



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Mark 12:28-34 Mark

“The Greatest Commandment”

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you, Howard. Good morning. We are continuing our study in the gospel of Mark and this morning we will be looking at Mark 12:28-34. So follow along with me as I read our text. Remember, this is the day when a number of different groups were coming to the Lord with questions that were designed to trap Him in some kind of incriminating answer. So picking up with verse 28, we read:

“One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, and asked Him, ‘What commandment is the foremost of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The foremost is, “HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND 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 second is this, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ The scribe said to Him, ‘Right, Teacher; –’ or we could translate that “Beautiful, Teacher” “ – You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; AND TO LOVE HIM WITH ALL THE HEART AND WITH ALL THE UNDERSTANDING AND WITH ALL THE STRENGTH, AND TO LOVE ONE’S NEIGHBOR AS HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.”

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word and bless our time together now in studying it. Let's bow in a word of prayer.

Most gracious heavenly Father, we do thank You for the time that we have to come together and to study the Scriptures and to gain Your instruction to us about what is truly important and what You truly desire from us. And so we ask for Your guidance, and Your help, and Your blessing upon us, that You might open our hearts to Your truth and guide us in our thinking and enable us to apply these great truths to our lives. We pray that for ourselves. We pray that for other churches that are meeting in the city at this time, and throughout the state, and the country, and yes, throughout the world, Father, where Your people are gathered together with open Bibles, we pray that You'd guide them in their understanding. Give them a deeper appreciation of You, an understanding of who You are and what You've done. And bless them greatly.

We pray, Father, for our assembly. In particular, though, we pray that You would bless all of those who have been serving You in various capacities: those who teach the young, and the other Sunday school teachers who teach the adults, we pray Your blessings upon them. We thank You for their help and the ministry they have engaged in. We pray for others who have given their assistance and who are laboring in Your service, for secretaries and for those who do janitorial work. And we pray for the deacons, Lord, and their diligence. And pray that it would continue, and we thank You for it and pray for the elders that You'd give us wisdom in the decisions that we make and the way in which we seek to shepherd this flock of Yours. May we do it under Your guidance and Your direction.

We pray, Lord, not only for the spiritual needs, which are many, but the physical needs, as well. Bless those who are sick. And we have their names listed on our bulletin and on our calendar of concern and we don't need to go over the details. You know them. We intercede for them, Father, and ask that You would give strength and that You'd give healing, and that You'd give encouragement. And we pray, Lord, that You'd bless those who are in financial need, and bless those who are traveling on vacations, and bless those who are engaged in business. And we pray that in all the ways that blessings are needed and protection is needed and encouragement and healing is needed, we pray that You would supply it.

And in asking that we know we come to One who is faithful. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord. You never ever abandon Your people. We may go through difficulties – and we often do – and pass through uncertainties and pass through times of grief, but You never abandon us. You are always faithful. And help us to lay hold firmly to that great truth, that certainty of the Scripture.

So we pray for this church that You would build us up and bless us, give us hearts that long for You, that desire You, and live for You. We pray, Lord, for our nation, and we pray that You'd bless it and bless the leaders that You have placed over us. We pray for President Clinton. We pray for his cabinet. We pray for the senate and the congress and the supreme court and the lower courts, all of whom You have placed in those great positions. You have given them as leaders of this nation, and we pray that You'd supply them with wisdom, and that You would help them to see that they of themselves are inadequate, and perhaps they will turn to You. And we pray for that. We pray that multitudes throughout this land would turn to You, to our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we pray for that blessing upon us. We think of those who are in great need in the midwest due to the rains and the flooding of the Mississippi, and we ask that You would supply for them, and if it please You, turn back those elements. We commit those things to You and know that You are sovereign, Lord, and it does remind us of that, and that all things are in Your hand. And we really cannot stand against it. And we pray that You would use that in a special way to bring men to faith.

And now, Father, bless us as we open the Scriptures. We pray that You would bless us greatly because we are looking at something that is supernatural. That is what Your Word is. It is alive, and it is powerful, and it is sharper than any two-edged sword, and it is able to divide between the joints and the marrow and separate between the intents of the heart. This is a supernatural book that we have, Father, unique in all literature. And so we pray that it would have its good effect in our lives this morning. Prepare us for the week to come and that we might be servants of Yours and fit for that service. We pray these things in Christ's name, Amen.

Our study this morning concerns the greatest commandment and you know what that is already because we've read the passage, plus I suspect you knew that

already because you're reading through your Bibles this year, aren't you? So you know what's coming. Well, the problem is many people don't do that and so it would be interesting, I think to take a survey not of this group of people, but say of the city of Dallas to find out what they thought the greatest commandment is. And I think we would probably find a variety of answers to that question with the rise in crime that is so prevalent, many people no doubt would say, "Thou shalt not kill. That's the greatest commandment." ,Perhaps those who reflect with some discouragement on the rise in the divorce rate would say, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." ,And then there are those who are living in the suburbs who are very distressed over the rise of crime that has invaded that area, which was a bastion of security – at least so we thought some years ago – from crime. And yet it's escalating there. There's all kinds of break ins and vandalisms and so perhaps some might say, "Thou shalt not steal."

And of course all of these are important commandments. But do any one of them really qualify as the greatest of the commandments? And this is a question that we might ask ourselves, but it's a question also that was very much on the minds of the scribes and the Pharisees during our Lord's time. And as you know, they had great confidence in the law and in their ability to keep it. And so they devoted themselves to it. In their study of the law of Moses, they counted up 613 commandments, and they divided those into basically two groups, into 365 negative commands and 248 positive commands.

But they didn't stop there with their analysis of the law of Moses. They also tried to apply the law to every aspect of life with the result that they developed a great body of traditions that are very prominent and figure very prominently in the gospels and the time of our Lord with thousands of rules for daily life. And so with all these rules and regulations, they needed some perspective. They needed to know which was the greatest commandment around which they could organize their system of the law so that they wouldn't end up majoring in the minors. And so they weighed and they evaluated the commandments and engaged in hair splitting debates to determine which was the greatest and which was the least of the commandments, on which one they could hang the whole law of Moses.

There was a famous story about Rabbi Hillel, who lived a generation before our Lord. In fact, he was related to Gamaliel, the great rabbi of Paul's day who Paul

studied under. And Hillel was challenged one day along these lines by a Gentile who said to him that he would become a convert to Judaism if the rabbi could teach him the whole law while standing on one foot. And in other words, he was saying, “You’ve got all of these rules and these regulations, so many that they make a person’s head spin. Now, can you boil it all down for me? Can you give me the essence of your religion? Can you sum it up for me? And if you can do that so that I can understand what it’s all about, then I’ll convert.”

And so the story goes that he stood on one foot and he said, “What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole law. The rest is commentary. Go and learn.” So this question, what is the greatest of the commandments, the controlling principle of their religion, this is a question that occupied the thinking and the energy of the rabbis in our Lord’s day. And that’s the question that a scribe now brings to the Lord.

For the past few weeks, we have been looking at a series of questions that different groups have brought to the Lord, the priestly group: the aristocracy came first of all, and then the Herodians and the Pharisees came with their questions, then the Sadducees came with their question about the resurrection. And all of these people came to Him seeking, as Mark has written in chapter 11, to destroy Him, to catch Him in an answer that would be incriminating in some way, either with the people or with the Roman officials.

And so we come now to the last of their questions on this day of questions. And while all of these other questions have been hostile in their nature, this question seems to have been asked with a different tone, in a different spirit, with at least some interest in some sincerity. At least that’s the picture we get from Mark’s account. Now as we read Matthew, he states that the scribe was tempting the Lord, he was testing the Lord. But still, the answers that the Lord had given on that day constrained this man, and no doubt many others of the scribes, to admire the Lord, particularly the answer that the Lord had just given to the Sadducees about the resurrection, which as we discussed last week was a point of great debate among the two groups.

And so he was very much impressed with that because Mark states in verse 28 that he recognized that the Lord had answered them well. And so he asks the question, “What commandment is the foremost of all?” In other words, what is the

most important thing that I can do to please God and gain His approval? Is it keeping the sabbath? Is it living a chaste and pure life? What is that one great thing that I can do that will please God most of all? And the Lord answers the question by quoting two passages from the Old Testament.

The first in verses 29 and 30 is the famous Shema, which is the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4, the word “hear.” And we read in verse 29, “the foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord.’” Shema yisrael adonai eloheinu adonai echad. “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” And there is special stress placed on that word, one. This is the fundamental expression of faith of the Jewish people, the religious Jews, even to this day recite it morning and evening. And the importance of it is stressed a few verses on in the book of Deuteronomy, where the Israelites are commanded to take that passage in posts of their houses. And the Jewish people historically have taken that very literally. They have put copies of the Shema in leather pouches that are called phylacteries, which they bind to their hand and they bind to their forehead, and then they have placed the texts in a metal box or a wooden box called a mezuzah and they attach that to the door posts of their houses and their buildings. In fact, if you go to Jerusalem today, almost every door you walk through and every building there has a mezuzah on it containing this passage of Scripture.

Some years ago, my wife and I were on an El Al flight to Tel Aviv, and I witnessed something of this on that flight because as the sun was coming up over the continent of Europe, a group of Orthodox men got out of their seats and they all gathered at one of the doors where there was some space for them, and facing eastward, looking toward Jerusalem, they had their morning prayers. And they wore their prayer shawls and they put on their phylacteries and they recited the morning prayer. And it was all very formal. It was all according to the strict letter of the law. It was all according to their tradition. And I think very much like the religious activity of our Lord’s day, which had been reduced to a formality, reduced to a kind of rote exercise in ritual.

The point, of course, of that command that’s given in Deuteronomy 6 is not to bind pieces of parchment and pieces of paper to one’s hand or one’s forehead or place it upon the doors. The point is that it is to be upon the mind, that it is to be within the

heart. That is to govern our thinking and all of one's actions, which is symbolized in the hand, all aspects of life, going out of one's house, coming into one's house, all of life is to be governed by this very, very important, fundamental teaching of the law of Moses. It was fundamental to their understanding of who they were as Israelites and fundamental to their understanding of who God is.

It is the foundational statement of their faith, as I stated, and it's made in two propositions, or two points. And the first one is that God is a unity. He is One, and there's special stress upon that fact. He is not a plurality. There is one God, which was a revolutionary statement for that time because they lived in a world of many gods: the gods of the Egyptians, the gods of the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Greeks, and so it went. All of the Gentile nations had their pantheon of Gods. And yet here, we have this great truth that no, not many gods. There's one God, one Creator, one Ruler of the universe. And secondly and very importantly, this one God was Israel's God. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one Lord."

Now that was the second great teaching of that statement of faith. He is their God in a special way. He is their God because He has entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, a personal relationship with them. Now, that is the clear statement and the clear application of Deuteronomy 6:4, but we find that throughout the Old Testament. For example, in Amos 3:2, the Lord said, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth;" meaning of all the nations of the earth, Israel alone is the nation that He had chosen for Himself. And that's the sense of that word "known."

Obviously, when He says, "You only have I known," He's not saying, "I've only known about Israel and I don't know about these other nations." But God is omniscient. He knows everything. He knows everything about every nation. He's the creator and sustainer of all the nations. And so He couldn't be saying that He only knows about Israel. In fact, that's not what He says at all. He says nothing about knowing about Israel. He says that He knows Israel. And here it's not an expression of cognition or a perception or of intellectual understanding. This is an expression of personal relationship, which of course involves understanding, but the point is personal relationship, which is often the sense of that word, "to know." It speaks of a personal intimate relationship of love.

And we see this in one passage that I think brings it out very clearly, Genesis 4:1. “The man knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain. The word “know, to know” there is of personal intimacy and that’s the sense in which God uses it in Amos 3:2, of a special love that He had for Israel, of His electing love. In fact, the Hebrew text puts a great deal of emphasis on the uniqueness of this relationship. Literally it is “only you have I known.” So whenever a Jew would recite Deuteronomy 6:4, at least recite it with some thought and not simply go through a ritual of reciting it, but give thought to what he was saying, he would be reminding himself every time that he had a special relationship with God.

He was their God in a unique way, not because they had chosen Him, but because He had chosen them in His sovereign grace and not because Israel was particularly chooseable or particularly likeable. In fact, that’s the point that Moses goes on to make in Deuteronomy chapter 7, and he explains to them there why it is that of all the peoples and all the nations of the earth God had set His love upon Israel, why God had chosen Israel. And he says to them, “It’s not because you were such a great nation or such a large nation. For,” he says, “you were the fewest of all peoples.” That’s not why He chose you, because of your size and your glory and your beauty. He chose you because the Lord loved you. And that very simply, very directly gives the answer for why He chose Israel, because He loved her. But in saying that, it also expresses the great mystery of it because it doesn’t say why He loved them. In fact, from what he says, there’s every reason not to have loved them. And yet, in spite of that, He chose them because He loved them, and that’s grace.

It’s out of one man, Abram, who at the time was an idolater, He chose him from Ur of the Chaldees and brought him to a promised land made of him a great nation. As I say, that’s grace and grace demands a response, and the response given in verse 30 is the response that we’re to make. He continues quoting from Deuteronomy 6, and now verse 5, where we read, “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.” In other words, we’re to love Him with the whole personality.

Our whole personality is to be devoted to Him. That’s the point of these terms: heart, soul, and mind. I’m not going to try to define them all carefully for you. I think that they really overlap in their meaning and without defining them, the idea is

clear enough. Our whole inner man, our whole personality is to be devoted to God, as is all our strength, which is directed by the heart, directed by the mind. And we are to love Him with the whole man. We are to love Him body and soul. Our thoughts, our wills, our feelings, our actions, all of our faculties are to be committed to God's service. And the Lord underscores that with that word "all," which He repeats four times: all, all, all, all. We are to have wholehearted love for God, love that is undivided in its loyalty.

So what is man's great duty? What is the greatest duty that he has? What is the most pleasing thing that man can do in the eyes of God? Teaching Sunday school? Becoming a foreign missionary? Giving large sums of money in the Lord's service? All of those things are good. But that's not what's most pleasing to God. The thing that is most pleasing to Him is loving Him. As one writer put it, "The great commandment is to seek God for His own sake, to have pleasure in Him, to simply love Him and to desire Him." That's what He desires from us. That must have been a surprising answer to the scribe, a man whose whole thinking and theology turned on the idea of works and deeds and ceremonies, of effort that gained the approval of God. But God says, "More than your deeds, more than your money, I want your heart. I want your undivided love."

John Calvin understood that and expressed that with the signet that he had, the signet that he used as a seal on documents which was his symbol, and his symbol was an outstretched hand holding a heart that was being offered to God. That's what God desires, and the person who does that, who loves Him will have the deeds. They will follow naturally. As Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room discourse in John 14, He said, "If you love Me, you will –" what? "– you will keep my commandments." And notice the order there. "If you love Me –" love comes first. And if love is there, then the commandments or the obedience to the commandments will inevitably follow because it's a necessary expression, an inevitable expression of one's love for God.

And the expression of our love for God will be our love for men, which leads to the second quotation, and the second great command that's given in verse 31 with the quotation from Leviticus 19:18. "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The

scribe had come to the Lord and he had asked for one commandment, the one great commandment, the greatest of all the commandments, and the Lord here gives him two commandments, but the two go together. They can't be separated. The one is simply the logical outgrowth, the logical extension of the other. If we love God, then we will love our neighbor.

And notice the standard of this love for neighbor. It's love for self. That might strike us as a bit strange offhand because it seems He's talking about self love, which He is. And while that may seem a bit strange, it shouldn't because that's the way God's made us. We have been created with a natural desire for our own good, for our own welfare. That's normal. In fact, the person that doesn't have that is not normal. Our Lord recognizes that here. Paul recognizes that in Ephesians chapter 5, where he instructs husbands to love their own wives, and he says "as their own bodies. For no one ever hated his own flesh." In other words, just as you care for yourself, care for others. Seek their welfare.

Unfortunately this statement, "love your neighbor as yourself," has been misunderstood in terms of self-esteem and explained that in order to love my neighbor, I must first love myself. I can't love my neighbor if I don't first love myself, and that means I need to have a good self-image. I need to have a high self-esteem, and so it goes. Now, let me say I don't believe that Christians should be preoccupied with self-deprecation, with self-loathing, that we should be weighed down with guilt and go around flagellating ourselves. I don't think that's the way we are to live. We do have worth as individuals, but it is worth that we find in Christ, not outside of Him. Outside of Christ, we're wrecked and ruined in the fall. We have nothing to offer God. But in Christ, we do have worth. We do have value. It's imputed worth. It is imputed righteousness, imputed value, righteousness and acceptance with God that is given to us upon faith in Jesus Christ. It's justification. We're declared innocent before Him. We're clothed with the righteousness of Christ, and we are accepted by Him. So that whether men accept us or not is really irrelevant, isn't it? If God almighty accepts us, that's the chief thing.

And yet, the fact remains that we all have our problems. We all have our difficulties in our personality and our flaws and we need one another to help correct those, and we need to be encouraged by one another. That's an important part of

Christian service to one another. We need that. And yet, I think really what helps further in understanding all of this is realizing that we're in the hand of a sovereign God and all of the difficulties that we have, whether they be in our personality, whether they be in our past, whether they be in our present circumstances, ultimately they're in the hand of God.

He is the One who has made us as we are and He has made us according to His wisdom and for His good purpose. He has a plan for everything that has happened, and what we are as individuals, and the great thing is He's working to change us. We are being changed. As we study the Scriptures and as we live in light of them, God does supernaturally change us through the enabling and sanctifying ministry of the Holy Spirit. He cares for us and He's dealing with us.

But this modern idea of self-esteem is developed around the idea of an inherent worth, an inherent value, a personal value apart from Christ, and that leads oftentimes to narcissism, which is a term we often hear applied to our age, a focusing on the self, becoming consumed with self. And when that happens, you can't be consumed with God. You can't be focusing upon Him. You can't be focusing upon one's neighbor. So rather than teach the verse, that really robs the verse of its meaning. It stands the whole thing on its head and misses the point.

Jesus is not commanding us to love ourselves. Grammatically, that is not the meaning of the text. The command is given to love the neighbor, not self. The love of self is assumed and the love of self here is not to be understood in terms of self-esteem, but of seeking our good, our welfare. And it's in that sense that self love is the standard of neighbor love. The point is we should be just as concerned about our neighbor's welfare as we are about our own welfare, and we should be seeking that. So love for God leads naturally to love for our neighbor, to actively seeking to benefit him or her.

Now that's very similar to the statement that Hillel had made a generation earlier when he stood on one foot and said, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor." Very similar. But there is a significant difference. The statement that Hillel made was basically negative, and what our Lord said is positive. A person could follow Hillel's advice without ever helping his neighbor. Just don't do anything overtly that will harm him. Retreat from him. Stay out of his way, and if

you do that, then you're fulfilling what Hillel said is the great command. But Jesus puts the matter in the positive. He puts it in the active and He says that we are to be not avoiding our neighbor, but we are to be actively seeking to help him or her in need.

And I think that that would be clear to a person who is reading Leviticus 19, because all the Lord is doing is quoting that statement. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And love is active. Love suits that. But this raises another question and that is the question, who is my neighbor? Because if I'm going to have to love my neighbor with the same love that I have for myself, then I want to know who it is I'm going to be loving and helping. And in knowing that, then I can know who my neighbor is not and who I don't have to love and who I don't have to help. And the Jew had defined this very narrowly and solved the problem for himself because he had defined his neighbor as another Jew, and that's all. And yet we know from the teaching that our Lord gives in Luke chapter 10, where He gives the parable of the good Samaritan that that's an inadequate definition of one's neighbor. You remember the story.

A man walking on the road to Jericho from Jerusalem and he's ambushed by a group of robbers who beat him, and strip him, and leave him for dead, and take all that he has. And then a while later a priest is walking down the road. And we assume this is a fellow Jew that has been beaten. And the priest sees him and he goes on the other side. He avoids him. He doesn't want to perhaps touch what might be a corpse and be ceremonially defiled. Maybe he's on an errand that he's got to hurry, and so he avoids altogether. And then a Levite comes and avoids the man, too, in the same way. Finally, a Samaritan comes, and we know from John 4 that the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans. They were mortal enemies. And yet, it's the Samaritan that goes to the aid of this man, who cares for him at great expense, not only financially, but in terms of time, and the message that the Lord gives is very clear. Who is your neighbor? He's the Samaritan. He's the Gentile. He is whoever you meet, whoever you have dealings with.

And so for the Jew the neighbor was not just the Jew. It was the Samaritan, the Gentile. It was everyone. So who is our neighbor? The same is true for us, whoever we have dealings with, whoever lives in the same home that we live in. It's

your husband. It's your wife. It's your brother. It's your sister. Whoever you meet in work, whoever you rub shoulders with there, the boss, the secretary. It's the person who waits on the table when we go out to lunch. And all of these people we are to love. And if we have love for God, we will naturally care and seek the best for these people.

Some years ago Chuck Colson wrote an article entitled *The Problem with Power*, in which he recounted an encounter that he had with a reporter after a speech he had given at an evangelical convention. The reporter was a secular reporter and he was just covering this convention. And he asked Mr. Colson, "Doesn't the Bible teach born-again Christians to be loving and humble?" And Colson said that it did. And the reporter then said, "Well, I've toured the convention displays and the bigger the exhibit, the more arrogant I found the people running it. Why?" And Colson said he tried to defend his brethren, but he knew that there was truth in what the reporter was saying. And the article was written back in the '80s and that was a time in which a great deal of money was being given to Christian organizations and they were growing and they were gaining popularity, but also political power. The White House was quoting these kinds of groups, and with that power came problems. As Colson points out, it can be intoxicating. And as he says, "Power breeds arrogance," even among Christians.

It can do the same with us. We're not immune to that. Maybe that we live in a nice part of Dallas, or we have a high position in our firm or in our business and we begin to think that we have some kind of pedigree. Well, listen. There is no place in the Christian for arrogance. We do have pedigree, but our pedigree goes back to Adam, as does every man's, and to a fallen condition. And the Bible does teach us to be loving and humble and helpful, and that's what we're to be, and that help and that humility and that care may translate into something as simple as a smile or a pleasant word at work, and giving a decent tip to the waitress or the waiter at lunch. Sometimes the demands are much greater than that. And go back to Luke chapter 10 and the good Samaritan, and you see that sometimes it can be a great inconvenience. It can be an expense in terms of time and money and effort, but that's what's to characterize us as God's people. That's what's Christlike. And we need to do that. We need to be that kind of people, and to the degree that we desire to please God, to

the degree that we desire God, we will desire to be a blessing to men. The two go together.

So what commandment is foremost of all? Well, the Lord answers, "Love." Love for God, love for man. Or, as Augustine put it, "Love God and do what you like." Because if you love God, then you will do the right thing for others. That was our Lord's answer and it satisfied the scribe. His response was very favorable. In fact, he seems enthusiastic about the Lord's answer. He says, "Right, Teacher," which means, "well said," or "beautifully said," or "beautiful, Teacher." And then, repeating the Lord's command of love, he adds that such love means far "more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Now that was an amazing advance on the thinking of his day, which was given to ritualism, which was given to sacrifices. But it's a truth found throughout the Old Testament. Empty ritual, empty ceremony is not what pleases God. He hates that. And He told Israel throughout their history that He hated their sacrifices. What He desires is our hearts. He desires obedience out of love.

Samuel told Saul when he was disobedient, "To obey is better than sacrifice." David wrote in Psalm 40, "Sacrifice and meal offering Thou hast not desired." Later in Psalm 51, he writes, "Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise." God wants our heart before He wants our service and our sacrifices. And in a day in which the nation offered daily sacrifices morning and evening, but rejected God's Son, in a day in which they engaged in all kinds of ritual, filled the temple on the feast days, filled the synagogues on sabbath, but did it out of a cold heart, this man, this scribe put his finger on the nation's problem, which was formalism and ritualism, and that's a problem that threatens all genuine worship of the Lord. Threatens us.

Paul addresses this in 2 Timothy chapter 3, where he describes the last days. And the characteristics sound very contemporary. "Men will be lovers of self, lovers of money – " they'll be ungrateful. And then he goes on to state that they will be " – holding to a form of godliness – " a form of godliness " – although they have denied its power." It's easy to slip into a form of godliness and not have the reality of it, not have the life of it, not have the power of it, not have a wholehearted love for God and not desire God for His own sake. Doing that is the foremost of all things, our Lord says, but the question is – and perhaps it's already occurred to you – how do I do that?

Because as we go through this passage and we listen to what the Lord says in just those two brief verses, we have to be convinced and convicted that we don't do that. And I would say nobody does that. Nobody has a wholehearted love for God, not as they should.

And so the question is how do we get there? Well, let me offer two suggestions. And the first is realize that love, love for God and love for man, is a gift of God. Look over at Galatians 5:22. You don't have to turn to it, but it's a passage I think that you're well familiar with, a passage where Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit. Now this is the fruit of the Spirit. This is what the Spirit produces, and it comes from us, comes out of us. He produces it in us, but it is His fruit. It is what He produces. And what is the first virtue that He gives in that list describing the fruit of the Spirit? The first one is love. Love, and then joy, peace, patience, kindness, and so on. Love is something that God produces in us. Left to ourselves, we would not love. He produces it. It's His work within us. It's the fruit that He imparts through the work of His Holy Spirit.

And so how do we get it? How do we obtain this? Well, I think, first of all, by realizing it's His gift and we have to pray for it. We have to look to Him for it. We have to go to our knees. We have to seek the Lord and ask Him to supply to us what He requires of us, but what we of ourselves cannot supply. Pray for that and ask Him to change our lives and to visit us in such a way that we are filled with a hunger and a thirst for God. So that we can express ourselves the way the psalmist expresses himself when he wrote, "As the deer pants for the water brook, so my soul pants for Thee, O God."

Now, that's a daily prayer. That's a prayer morning and evening. And as difficult as it is sometimes in this day in which we're so busy to pray, and I know you men are busy. Your days are occupied with work, maybe more than anytime in a long time in our history. Nevertheless, it is important, it is necessary that we pray, that we seek this from the Lord. We go to Him and ask Him to supply our needs in this way. So we pray, first thing.

Secondly, we need to consider what we are and do so, I think, in light of Deuteronomy 6:4. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord." Now that was given to the physical seed of Abraham, but it has special application to his spiritual

seed, to Jews and Gentiles of faith who believed in Him whom, Paul says, are the spiritual seed of Abraham. And so the one God, God almighty, is our God and our Father. Not just our Creator, not just our sustainer, not just the one who governs the universe. He's the God of everyone in that sense, but He is our God in a special covenantal sense. He is our Father. And why? Because of His grace, because of divine election.

What does Paul say in Ephesians 1:4-5? Well, he says there that "He chose us in Him – " in Christ " – before the foundation of the world." It goes on to say that "He predestined us to the adoption as sons." Why? Because He saw in eternity past that we would have good works lined up in our favor, or that we would have faith in His Son? No. That's not it at all. In fact, all we need to do is look at Romans 9 and you see there the great paradigm, so to speak, of choice, and there's Jacob and Esau and God's choice of the two twins before either had done good or bad, before they'd made any volitional choice, God loved the one and hated the other, He says. He chose Jacob and He passed over Esau. Not because Jacob had done anything good. Jacob was a deceiver. He chose him – well, again – for the same reason that He chose Israel, because He loved them. That's the ground of election. It's love. Not anything in us. It's grounded in God alone. It's grounded in His love. It's unconditional. It's unprovoked love. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:5, election, predestination to adoption is according to the kind intention of His will. It is what He freely bestows on us.

Now why am I saying this? And why am I getting diverted into predestination and election and the sovereignty of God? Because I think that has a very practical application, a fundamental application to us, and that is when we realize that we have everything: we have eternal life, we have forgiveness of sins, we have membership in the family of God through nothing in ourselves, in fact everything was against our being in that, we have that, though, by the grace of God, and that should give us a deep appreciation of Him and a desire to know Him better.

So I think as we understand these things, we will be drawn to prayer and we will seek the things that God has commanded of us, seek to know Him. That's what He desires of us more than anything, that we draw near to Him, that we desire Him. He desires it more than sacrifices and burnt offerings, ritual and ceremony are not

what the Lord values. Strict attendance in church on Sunday morning is not what the Lord values in and of itself. He wants our heart. And the scribe in recognizing that showed that the Lord was getting through to him, some light was breaking in on his heart and if he had begun with hostile intent, that intent had become favorable and he had seen the beauty of the Lord's words, and agreed with them, and showed that he was open to learning from the Lord.

So Mark writes in verse 34 that "when Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'" Not far, but not in. And so in saying this, the Lord was encouraging this man. He was challenging him to further reflection. He was saying, in effect, "You're right in looking away from ritual and in looking away from the trivialities of tradition. But that's not enough and you must look further. You must look to the one sacrifice that God does desire that was necessary, the sacrifice of His Son, and that is the way into the kingdom of God." Jesus was gently urging him to look to him, and in so doing, enter into that kingdom.

There is a story that bears some similarity to this that took place nearly 40 years later. It was during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, and if you know anything about that, you know that there were terrible things that went on within that city. And there was in the city a great rabbi who the story goes was smuggled out in a coffin. One of the leading rabbis of his day, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai, after Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was laid waste, he was credited with having reorganized Judaism. The Judaism that we know today is traced back to this man.

Well, one day as the city lay in ruins, one of his disciples was lamenting the fall of the temple and that it was no longer possible to atone for sins without the sacrificial system. Then we would think, "Yes. That's a good observation. It must have been a very painful operation for the Jews of that day." And the rabbi said to him, "My son, do not distress yourself. We have another atonement that is like it. And what is it? Charity. For charity I desire, not sacrifice." And that's the basis of modern Judaism. That is how the Jewish religion went from being a religion that focused on the sacrifices and the whole sacrificial system, which was the undergirding of that system, and now it's gone from that to being one without a sacrifice. And that, of course, is not what the Scriptures teach. One thing is clear in the law, what's very

clear is that without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. Not the blood of bulls and goats. They only look forward to the great sacrifice that would come, the sacrifice that was made by the God man and it's His blood that attains forgiveness. And apart from Him, apart from our Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice, which is the final sacrifice, no one can truly love God. No one can fulfill the greatest commandment. God calls us to love Him with a whole heart, but that begins with faith in His Son. That begins with faith in the sacrifice that He has made, and upon that act of faith, Christ comes to dwell within the heart of the believer, living there, imparting His life, His power, imparting change. And we can't begin to fulfill this greatest of the commandments in our own strength, but through Him we can because He imparts that life and He imparts that change.

So as we conclude, let me ask. Do you have that life within you? That life-changing life of the Lord? Have you received Him as your Lord and Savior? Or are you trusting in your good works, in your sacrifices, in doing some great commandment that the Lord has given? Trusting perhaps in your baptism or your membership in the church? Well, if that's the case then you'll never have the life that we need to enable us to have these great commandments fulfilled in us. And you never will until you stop looking to yourself or looking to your works and turn from them and look to Christ, the great sacrifice that God has made. Look to Him and enter into life eternal and enter into God's kingdom. May God help you to do that and may God help you to in the symbolism of John Calvin, offer your heart to God wholly and completely through His power. Shall we stand now for the benediction?

Gracious God and heavenly Father, we do thank You for the grace that we are reminded of this passage because we are reminded, first of all, Lord, that Your requirements are too great for us. They're impossible. And we recognize that we cannot fulfill these great commands in our own strength. We fail at every turn. And yet, on the one hand we have already fulfilled them in Your Son. We have His righteousness. We have His perfection. We have been declared righteous in that act of justification. And through the work of the Holy Spirit, You are changing us, really truly changing us and making us different. We thank You for that. We pray that You would increase our desire to know You, that You would give us a thirst for You, that we would pant after You like the deer pants for the water brooks, and that our lives

would be different. We pray that if there be any in attendance who do not know Christ that You would give them no rest or peace until they come to know Him, that You would open their hearts to the truth of their lost condition and the solution in Jesus Christ. We pray these things in His name, Amen.