

Love and What the Gospel Isn't

A sermon on Mark 12:28-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 November 2024

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Message

Jesus's primary aim was not saving us for heaven after we die, but establishing a culture of whole-hearted love in the here and now.

Sermon

Tonight's gospel reading turns much of modern Christianity on its head. If what we heard in this gospel reading is true, and surely it must be, then much of what many of us have been taught and held dear is fundamentally wrong.

That probably surprises you, because this is not an obscure and unknown passage. It is very well known and much loved. But I suspect that we mostly haven't taken it as seriously as the passage itself suggests we should. If the gospel was a cake, we've treated this teaching kind of like the icing on the cake, very nice, but not the main thing. But the reading tells us right up front that what it contains is the two most important ingredients in the cake. Leave these ingredients out, and you've got no cake. You might still have some sort of religion, but it won't be the gospel of Jesus.

What we heard tonight was a conversation between Jesus and one of the scribes, an expert in the written religious teachings. The scribe asks Jesus which commandment is number one. Jesus goes double or nothing and gives him a top two. The first is "the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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." And the second is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." "There is no other commandment greater than these," says Jesus.

Now those of you who have been in churches for any length of time have heard that story before, probably many times. So why am I suggesting that it turns much of what we have believed in our churches on its head?

Well, let me begin by identifying four major teachings that many of us would recognise as key components of the faith as it has been taught to us.

The first is that the basic message of the gospel is salvation through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Jesus came to save us from sin by dying as a sacrifice to atone for our sins.

The second is that this salvation is primarily what happens after we die; we leave this world and are welcomed into heaven. Of course we are saved when we put our trust in Jesus and his sacrificial death, but what we are getting now is just a foretaste of our ultimate salvation which is going to heaven when we die.

The third is that the whole Bible is equally the inspired word of God, and you can't pick and choose. We are called to accept it all and to obey it.

And the fourth is that, having been saved from sin, we are now required to live a life of obedience and purity. We need to be very clear about what is good godly behaviour, and what is not, and our church communities are to find their unity and identity in a shared commitment to living pure lives in obedience to Biblical teaching.

Now I don't think I've said anything terribly off the wall there. Most of you who grew up in churches or have spent many years in them would recognise those statements as basic expressions of the faith we were raised on. Am I right? So let's look at each of them again in light of what we heard in the conversation between Jesus and the scribe who Jesus commended as being not far from the kingdom of God.

Firstly then, this belief that the basic message of the gospel is salvation through the sacrificial death of Jesus. In pre-Christian times, Israel had an elaborate system of sacrifices to deal with all sorts of aspects of our relationship with God and especially for expressing repentance and securing God's forgiveness for our sins. But, the modern Christian teaching says, these sacrifices were not sufficiently effective in dealing with our sin, and so Jesus came to be the ultimate sacrifice, once and for all. As our reading from the letter to the Hebrews tonight put it, Jesus "entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."

Now I'm not about to suggest that the death of Jesus is not important. I do believe that we are saved by being united with Jesus in his life, his sacrificial death and his resurrection. But is that the heart of the gospel of Jesus? Is that what Jesus thought he was here for? Surely if it had been then when Jesus was asked about the most important commandments, he would have included something like Leviticus 9:7 where the high priest is told to sacrifice sin offerings to make atonement for himself and for the people. Even if he'd had to expand to a top three, you'd think he would have included something like that if a sacrifice to atone for sin was the heart of what he was on about.

But he doesn't. And not only does he not, but what is it that prompts him to commend the scribe as being close to the kingdom of God? The scribe says, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Hear that? *Much* more important than *all* offerings and sacrifices. Jesus could easily have said, "No, no. You can't say that they are more important than sacrifices. Without the sacrifice for sin, you will remain unforgiven and unsaved and incapable of loving God or neighbour." Surely he would have said that if that's what he thought. But far from correcting the scribe, he says, "You're on the right track there."

So if we are to believe this, the heart of the gospel is not a sacrifice to atone for sin, not even the sacrificial death of Jesus. The heart of the gospel, the heart of Jesus's teaching, is love. Love of God and love of one another. And this gospel reading mentions both for the purpose of saying that it is love, not sacrifice, that is number one. And number two.

Let me move onto our second typical Christian belief, the belief that salvation is about leaving this world and getting into heaven after we die. I'll be briefer with this one, because I'm making a bit of a stretch to connect it with this story anyway. Roughly speaking, there have been two different ways that Jews and Christians have understood the kingdom or culture of God. Some think that God is intent on transforming this world into the culture of God. Others think that this world is a lost cause, and our hope is in another place called heaven which we will go to when we die.

My connection of this to tonight's gospel story is that not only is there no mention of a heaven when you die in Jesus's top two teachings, but more importantly at least the second one, and probably both, are teachings about the reshaping of the culture, of how we live, in the here and now. Jesus's top two, like the prayer he taught us to pray, imagine the will of God being done here on earth rather than delayed until we are whisked off someplace else.

Belief number three was that the whole Bible is equally the word of God, and you can't pick and choose. It is certainly true that God can and does speak to us through the whole Bible, and it is certainly true that we have no right to just pick and choose what we like and don't like, as though the biblical teachings were consumer goods on a shop shelf. "I'll have one of those and two of these, but none of that this week thanks."

But the most controversial thing about Jesus's answer to the scribe's question about the most important commandment was the fact that he gave an answer at all. Some people then, and many Christians today, would have expected him to say that you can't pick and choose between them, they are all equally important.

But Jesus didn't say that. He had no hesitation in identifying the calls to love God and to love others as the top two commandments. In several other places, Jesus and the apostles explicitly tell us that all the rest of the law and the prophets is summed up in these commandments to love (e.g. Matthew 7:12; 22:40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

So, while we can't pick and choose on personal preferences, Jesus gives us a key by which we can judge between one passage of scripture and another, and between one interpretation and another. If it points us in the directions of love of God and love of others, it is trustworthy and important. If it seems to be pulling us towards hostility and judgement and division, or towards the closing of doors or borders, then we've got it wrong, we're not reading it through the eyes of Jesus.

Which takes us on to belief number four, the belief that rigorous moral purity is super important, not only for each of us as individuals, but as the defining mark of the Church community. We have just witnessed the Baptist Association of New South Wales focussing in on this idea of purity and concluding that it is essential to tighten up the boundaries and to expel any churches like ours who support things they regard as impure, like same sex marriage. The belief is that the association and its churches will only be faithful and strong if they separate themselves from sinners and stand firm for "biblical" values and behaviours.

Which all sounds logical enough. It's just that it doesn't sound much like Jesus. Jesus had precisely nothing to say about homosexuality, and not much more about a whole bunch of other moral issues that we Christians have often made a big song and dance about. But he had a lot to say about the importance of love – love of God, love of neighbours, and love of enemies – and it is love that he said should be the thing that his followers are known for (John 13:35).

Too often that talk of Christian identity and moral boundaries just sounds like an in-house version of the conversations about national identity and tough border protection. It doesn't sound like anything to do with love, with what Jesus said was most important. It is true that the law Jesus named second, the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself, had always been understood as meaning that you are to love your own people, your family, your

tribe, your compatriots. But when Jesus was asked who he thought was the neighbour we were to love, he answered with the parable of the good Samaritan, that is the good West-bank Palestinian, an answer that portrayed as the model neighbour someone who was despised as an enemy by his fellow Jews. Which was another way of saying what he spelled out elsewhere, that we should love even our enemies, or in other words, our love should know no boundaries, no borders, no limits.

Jesus not only turned the religion of his own day on its head, he turns most of the religion of our day, religion as we know it, on its head.

Love of God and love of neighbour are not the nice icing on top of the cake. They are the cake. They are the gospel. They are the heart and soul of Jesus's message, not because Jesus doesn't care about our salvation, but because love is our salvation, love saves us. Love saves us because what God is saving us from is our self-destructive plunge into hatred and hostility and vengeance. Love is the way out.

Love is the heart and soul of Jesus's message, not because Jesus doesn't care about getting you to heaven when you die, but because Jesus's first concern is bringing about heaven here on earth before you die. Love is the heart and soul of Jesus's message, not because Jesus doesn't care about the Bible's teachings and laws, but because love is the meaning and the goal of the Bible's teachings and laws. Love is the heart and soul of Jesus's message, not because Jesus doesn't care about the moral character of his church, but because love is the measure of the moral character of his church. The church that is known first and foremost for being a people who love others is the church that Jesus says are evidently his followers.

My friends, if we take this seriously and live it out whole-heartedly, there will be people who will say that we have sold out, that we are no longer real Christians, that we have become a bunch of bleeding-heart liberals who have thrown out the Bible and the gospel. But it is actually Jesus who has turned this all on its head. Let's commit ourselves to following Jesus and living by what he said was most important.

Hear, O People of God: the Lord our God, the Lord is one, and the Lord is love. 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. And you shall love your neighbour and your enemy as yourself. This is the gospel, this is the law and the prophets, and by this we will be shown to be following Jesus.