Good morning,

It is a blessing to be with you this morning on this the last Sunday in 2018!

I preached here for the first-time last year on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s Day, and last year I commented that this is usually the place in church calendar where they put the rookie preachers. Well, when Pastor Will asked me to preach on this weekend again this year, I wasn’t sure what to think about that. Apparently, I didn’t pass the test last year, and so you guys are stuck with me again.

Well, in all seriousness, any day I get to open the Bible and talk about God’s truth is a good day. I am excited to share God’s Word with you this morning, and I am confident that God has something essential for us today as we enter the new year.

Over the past month, during Advent, Pastor Will has been showing us how the arrival of Jesus was anticipated in the Old Testament. And today we are returning to our study of the gospel of Mark. The gospels, (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are four books in the New Testament that tell us what happened when Jesus first came to earth. As Mark writes, he is seeking to answer two questions for us: Who is Jesus? And what does it mean to be his disciple?

We are now in the last week of Jesus’ life before his crucifixion. The conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders has been simmering for most of his ministry, but here, during the Passover week, this conflict escalates. After Jesus cleaned out the temple, the chief priests and the scribes began actively seeking an opportunity to kill Jesus. And while Jesus was teaching, the religious leaders in Jerusalem tried to trip him up with tough questions.

Who had Jesus been disputing with? Earlier in chapter 12 we see that he had been talking with the Sadducees about the resurrection (Pastor Ben preached about this), and with the Herodians, and with the Pharisees about taxes (Pastor Will preached about this). While Jesus was responding to these challenges, someone else was listening, and he had a question of his own.

As we read Jesus’ response to this man’s question we learn that those who love God will love like God and thus do what God desires. We are going to learn lessons from the manner of Jesus’ response, and lessons from the content of Jesus response. These are our two points for today. Please follow along in your Bibles as I read from Mark 12:28-34.

*28And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing* *that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”* *29Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30And 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.**’ 31The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”* *32And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33And 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, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* *34And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

**This is the Word of the Lord**. Echo: Thanks be to God.

I am a basketball fan, and over the past few years there has been a debate going on among basketball fans about who the greatest basketball player ever is? Now, I know even bringing up this question around Chicago is controversial. Because a lot of you sitting out there are probably thinking to yourself; “There is no debate. There is only one answer to this question.” And will someone out there tell me what that answer is? Of course, the answer is Michael Jordan.

Well, I know it is hard to imagine, but some people have begun to suggest that Lebron James might be a better basketball player than Michael Jordan was. Others would say neither.

The way you answer this question depends on what you value most in a player. Is it wins? championships? Playoff appearances? Personal statistics? The game of basketball has changed so much over the years, and this makes it difficult to compare players from different eras. The way I would answer this question is informed by how old I am and who I have seen play on TV. While our heart may be with MJ, we should admit that how we evaluate athletes is subjective.

In our passage today Jesus is drawn into a debate about the greatest. But he wasn’t asked about basketball players. He was asked what the greatest commandment was, and his answer was clear. You see, in that time there was an ongoing discussion about which commandment was the most important. Jewish Rabbis had identified a total of 613 separate commands God gave to Moses. It is hard to remember all 613 commands, but what if there was one command that captured the essence of what God wanted from his people? This is what motivated the question Jesus is asked here – the desire to summarize what God wants people to do.

When the man heard Jesus’ reply to the previous questions, he was impressed. Our text says that the scribe saw “*that (Jesus) answered them well”* So he decided to ask Jesus a question of his own. But his question was different than the previous questions. He is not trap Jesus. He seems genuinely curious. And Jesus responds differently to the scribe than he does to the others.

When we think about the interactions Jesus had with religious leaders we often think about the combative interactions - where he called out their hypocrisy and labeled them “white-washed tombs”. Just a few verses after our passage, in v. 38, Jesus warns his hearers to “beware of the scribes.” This oppositional dynamic in Mark makes *this* interaction more remarkable.

Our passage reminds us that some of the religious leaders were sympathetic to Jesus. We read in John 3 about Nicodemus, likely a member of the Sanhedrin, who also approached Jesus with sincere questions and even helped burry Jesus after Jesus was killed. There were Jewish religious leaders who believed in Jesus and wanted to learn from him.

This scribe wasn’t trying to make Jesus look bad. He was genuinely interested in how Jesus would respond. And Jesus sees this man’s motivation and responds with a clear answer to the question. When Jesus answers people he responds not only to the question, but he also responds to the heart of the questioner. Jesus sincerely answers those who approach him with humility.

In our study of Mark, we have seen that Jesus doesn’t always answer the questions people ask him. At the end of chapter 11, the religious leaders ask Jesus where his authority comes from. Instead of answering this question, Jesus asks them a different question, and when they don’t answer his question, he refuses to answer theirs.

Our passage today assures us that Jesus responds compassionately to those who seek him sincerely. I know there are a lot of you out there who struggle with something about Christianity. You have questions about God or the Bible that you would like answers to.

You might have big pictures questions about faith like; How did we come to exist, didn’t we just evolve from simpler life forms? If God is good, why is there evil in the world? You may also wonder if the Bible is a trustworthy account of history.

Your questions may be more personal. You may wonder why God let your family member die? Or, why hasn’t he given you the spouse you desire? You may wonder; does God hate me if I am gay? You may have had bad experiences with Christians, and you may wonder why Jesus has followers who are jerks. All these are legitimate questions.

How many of you have recently seen yard signs or billboards that say Explore God? Well, Explore God is a movement involving hundreds of churches in the Chicago area. In early 2019 many churches near us are addressing some of the big questions people ask about God and faith. We won’t be officially participating because we are in the middle of our Mark series. But we should be praying for those churches that are involved in this campaign.

Our passage shows us that those who approach Jesus with sincere questions have nothing to fear from him. And at this church we want to be like Jesus in that way. We recognize there are people here who are at various places in their faith journey. If you are not yet a Christian, we are thankful you are here. If you believe in God but you have doubts, we are thankful you are here.

And I want you to know that those of us who work at this church want to hear your questions. Will, Donna, myself, Ben, any of our elders; we would be so glad to grab coffee with you and talk. I recognize that sitting down with someone who works for a church can be a scary thing, especially if you have had bad experiences in the church before, but we want to earn your trust. All our e-mail addresses on the church website. So please feel free to reach out to us.

And, if you are a Christian who has friends who have questions, I would encourage you to follow the example of Jesus in our passage and look past the question to the heart of the questioner. If someone has sincere questions about Christianity, be slow to speak, listen to them, and seek out answers if you don’t have them.

We have talked already about the manner of Jesus’ response, but we need to understand the content of Jesus response as well.

In answering the man’s question about the most important commandment, Jesus cites two different scripture passages. The first passage Jesus quotes is Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This passage is known as the Shema. Faithful Jews would recite this passage every morning and evening. It was the cornerstone of their faith. This passage affirms monotheism, the belief in one God. It also teaches the importance of whole-hearted devotion to God. Now, as I read this section again (starting in verse 29) I want you to say the world “all” out loud every time we encounter it.

*29Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30And 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 repetition of “all” here shows us how comprehensive a person’s love for God must be. This is only strengthened using four separate terms; heart, soul, mind, and strength to talk about how a person should love God. The boundaries between these terms are not as important here as the number of these terms. The grammar Jesus uses leaves out nothing in this command to love. Every part of every part of a person should be caught up in their love for God. Our Mind, emotions, will, passion, energy, all of these things should be engaged as we love God. Our love for God should be total, complete, and unrivaled. It should be unreserved.

This passage provides a helpful corrective to some of our modern concepts of love. We tend to think of love as primarily an emotion that we feel toward someone else. We don’t think of love as something that involves our logic and demands our discipline. But true love engages every part of a person. And our love for God should be seen in every part of who we are.

Our love for God should involve our emotions, we should “feel” love for God. But we should also use our minds in ways that express our devotion to God. God has given each of us intelligence and creativity, and we should love God in those ways. Loving God means using all the gifts he has given us in service to him.

But Jesus isn’t done responding to the Scribe’s question. He shares another command from the Old Testament in Leviticus 19:18. In verse 31 Jesus says;

*31The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

Jesus not only responds to the question, but he expands on the man’s question. This might seem like Jesus isn’t playing fair here because he shares two commandments instead of one. But notice that he doesn’t put these two commandments on equal footing. Loving God is the first and greatest commandment, but for some reason Jesus was compelled to share a second commandment as well. Why does Jesus say more than the man asked him to say?

The first thing we could say about this is that these two commands together summarize the whole law. They also mirror the natural division found in the ten commandments. The first four commandments discuss people’s relationship with God and the last six describe people’s relationship with each other.

The second thing we could say about this is that obeying the first command inevitably leads to the second command. Loving God leads to loving like God. It is impossible to love God and not love other people whom he has created.

Scripture teaches us that God is the ultimate subject when we serve each other. Jesus says in Matthew 25:40; *‘…Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’* God is personally honored when we teach each other with kindness and respect. When you serve families at the Christmas Store, you are showing love for God. When you pack meals at Feed My Starving Children, you are showing your love for God. Husbands, when you take the garbage out to serve your family, you are loving God. Moms, when you make sacrifices for your children you are loving God. Kids, when you show kindness to your siblings or classmates you are expressing love to God. When we love others, we are also loving God.

Love for God and love and love for others are tied together. You can’t love others fully without loving God. R. J. Edwards says that *“Whoever does not find the source of love in God will fail to exhibit God’s unique love to one’s neighbor.”* Now, there are many non-Christians who are incredibly compassionate, and self-sacrificial, I am not questioning their sincerity. I know plenty of non-Christians who treat other people better than Christians I know. But I do believe the Bible teaches us that ultimate love for others is only accessible to us through God.

I know there are a lot of you out there who are extremely troubled by the injustices in this world. You care about the plight of refugees and you want to fight the evils of sex trafficking. You are angry about the oppression of women and you are upset about racial discrimination. Every single one of these justice issues can be traced to our lack of love for our fellow humans, and God is grieved by our disregard for other people.

But our passage today also reminds us that there is no secular solution to our love deficit. You can’t have a nation where justice reigns unless that nation loves the one who is just. You can’t have nation where people love their neighbor unless those people know the One who is love. The only force powerful enough to transform our society is the love of God. Positive changes achieved by other means will only be temporary. The world is filled with systematic injustice, and we should try to changes those systems, but systems filled with unrepentant sinners will always lead to oppression.

If you want fight injustice and help make this world a better place, you need to share the good news about God’s love for us. Tell both the oppressor and the oppressed that in Jesus, God loved them enough to die for them. Tell your friends that if they confess the wrong things they have done, and turn from their sin, God will embrace them in love. People who experience God’s astounding, underserved love will be able to offer that type of love to others. You can’t separate the love of God from love for people, that is why Jesus answers with two commands instead of one. And the scribe in our text sees the truth in what Jesus is saying here. He replies in verse 32;

*32And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33And 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, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”*

The scribe sees that Jesus has responded wisely and agrees with Jesus’ conclusion. But the scribe also adds another observation. He specifically says that loving God and loving others is more important than *“all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices”*. You see the Law of Moses told the people to offer various sacrifices to God. The problem was, that at many points in their history God’s people were better at making sacrifices than loving God or loving others. But God is not honored by sacrifices that are made by people who do not love him.

God’s people in the Old Testament often rebelled against him, and when they did, God would send them prophets to call them back to himself. The scribe in our passage knew what these prophets had said and his reply to Jesus reflects the testimony of the prophets. For instance, the prophet Hosea once wrote: *“For I desire steadfast loveand not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”* (Hos 6:6)

Throughout all of Scripture God consistently communicated that he wanted the love of his people more than he wanted them to perform religious ceremonies. But time and time again the people’s hearts strayed from God. Sacrifices are meaningless unless they come from a heart that loves God. The Scribe understood this truth, and Jesus commends him for it:

*34And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

One of the scholars I read in preparation for this sermon made an interesting comment. He said that the scribe had come to evaluate Jesus, but that in the end Jesus ended up evaluating him. Jesus saw into his heart and knew that he was close to God’s kingdom. Jesus began his ministry by declaring; *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.”* (Mark 1:15), and Jesus knew this scribe was close to salvation. He was almost there.

As we conclude today I just have two brief applications for you;

1. **Remember that God sees Your Heart**

At the very moment when we approach God with our challenging questions, he sees past our questions to our hearts. There are no religious activities we can do to impress God if our hearts are not right. I am a pastor, you can fool me. I can’t see your heart. But Jesus does.

We might feel vulnerable when we remember that God sees past our religious exterior. Our darkest secrets are visible to him. But this knowledge can also be a comforting thought when we remember that God saw our rebellious hearts and still chose to love us. Knowing that God sees our hearts also can free us from pretending. We can stop faking it because he sees through all our masks. We can be honest with him and with others because we are seen and loved.

1. **Evaluate Your Love Levels**

The most important thing in life we can do is to love God, and secondarily to love others. Today ask God to show you where your love is lacking right now. Ask God to show you where your love for him is lacking and ask you him to show you where your love for others is lacking. It might be that difficult relative or that annoying coworker, or that person who wounded you in the past. Pray that God gives you the love you don’t have for the people that he already loves.

One of the questions that Mark wants to answer is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Mark shows us that disciples of Jesus love God and therefore they love like God and do what God desires. This week I have been praying for myself and for you, that all of us would love God more.

Will you please pray with me?