better yet, these three things need to get a hold on us!

First, *God initiates the relationship, and we respond to His love.* Remember what the Bible tells us about this.

- "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).
- . . . just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:4-6).
- We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

God initiates this relationship in His love; we respond to Him in love. That's how it works! We would never enter into a relationship with Him by our own initiative because we've all been marred by sin. We would never seek Him on our own. But He seeks us. He calls us. He loves us. He reaches out to us. When we respond, it's because He has already been taking the initiative!

Here's the second thing about this relationship: *Our love for God must be exclusive and total!*

The LORD is *one* God! Or as the NRSV translates the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4, **The LORD is our God, the LORD alone . . . He has exclusive claim** over our lives as Creator, Redeemer, and Lord. He is a jealous God, who demands exclusive love for and loyalty to Himself (Deuteronomy 6:15).

So we're to love the LORD alone as our God. He *will not* tolerate competitors. As one old preacher put it, "He will be Lord of all or He won't be Lord at all." Our love for and devotion to Him must be exclusive.

And it must be total. We're to love Him with our total being—with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind (Jesus added this interpretively), and our whole strength. This covers *every aspect of our being*—our wills, our minds, our bodies, our entire selves!

Blackaby emphasizes that this is a relationship that's continuing, real, and personal. Because it's a love relationship where we experience God's love and we in turn love Him, we want to spend time with Him. We have to nurture the relationship continually and intentionally through time with God in prayer, study, and enjoying His presence, and through being attentive to Him in everything we do.

What we're talking about here is like the loving and exclusive commitment of marriage. Couples who love each other want to be with each other, and being together provides the opportunity for their love to grow even deeper. They're in a relationship in which they're devoted exclusively to each other—no one else is to come between them, and they're to have this kind of relationship with no other person.

In the same way, we are to have no other gods besides the LORD, and we're not to put anyone or anything before Him. We're to be absolutely and exclusively committed to Him. And we're to nurture our relationship with Him by spending time with Him in prayer, study, worship, and being attentive to Him.

It's also a lot like a healthy, nurturing parent-child relationship as well. There's joy in being with our children and helping them to grow into responsible adults. And in our time with God and our relationship with Him, He nurtures us and fashions us into who He wants us to be and become for this life and for eternity!

And here's the third thing: *Everything else in the Christian life grows out of this love relationship.*

Don't miss that!

So often we lack motivation in our worship, our witness, and our service to God. Could it be that the root of the problem is that our relationship with Him isn't really a relationship that's characterized by love?

When we love God with all our being, the fulfillment of the second commandment naturally follows—we love our neighbor as ourselves.

When we love God and our neighbor, a Christian lifestyle naturally flows out of our relationship with God.

- A life of prayer where we enjoy God!
- Genuine worship as we eagerly praise God with His people, hearing and responding to His word in faithful obedience!
- Missional witness as we gladly tell others about Christ and His love through our words of witness and our deeds of love!
- Acts of ministry as we follow Jesus, serving as He served!
- Generous stewardship as we joyfully give as Jesus gave Himself for us (2 Corinthians 8:9)!

In John 14:15, Jesus told His disciples, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” Isn’t obedience the real indicator of the depth of our love for Jesus?

When we really love Him, this love relationship is the wellspring of our obedience, our worship, our witness, and our service.

Don’t miss the relationship

Have you missed the relationship? Have you put so much emphasis on *doing* in your Christian life that you’ve missed out on enjoying your *relationship* with God? Jesus made it clear—*our personal love relationship with God is the most important thing in life*. If we’re missing that, we’re not really experiencing God!

Throughout the history of Christianity, there’s been a tension between the contemplative life, where all the focus is on one’s relationship with God, and the activist life, where all the focus is on doing. But according to Jesus, it’s not to be either/or, but rather both/and. The ideal Jesus calls us to is to focus on our relationship with God. Then out of that relationship flows a desire to be with Him and to worship and serve Him in the world.

Remember Mary and Martha? While Martha was so busy serving in the kitchen, *getting things done*, Mary was at Jesus’ feet, hanging on His every word! When Martha complained to Jesus about Mary, He told her, “**Martha, Martha, you are troubled and anxious about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her**” (Luke 10:38-42, ESV).

So brothers and sisters, whatever you do, *don’t miss the relationship!*

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¹ In this sermon series, I am relying heavily on Blackaby’s ideas as presented in Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

³ Blackaby and King, 50-62.