

“Loving God Many Ways”

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First in a Series

Mark 12.28-32

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A teacher of the Law of Moses came up. He heard them disputing with one another. Seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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."

And the man said to Jesus, "You are right, Teacher." . . .

And Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Mark 12:28-32a, 34a (ESV, adapted)

I enjoy reading. I usually have more than one book on the go. When I have reading time, I dip into whichever one grabs me then. Tomorrow, it might be a different one. Sometimes I'll plow through a book. More often, I slowly chip away at a few at a time.

This fall's worship and preaching themes are going to be like that.

Last week, I started into the Gospel of John, one of the accounts of Jesus in the Bible. We're going to finish all of chapter 1 by Christmas! That leaves 20 chapters to go. Some books are meant to be savoured slowly.

In November, I'm going to take another off the shelf. I'm calling it "What Can I Say?" We've been at a funeral home, or with a friend who is bereaved, and we struggle for words. We say something, and it might be so helpful. Or hurtful, though we absolutely meant no harm. For a few weeks I want to think about things we can say to help, and bless, and tell the healing truth of God, who walks with us through death's dark shadow. You'll see in your Sunday News that I'm asking for your stories, so you can help me write the words.

Today, we are starting a third "book."

II

Someone asked him a question, and Jesus answered. *“Hear O Israel. The LORD your God is the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and all your self, and all your mind, and all your strength.”*

The person had asked, *“Which of God’s commands is greatest?”* In other words, “What’s life all about? What does a spiritually formed person look like? What is a person—you and I— what are we for?¹

“Love,” Jesus said. Love shapes how you act to a person. Love moves you to help them become what God wants for them. Love is a feeling and, more important, an action.²

“Love your neighbour,” Jesus said. Which he expanded to include anyone in need, even your enemy! *“Love them as if they were you.”*

But first he said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, self, mind, and strength.”*

I have some idea how to love my neighbour. But how do I love God?

Worship? You’re here!

Pray?

III

When I was first learning to follow Jesus, I tried praying the way people said to. Some people were really good at it, and I thought they would be good to learn from.

So find a quiet place, free of distractions. Close your eyes. Sit quietly. And talk with God.

[After a few moments, stop to send a text. Then resume.]

Okay, what do I do with the distractions in my own head?

Read the Bible. God likes that.

¹ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2004), 5-6.

² “Love . . . is unconditional regard for a person that prompts and shapes behaviors in order to help that person to become what God desires. Love, when working properly, is both emotion and will, affection and action.” McKnight, 8-9.

[Start reading. Look perplexed. Close it, and go back to praying. Nod off.]

Try a prayerful posture.

[Move into a yoga pose. Instead of an “Ohm,” let out a painful moan.]

I finally talked with someone wise about prayer.³ He asked about me, what I like to do, all sorts of questions. *“The problem,”* he said, *“is that the people you are trying to emulate—the sort churches hold up as great prayers—are different from you. What works for them is not for you.”*

Jesus tells us all to love God. God wants our love. God made us for this relationship of love with God. Yet we will show love differently, because we are different from each other.

If you take medications, you know what helps your condition might not help someone else with the same condition. We have different bodies. We have different spiritual selves too. So we love God differently.⁴

IV

By God’s grace, we have ten, twenty, thirty centuries of people learning to love the God who has come to us in Jesus. Many traditions. Countless cultures. Many ways.

Gary Thomas has sorted these into nine patterns. He calls these “sacred pathways.” Here they are.

Caregivers love God by caring for others.

Traditionalists love God with our ancestors.

Activists love God by confronting injustice.

Contemplatives love God through adoration.

Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

Enthusiasts love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

Intellectuals love God with their minds.

Naturalists love God outdoors.

Sensates love God by engaging their senses.⁵

³ Professor Reg Johnson, then of Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. He was teaching a course on spiritual formation at Tyndale Seminary in the summer of 2002.

⁴ I got this medical illustration against a single-prescription spirituality from Gary Thomas, [Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul’s Path to God](#) revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 14.

⁵ I’ve changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series.

Your particular pathways, the ones most fitting to you, are where you go when you need to hear from God. Your pathways are the practices you turn to when you need God to strengthen you. Your pathways are how you best hear how God is leading you.⁶

Most of us have more than one pathway. Ours interact together, and can change over time.⁷ Spiritual maturing is about deepening in our pathways. Maturing is also growing in new pathways that stretch us. When we are in a spiritual rut, trying a new pathway can “spice up” our love relationship with God.⁸

Seeing this diversity of pathways also helps us appreciate and value, or at least put up with, each other. Among us are all these pathways. We worship differently, because we love God differently. Many tensions that can happen in a Christian community come from this God-given diversity. Holding us all together can be hard. Yet the same Holy Spirit who enlivens all these pathways, brings us together.⁹

We are going to work through this “book,” *Loving God Many Ways*, like this. Each month, usually on the second Sunday, our worship will highlight one of them. For instance, in November we’ll highlight the “Traditionalist” pathway. Our service will lift up some ancient practices of the church. That might not be your natural pathway. Please try to be part of it. You don’t know how God the Spirit might use it, to help you love God more. I hope you’ll grow in your appreciation and support for your sisters and brothers for whom that pathway is a treasure.

Also, during the week after each Sunday, I’m hoping to set up a time, or times, when those who want can get together. In a small group setting, we can explore some practices of that pathway.

What are your pathways? You might have a sense just from this list. In your pews are booklets with questions. These might help you see your pathways more clearly. It’s not a perfect tool, but it might help. So please take it with you, if you wish. If there are not enough, we’ll gladly make more. And I’ll be glad to talk with you, if you want, about what you find.

⁶ “When you need to hear from God, when you need to be strengthened by God, when you need to receive your marching orders from God, where do you go?” Thomas, 33.

⁷ Ibid, 233ff.

⁸ Ibid, 37.

⁹ Ibid, 237ff.

V

Love your neighbour. Love God.

Jesus commands it. But, can love be commanded?

Jesus doesn't simply command love. He gives us the ability to love: to love each other, and to love God.

One way to think about sin is this. Sin is the death grip that un-love has on us. And it is the poisoned fruit that flows from our un-love. Jesus, by his supreme act of love, his death for us on the cross, submitted himself to our un-love. And broke its power. Forgave us for our un-love. Jesus freed us to love.

He gives us his Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Love is a gift, the greatest fruit of the Spirit.¹⁰ God the Spirit pours love into us, so that we can love: love our neighbour, love God.¹¹

Jesus' command to love is, then, also his promise.¹² His promise that we can love God. Love God, in many ways. Amen.

¹⁰ Galatians 5.5 and 1st Corinthians 13.13.

¹¹ Romans 5.5.

¹² Telford Work, Deuteronomy. Brazos Theological Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), 96.