

LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD

Mark 12:28-44

Key Verse: 12:30

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

Thus far, Jesus has taught his disciples about his servanthip. He concluded in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” However, at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus began teaching about his Lordship in various ways. He called himself “Lord” and entered as King (11:1-11), and then cleared the temple with divine authority (11:15-17). In the parable of the tenants, he identified as God’s beloved Son, the true owner of all things (12:1-11). Jesus revealed that the Messiah is the Lord of David by quoting Psalm 110:1 (12:35-37). Then Jesus prophesied that he would come again at the end of the age in great power and glory as Judge (13:26-27). Even when he was tried before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate, Jesus identified himself as the King of the Jews and the Son of God (14:62; 15:2). Why did Jesus reveal his Lordship during his passion week? It was to help us know that his death was not that of an ordinary man, but of the Son of God and the Savior of the world. And through his resurrection, he proves to be the Lord of lords who will come again as the Judge of all humankind.

In today’s passage Jesus teaches the most important commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. How is this commandment related to Jesus’ Lordship? In this command, “the Lord your God” refers to the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we should love God the Son, Jesus, with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength. We need to understand this commandment in the context of this passage. It was Jesus’ answer to an important question raised by a teacher of the law (29). Then Jesus corrected the teachers of the law for misunderstanding the Scriptures (35). Finally Jesus warned people to watch out for the teachers of the law (38) and then he sat down, concluding his powerful Teaching Tuesday in the temple courts.

Who were the teachers of the law? Most of all, they were experts in the Bible. They studied the Scriptures with great zeal and taught others passionately. Their teaching had a great impact on people's lives. But they did not practice what they taught. Their knowledge had no power to transform their character. They did not honor God; instead they honored themselves. They assumed that they loved God because they knew the Bible well. Yet in truth, they loved themselves more than anything else. Recently, we have heard stories of renowned church leaders who were exposed as selfish, greedy hypocrites. This surprised us. But this can be the problem of any Bible teacher. As a ministry which focuses on Bible teaching, we UBF members are all vulnerable. We must pay close attention to Jesus' words. Do we really love God most? Or do we love ourselves most? Let's listen to Jesus and what he really wants to say to us.

First, love God most (28-34). Jesus was still in the temple courts, where the most prominent religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, had just tried to trap him in his words. Jesus won two debates decisively with divine wisdom. One of the teachers of the law was amazed and asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (28) At that time it was common for teachers of the law to debate this question. They had identified 613 separate commands of God to be obeyed; 365 were given in the negative and 248 were positive. They further divided the laws into "heavy" and "light," -more important and less important. They tried hard to summarize all the laws in brief statements. With this aim, they debated endlessly without grasping the core of the law. However Jesus immediately and precisely summarized the whole law in a few words by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18b.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 begins with the word "Hear," which is "Shema" in Hebrew. Devout Jews recite these verses every morning and evening, much like Christians may say the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed regularly. The word "Shema" means listening to God which brings obedience. We must listen to what God says and obey him. Then we can know him truly. Many people listen to other voices and invent their own gods. These days many churches do not teach the Bible as it is. Instead, in order to gain followers, they teach what people want to hear even if it goes against the core of the Bible. In this way they invent their own god. This is idolatry. Our knowledge of God must

be based on what God says in the Bible. What does God say? “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In the original text of Deuteronomy 6:4, “the LORD” is in all capital letters. It was translated from the Hebrew “YHWH,” the name God revealed to Moses when he met him at the burning bush. It means “I AM WHO I AM.” God is the existing One who makes everything else exist. God is eternal and the source of life.

This God is “one.” The word “one” is “echad” in Hebrew. It means “one,” but with a plural connotation. Literally it means, “together make one.” So it implies the Triune God. Actually, the Triune God is revealed throughout the Scriptures in many ways. In Genesis chapter 1, the English rendering, “God,” is translated from “Elohim” in Hebrew, which means Almighty God. It is singular with a plural connotation. So when God made people, he said, “Let ‘us’ make mankind in ‘our’ image” (Gen 1:26). Yet God created humankind in “his” own image (Gen 1:27). In Genesis 1:3 God speaks his word to create the universe. John 1:1 tells us that this Word was with God and was God. This Word is Jesus. Genesis 1:2 mentions the Spirit of God. So the phrase “the Lord is one” means that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are one. This Triune God is the one true God; there is no other (Isa 37:16). This one true God is the One we must listen to and obey.

The true God has revealed himself through his words written in the Bible, and through his work in history. Two dominant aspects of his identity are very clear. First of all, he is the Almighty Creator. He is the source of life. He gives life to every human being and is the true owner of our lives. He loves us like a Father and takes care of us. He provides everything we need to have the best environment for living. He also hears our prayers. Our God gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength and soar on wings like eagles (Isa 40:28-31). Also, God is the Redeemer. As he redeemed the Israelites from bondage in Egypt through the blood of lambs, so he redeems us from the power of sin and Satan through the precious blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. God bought us at a great price and made us his children. This God is the God of love, compassion, and mercy. This God is worthy of all our worship. If we turn away from this God and pay attention to other gods, they become our idols. This God really wants us to have fellowship with him. So he said, “Love the Lord your God with all

your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” What does this mean practically?

First, God should be the one we love first and foremost. There are many things to love: spouse, parents, children, friends, one’s nation, career, academics, art, music, sports, food and so on. These are wonderful, created things for us to enjoy. However, we must love God first and foremost. If we love something he created more than him, we become idol worshipers. If we love his blessing more than him, we fall into idolatry. If we try to worship another person more than God, that relationship will end in disaster. But if we love God first and foremost, we can have a right relationship with God and others, enjoy God’s creation, and live productive, happy lives.

Second, God wants us to love him with our whole being. Deuteronomy 6:5 encapsulates the idea of total devotion to God. God wants us to love him with all our heart. Our hearts are the center of our personality. If our hearts are stolen by something or someone, we cannot love and serve God. If we had two hearts, it would be okay. We could serve God and something else at the same time. But as Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters” (Mt 6:24a). When we love God with all our hearts, we are full of spirit and joy. Our souls, Biblically speaking, refer to our entire lives. So we are to love God with all our lives. Our minds refer to intelligence, understanding and reason. We must love God with our minds. Our strength is our energy and stamina. Young people are especially full of strength. If they love God with their strength, they can be a blessing. Otherwise they can be troublemakers. “Heart,” “soul,” “mind” and “strength” do not represent rigid compartments of persons, but the whole human being. So it means to love God with our whole being. The word “all” is repeated four times in this command. God does not want us to love him partially, but with everything. God does not want us to be lukewarm, but passionate. So Paul says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Ro 12:11).

When we think about Jesus’ command, a question may arise in our hearts, “Why is God so demanding?” “All our heart?” “All our soul?” “All our mind?” “All our strength?” If we love God in this way, what will be left of us? Does God command this to burden us? Actually, the opposite is true. St. Augustine

said, “Love God and do as you please.” When we love God with our whole being, we can be free from all other things, and we can find real satisfaction, happiness, and joy. Otherwise we will be corrupted and become slaves of our sinful nature. So the Apostle John said, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them” (1Jn 2:15). In short, God wants an intimate love relationship with us. He wants our love to reciprocate his own love for us.

God loved us fully and completely by sending his one and only Son, Jesus. Jesus taught us what true love is. 1 John 3:16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” We love God because he first loved us (1Jn 4:19). As his love for us is life-giving, our love for him should be life-giving. This is how we can have an intimate love relationship with God. It can be compared to a marriage in which a husband and wife reciprocate wholehearted love. What happens if one of them is half-hearted? Disaster! However, when they love each other wholeheartedly, their union becomes dynamic and fruitful. Their children are blessed and grow to be loving people. What happens if we are half-hearted toward God? Our relationship sours. We remain childish and immature. Frustration, bitterness and complaining follow. However, when we love God with our whole being, our love relationship blossoms. As love flows, we grow to live the most beautiful and productive lives.

After teaching the most important commandment, Jesus added a second important one: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (31a). Loving God is expressed by loving our neighbors. If we claim that we love God, but do not love our neighbors, we deceive ourselves. 1 John 3:17 says, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” Loving neighbors, unlike loving God, does have a parameter: we should love our neighbors “as ourselves.” Basically, we love ourselves very much. We are naturally concerned about our health, security, honor, well-being, and so on. We want to be respected by others and treated well. If someone dishonors us, we become upset. So we should respect others and care for them. As the golden rule says: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” (Mt

7:12). The question is, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus taught that any needy person we meet is our neighbor (Mt 25:40; Lk 10:29-37). The best way to love others is to share the gospel with them to help rescue their souls. That is why Jesus said, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:15).

When the teacher of the law heard Jesus’ answer, he was really moved and responded, “Well said, teacher. 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” (32-33). Through Jesus’ answer, he could understand the core of the law. Christian life is not a matter of following rules and regulations. It is primarily loving God and loving others. When Jesus saw that this teacher of the law had answered wisely, he said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (34). Jesus complimented his understanding. However, understanding is just the beginning. Knowing is one thing and doing is another. Teaching is one thing and practicing is another.

Second, how we practice God’s love (35-44). Until this moment, Jesus had answered all the questions of the religious leaders with God’s wisdom. His answers were so profound and are the everlasting truth. So no one dared ask him any more questions. Now Jesus began asking questions to correct their concept of the Messiah. First, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David?” (35) It is true that Jesus is the son of David, but this was an incomplete understanding of the Messiah. They emphasized his humanity and ignored his divinity. But David had declared: “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet’” (36). These words from Psalm 110:1 were not mere human words, but divine revelation spoken by the Holy Spirit. Jesus pointed out that David called the Messiah his “Lord,” acknowledging his divinity.

Why is acknowledging Jesus’ divinity so important? If he were merely a human descendant of David, his suffering and death would be insufficient to solve our sin problem. But as the Son of God, his death on the cross is fully sufficient to solve our sin problem. By his resurrection from the dead, he proves to be the Son of God (Ro 1:3-4). Our gospel faith rests on the foundational truth that

Jesus is fully human and fully God (1Ti 2:5-6a). In Psalm 110:1, Jesus foretells his ascension to the right hand of God as our Savior King. Jesus defeated the power of sin, death and the devil and became our Savior and Lord, who reigns over us with life, love and peace.

Why did Jesus emphasize that the Messiah is the Son of God? This is the main point the teachers of the law needed to learn. Without knowing that the Messiah is the Lord God, they could not know the love of God or practice it; they remained under the power of sin. This was the agony of Apostle Paul. He was a great Bible scholar, who had the desire to do what was good, but could not carry it out. What he did was not the good he wanted to do, but the evil he did not want to do—this he kept on doing. Through this he realized that sin was living in him, and he was powerless. So he cried out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” He realized that only Jesus could deliver him (Ro 7:24-25a). Indeed, Jesus delivered him and transformed him into a man of love. He shared God’s love and saving grace with the Gentiles in such a powerful way that the course of history was changed. To do this, he suffered unbearable persecution and hardship. Yet, he was victorious, saying, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro 8:36-37). His testimony shows us that God’s love through Jesus can transform teachers of the law into people of love whom God uses powerfully.

In verses 38-44, Jesus shows us that loving God is expressed by our actions. The teachers of the law knew the law very well but did not practice God’s love. They were characterized by pride, self-glory seeking and greed. Jesus said, “These men will be punished most severely” (40b). On the other hand, Jesus mentions a poor widow who loved God wholeheartedly. Rich people were offering large amounts of money. But it was not to love God; it was to show off or get a tax break. Jesus said they gave out of their wealth; they were not truly sacrificial. However, a poor widow offered two small copper coins, worth a few cents. Jesus said, “...she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.” So Jesus valued her offering highly. And she became an example to us of what it really means to love God.

In light of today's passage, we cannot overstate the importance of loving God and loving our neighbors (see 1Co 13:1-3). As I prepared this message, I reflected on how I have loved God and my neighbors. It is only through the cross of Jesus and his resurrection. As a young man, pursuing the American dream and virtually worshiping the god of money and the goddess of pleasure, I was lost. Then, through a sacrificial missionary, God's love in Jesus broke through to me in the words of Mark's gospel. Jesus set me free from my sins and the power of idols. Jesus helped me to love the word of God and gave me a new direction as a Bible teacher and pastor. But it was just the beginning. Progressively, over the past 41 years, through serving God's sheep, marriage, raising children, and serving in ministry, my selfishness and self-glory seeking desires were exposed again and again. Like the teachers of the law, though I knew many things, I failed to love properly. Yet, as I cried out to God, he helped me to come to the cross. In the cross of Jesus, I could die to myself, and the love of God grew in my heart. Now I know that the most important thing I can do is to love God and others by depending on Jesus' grace at the cross. Recently, as I prayed, the Lord revealed his clear direction for us to raise 120 disciples of Jesus among college students in the Chicago area who can be spiritual leaders for America and missionaries to the nations. This revelation came with amazing clarity and power. At the same time questions arose in my mind. In these dark times? In spite of all our shortcomings? Then the word of God touched me, "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." I could believe that God will accomplish this task, and all I need to do is pray and obey. This is how I can love God and love my neighbors. Let's pray for one another to love God passionately. As we do so, we can make a loving community. God can work mightily to bring his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.