

## LEAD WITH LOVE

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Mark 12:28-34

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Community Church Congregational

At first glance, this seems like a pretty basic scripture reading. So, let me give you some context. This conversation comes at the end of a series of debates. Jesus is in the Jerusalem temple, where he has been questioned and tested by the scribes, Pharisees, priest, and legal experts. Imagine a world-famous chemist comes to visit a classroom of world-class chemists. They question his authority. They quiz him on complex questions of science. They try to trip him up, or make him look foolish. But he's steadfast and strong, wise and calm, answering most of their questions with more questions, forcing them to look within and recognize that chemistry – like theology and spirituality – is complex and mysterious. But then one student comes forward, who has been mightily impressed by the wisdom of this man's answers. This student is an expert in the law of chemistry – or in today's scripture, an expert in the law of God, Torah, God's teachings. And so the expert chemist asks the world-famous chemist, "My Teacher, what is the chemical make-up of water?" The question this legal expert asks of Jesus is that obvious. Every good Jewish boy would have known the answer. What Jesus says to us in this scripture is nothing. It's been taught by religions around the world since ancient times. It was the heart and soul of Judaism even before it was codified in the Ten Commandments. To love God is to covenant with God to be people of love. To love our neighbor as ourselves is the covenant we are called to make as children of God, followers of Jesus. It's so basic that, like saying H<sub>2</sub>O is the makeup of water, that you might have expect the crowd to chuckle or sneer. But instead, they were silenced. Why is this?

Love... it seems to be every Christian's favorite topic. I suspect if you asked our Sunday School teachers what they want to teach the children of the church and they'll tell you "to know God  
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loves them.” During our Memorial service on Thursday, a little girl wandered out to the courtyard afterward and began singing familiar, comforting words on what must have been a very confusing, crowded day for her. But she just twirled in her little princess dress and sang, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” All of us felt comfort in her sweet song. Love – we all like to sing about it. Christian, non-Christian, pop singer, church singer. Fifty years ago (yes 50 years!), the Beatles were singing “All you need is love.” This weekend, a friend in San Diego is having her congregation sing the camp song we knew as children (not quite 50 years ago, but the song’s definitely been around more than 50 years), “Love, love, love, love, the Gospel in a word is love. Love your neighbor as your brother. Love, love, love.”

Singing about it seems natural. Love songs sell. Summarizing the Gospel in this single word might even be right: Love. Summarizing all of scripture in this single word might even be right: Love. But when Jesus and this scribe begin to talk, they aren’t just summarizing scripture. This is not a Cliff Notes conversation about what it means to be faithful in following God’s commands. This is the long essay – an essay that begins with a question. “Which commandment is the most important?” This dialogue is so complex in its simplicity that it silences Jesus’ detractors.

This talk of loving God and loving neighbor puts an end to the pointless debates that had preceded this conversation. Suddenly, those debates over whether it’s okay to pay taxes to Caesar and whether a woman who’s been widowed multiple times will have multiple husbands in heaven suddenly seem very trivial. For the law of love is not only the summation of scripture; it’s the hardest thing God asks us to do. It’s easy to sing about. But it’s challenging to live.

Love your neighbor as your brother, your sister, yourself. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. This is not a Hallmark Christmas movie. This is not about feeling good because we

go to church. This is about changing our lives so that we lead first with love – always and everywhere. This scribe changed the conversation from pointless theological debates to the only theological point that's worth debating. How do we love God with every part of our being? How do we every human being with a covenant and a commitment so strong that we are as responsible for caring for every other human on this earth as we are responsible for caring about ourselves. Start talking like that, Jesus, and you're liable to get yourself killed. In Mark's Gospel, this conversation is a turning point. From this point forward, Jesus is headed to the cross. Love does not always end well.

Mahatma Gandhi preached and lived this type of love at the risk of livelihood and even life itself. Gandhi's love for the people of India was so faithful that he gave his entire life to their cause of freedom and independence. Alongside that love, his love for his enemies, the British empire that held them under colonial reign, caused him to insist on all protests being non-violent. This was a man took seriously the Hindu teaching that we are to care for all others as much as we care for ourselves. He tried always to lead with love.

Dr. Martin Luther King's desire to live out his Christian ministry in protest of segregation arose from his love for his sisters and brothers of color. And yet, his love was not just for the neighbors he knew well... he loved this country enough to meet with regional and national leaders, even those who most strongly opposed his work for equality, always in search of a peaceful way to find justice and equal opportunity for all Americans. He loved even his opponents in the black community enough to meet with violent protestors and try to convince them to choose the path of love and nonviolence. He tried always to lead with love.

For Jesus, this type of love is not just about a cause... it's about a commitment. Scripture often calls that commitment a covenant, no less important than a marital covenant, probably more important.

As followers of Christ, we have said “yes” to this same covenant. Whether we covenant as a church member or not, when we commit to following Christ, we have committed - covenanted - to lead with love. This love thing is all about a covenant with God to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love and care for others as much as we do for ourselves. And loving that way is big stuff.

I remember a little girl giving me a big hug after a children’s sermon and then saying, “I love you, Pastor Mary.” But after church, that same child came up to me and looked me in the eye, saying most earnestly. “Oh, I made a mistake. I said, ‘I love you.’ But I don’t love you. I just like you.” How insightful! That little girl knew that love was more than just a sweet thing to say at the end of a fun children’s sermon. She understood that love is serious business. Not just something that makes you feel good, but something that really means something. Loving means ongoing care and concern, watchfulness and awareness of the other person’s needs, commitment to the time and attention that person needs to get along in this life. Long-time married couples often advise younger couples that love is not a feeling, it’s a choice. Such is the case with if we are to live and lead with love. When Jesus if this greatest of all commands, he’s not talking about feeling love for someone else or for God. It’s about choosing to love someone else. It’s about choosing to love God.

Choosing to love God, choosing to love ourselves, choosing to love our neighbors is first and foremost a choice. But when we make that choice, we enter into a covenant. We are making a commitment to ourselves, to God, and to God’s world. That’s all covenant is – a commitment. But the covenant to love is probably the biggest commitment of all. Honestly, covenanting to join the church kind of pales in comparison. But covenanting to lead our lives with love, as church members, as Christians, or simply as God’s children walking around this earth – that’s a big deal. That’s a game

changer.

[What might this mean in practical terms? To love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength? It might mean dragging ourselves out of bed after a late Saturday night in order to worship God on Sunday morning. It could mean giving thanks to God, for all the beauty and gifts of this world. As the fictional character Celie says in the book *The Color Purple*, “I think it really irks God when we walk through a field of purple and don’t notice.” To love God means turning off the television and open up the Bible. It means praising God even when times are terrible. It means counting our blessings, when we feel like we have nothing. It means talking with God and listening for God when we have decisions to make.

What does it mean in practical terms to love ourselves? It might mean turning off that computer and calling a counselor if the websites we’re visiting are polluting our minds. It might mean valuing ourselves enough to call a friend for help when we’re depressed. It might mean putting down that beer and getting to an A.A. meeting. It might mean valuing our health enough to carve out time for that walk on the beach or that appointment with the doctor about the growth we just noticed. It might mean valuing our spiritual health enough to take time for that quiet talk with our friends or that silent moment before bed.

What does this it mean in practical terms to love my neighbor as myself? It might mean calling that friend who’s spouse died last summer. It might mean mowing the lawn of the hospitalized next-door-neighbor, even though they complain every time your dog barks. It might mean being truly respectful and kind to the person in this church who gets on your nerves the most. It might mean loving your wandering adult child enough to call them up on their birthday, even when the last words they spoke to you were hateful and cruel. It might mean buying groceries for the food bank instead of

going out for a fancy dinner. It might mean inviting that new parent at school to church next Sunday, even if you are envious of her beautiful clothes and her expensive car. It might mean buying a birthday present for the boss you can't stand, or attending the funeral when their spouse dies. It might mean praying for the employee who just quit without notice, praying for their highest and best good, just as you would want someone to pray for you. ]

Loving our neighbors as ourselves is not easy stuff. And Jesus never meant for it to be. He knew it wouldn't be, for he lived out that challenging commandment every day of his life, even as he hung dying. For Jesus said, about the very people who had hung him on that cross and about the very people who had betrayed and denied him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus spoke these words of forgiveness out of a deep, abiding love, a strong committed concern for all of his neighbors, friends and foes, kind and cruel, fun and boring, close and far away. It is this type of love.... committed, caring, unconditional, and giving... that we are challenged to live when we lead with love, the love of the Great Commandment. It is this type of love that flows through us by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why we can "yes" to this covenant: To love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, and all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we say "Yes!" – when we choose to covenant to love in this way, this love is no longer just our love – this is God's love flowing through us, changing our lives, and helping us to change God's world for the better.

Will you pray with me.

Gracious God of love, help us to lead our lives with love. To lead first with love. To embrace love as the guiding commitment we have with you. With the power and strength of your Spirit, send love through each of us, through our church, and through the commitments we make to you, to our church, and to one another. We offer this pray and our hopes to you, in the name of Christ Jesus. Amen.