

“The Most Important Commandment”
Mark 12:28–31
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It's an intimidating thing to be asked to preach at Briarwood Presbyterian Church for a number of reasons. To stand here in this pulpit where Harry Reeder has stood for so long, a real good friend of mine and a wonderful pastor for you is intimidating. I think about 50 years ago in the old Briarwood Presbyterian Church and the PCA sent me and my lovely wife to friends as one of the first missionaries of the PCA 50 years ago this year. So, what am I doing here today? I'm here today because I believe the Lord has given me a message that I want to bring to you that is absolutely essential for our day and age. This is an age that is intimidating as well and we need to know how to stand firm.

My sermon is based on Mark 12:28-31, which we will get to in a moment, but I would like to remind us that without God we have nothing and life is meaningless. Harry said, “I have no idea how many years I have left, but I want to leave a church believing in the inerrancy of Scripture.” That's what I believe in as well. What does Scripture tell us about one of the most important things that our culture is trying to figure out today, namely, what is love? Today we often hear the phrase ‘love is love,’ which gives away what people are saying as a totally subjective notion that we try to work up ourselves. But if we turn to our Savior who is the very personification of love, to know what love means, Jesus is both the lover of sinners and the wisdom of God.

In previous chapters in Mark, Jesus comes to the temple in the name of the Lord and cleanses it. His people are astonished with His preaching. They ask Him about the resurrection and then comes Mark 12:28-31 which says [28] *And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”* [29] *Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. [30] 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.’ [31] The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

Jesus's wisdom takes us to the very center of the Old Testament, to Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 which says [4] *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [5] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* That text was known as the Shema, because Shema means ‘hear O Israel’ and the Shema became the very central prayer the Jews prayed every day from that time on. So, Jesus makes His affirmation His answer to that question based on the Old Testament.

We are faced today by a progressive ideology, even in the interpretation of this text. Emerging theologian Brian McLaren takes the opposite view of Jesus and rejects when Jesus says ‘you shall love the Lord your God first’ because he claims that we must love the neighbor first because only through loving neighbors do we prepare our hearts to love God. Jesus says, “Love God first” and Brian McLaren says, ‘Love the neighbor first’ and that will tell us how to love God. Brian McLaren ended up rejecting God, the omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent Creator and cosmic Redeemer. The creation becomes the model and view of God. That, of course, is so precious to pagans of all kinds and Eastern religions who've come into our culture in our day.

Jesus says to Satan in Matthew 4:10, understanding the problem, [10] *Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve."* Jesus put God first in how we serve. Paul does this as well in Romans 1:25 which says [25] *because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.* This is the verse on which we have based our ministry, Truth Exchange. By the way, Harry Reeder was one of the first members of my board when we launched Truth Exchange, and I was forever indebted to him. But that text is crucial, I think, for the message that I want to bring to you today.

It's a message of the importance of proclaiming the Lord as both the good Creator and the loving Redeemer. Young people need to hear this as they go out into a world who is rejecting God the Creator, and putting their ideas in His place. This is a truth and lie issue and the lie is they worshiped and served the creation (that's the lie), rather than the Creator which is the truth, Who is blessed forever. So before answering the question, how do we love our neighbor which gives us the risk of falling into paganism, we must follow what Jesus says and ask, "How do we love God?"

My sermon is in two parts. One, is how do we love God the Creator, which really emphasizes God how we love God and emphasizes God as the Creator and the answer that Jesus gives, gives us that focus. The second part deals with the question how do we love our neighbor and that teaches us how we love God the Redeemer.

This first part has four points – how do we love God? We love God first because He is first and it seems logical. God says 'I am first and I am last' (Isaiah 44:6). Then He says, "My glory, I will not give to another" (Isaiah 42:8). So God will not share His glory with the creation that He made. This is why this is the first commandment. God is where everything starts. If we don't build our view of things on this truth, we will lose it entirely for the struggle we have in the culture today because God, you see, as Moses says, is the Lord abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6). God says, 'I the Lord your God am a jealous God showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments' (Exodus 20:5-6). So, if we want to know what love is, we must seek God first because He is the God abounding in steadfast love.

God is the source of the love we all seek. Before there was any neighbor, there was God and that's whom we need to learn how to love. John Calvin understood this truth that we owe our existence to the loving Creator when he said, "True and sound wisdom consists of the knowledge of God. It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face." In the hotel this morning, a man came up to me and said, 'Where are you going?' I said, "I'm going to preach." He said, 'Oh, I'm in a mess.' I said, "Can I pray for you?" He said, 'Yes' and right there in the lobby, I put my hand on him and prayed for him. You see, this is the only access we have to a true knowledge of life and of God and who we are.

Some of you follow the podcast that was put out by ministers in your church where I mentioned a liberal confession, which I called witchcraft, where this so-called Christian pastor woman began the confession with, 'I believe in the nonbinary God whose pronouns are plural.' Do you understand what non-binary means in this world that is constantly being used? It means that there is no other, no great distinction, no creator. That's what non-binary means. Now we apply it to sexuality because we don't want to even celebrate the distinctions between male and female but we are doing that, yet refusing to recognize the distinction between the creation and the Creator. Do you see that? That's why our young people need to get a hold of this kind of thinking. This non-binary thinking is rejecting the very essence of the way God created the world.

Herman Bavinck, the gifted 19th century Dutch theologian, didn't have the terms binary or non-binary, but listen to what he says; "Paganism fails to appreciate the riches and diversity of the world. It erases the boundaries of heaven and earth, matter and spirit, soul and body, man and animal, intellect and will, time and eternity, creator and creature, being and nonbeing, dissolving all distinctions into a bath of deadly uniformity of non-distinction." That's what we're facing in our time.

God is prior to everything, is the source of everything, thus He is first. It's interesting and odd and why the Bible begins with one phrase, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth..." (Genesis 1:1). Everything after that is commentary but that's the fundamental statement that Moses takes to the Pagan world around him, showing them a view of God that they did not have. As we talk about God as first – if God is first, then that presupposes distinctions. We have to make distinctions. If there's a second and it's different from the first. So, we worship as divine, the only person Creator who's distinct from the creation He makes. That an important truth we have to affirm in our day to day, as people have rejected the creation and the Creator.

So, this is a message that I want to bring to you in the light of people like Carl Sagan, that television scientist who made a statement on TV, which makes no sense. Sagan said, 'The cosmos is all that is, ever was or ever will be.' The Humanist manifesto of 1973 says 'we find insufficient evidence for belief in a supernatural being.' It's very interesting, though, that today there are scientists who've come to the end of following evolution because they cannot explain the incredible structure of the DNA system as one of the most intelligent things on the face of the universe. Some of them actually say that the only explanation of the intelligence that we find in our systems that make us work is intelligent design. They won't ask who this intelligent Designer is, but that's the solution they come up with, because the DNA suggests a designing mind at the beginning of life and that's the most incredible thing that scientists are discovering today. One says 'the human brain is only about as large as two fists containing 86 billion neurons, forming 100 trillion connections to one another, making the old organ arguably one of the most complex systems in the universe.' Darwin had no idea about that and couldn't explain it, nor can the systems.

We love God, because He is the first designing mind. He gives sense to the world in which we occupy. It's interesting that the Gospel of John begins the way it begins in Genesis 1:1. It begins in the beginning where God created the heavens and the earth. John 1:1-2 says [1] *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* [2] *He was in the beginning with God.* John says, 'In the beginning was the Word.' that is in the beginning was intelligence and that's where people have to begin. So, we turn to God first, because He is the intelligent Creator.

The second point in the first part is, we love God because He is first in His essence as Trinity. This is a mysterious notion about the person of God, which solves so many problems. The Trinity is the source of human love but the doctrine of the Trinity means that love is not created by God loving us so we help God discover one of His important attributes. We're not part of that. God is love in and of Himself between the persons of the Trinity and so the Trinity is a fundamental way of answering the Biblical question, why did we love God first? It is because God is the origin of love. The very notion of love, stems from the transcendent being of God as Trinity, not dependent upon creation. In some religions, God, to be personal creates but if God creates to be personal, then He is dependent upon persons and He's no longer the great God of the universe. So, we cannot do that. We love God first because He is Trinity.

My third point in the first part is, we love God first by respecting His Holiness and the Holy character of the creation He made. I watched the memorial service for Harry Reeder, and saw that the hymn Holy, Holy, Holy was sung, and then it was sung again this morning so thank you for doing it. Holiness is a massive statement of the binary, what I call tourism. Holiness means things separated out into their rightful places. When the Scripture tells us that God is holy it means that He's totally different in His being from everything else and that is the ultimate statement of the binary/non-binary issue.

The world is made up of a holy God and a separate creation. The God who reveals Himself as this kind of God gives Himself a name – Yahweh. I am who I am. This is an interesting name because it is self-defining. Only God can self-define. In this age, we are asking little children to define themselves as to whether they are male or female. This is absolutely scandalous for only God can Self-define. God is the only being who self-defines and who defines everybody else in existence. So, we read that He made us in His image, male and female. The Creator was pleased to see a mirror of Himself in created beings, which is why we love God, because He has given this immense honor on us.

God creates things that reflect Himself in that they are distinct from each other and God is distinct from creation. God separates day from night when He creates sea and dry land. To create is to separate. It is to set apart, actually to make holy, thus created things in their separateness reflect in some creaturely way the holiness and separation of God. The key to holiness and thus to moral purity is to understand who God is as separate from us.

Paganism wants to eliminate the notion of separation, in particular with relationship to God. Paganism wants us to think of the sound of one hand clapping. Go ahead. Imagine that for you have to stop thinking to be a pagan. Mantra means killing the mind. God created the mind and loves the mind, but expects it to function in the way of separating things out. So we love God because He is wholly and is separate from us.

The fourth point in the first part is we love God by honoring the heterosexual holy image that He put in essence. This is the way both unspoken and spoken, we take the image of God to our world. Holiness or altruism is reflected in heterosexuality. Hetero means other and I also said holiness means other. So, in the very essence of sexuality, we have this fundamental distinction that teaches us who God is by reflecting on the otherness of people. God says, 'Let us make men in our own image, after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26). Psalm 8:4 says [4] *What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?* God created us as distinct beings to bring a witness of Himself to the creation.

Our uniquely human dignity comes from what God puts on us. Someone said 'God could have made a thousand males for Adam, but it would not have achieved the reflection of His image.' Genesis 2:18 says [18] *Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."* It is not good that there is only a man alone in the universe. That's the way you can translate that part of this verse. It's not that the man was feeling sorry for himself, but it's not good that you can only have males for that doesn't work.

God can only be known through the way He made human beings. Thus, we see in Isaiah 54:5, [5] *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is His name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth He is called.* When you put the whole issue of sexuality in this context, it's not small minded, unloving moralism or discrimination or violence or bullying. It is a theistic understanding of the way existence works and that's why God made us the way He did. We must reflect that distinction in the world that He has made.

I did some study on the history of homosexuality in the pagan world through time and space, and one particular author who was in favor of this kind of thinking, not my kind of thinking, showed that throughout time and space, the priests, many times in pagan cults, are homosexual. Not many people know that and then this author says what this means theologically. He calls homosexuality androgyny, which is joining male and female together. In Greek, *andros* is male, and *guné* is female. Androgyny means joining them together and that's what the perversions of sexuality are today, various forms of androgyny.

This scholar says 'androgyny is a symbolic restoration of the undifferentiated non dual unity that preceded the creation in direct opposition to the Old Testament account of creation, which is marked by distinction. The androgynous being thus sums up the very goal of the mystical quest, whether ancient or modern. The distinctions between the sexes are erased and the two merge into an androgynous whole.' This is what this scholar says this kind of sexuality expresses in the world in which we live both in time and space. It eliminates God, the Creator.

Now we get to part two – God the Redeemer. There is a second command that Jesus gives us which is 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The Jesus who said this, of course, was the very personification of neighborly love, though He gave the Good Samaritan as an example, Jesus is the great example, and Jesus encourages us to love the neighbor by keeping the commandments.

He inspired the Apostle Paul to say in Romans 13:9, [9] *For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* So, the Bible is telling us that we love the neighbor by putting into practice the Ten Commandments, the morality that God reveals to us. Love of the poor and the suffering is important to God.

Finally, showing the love of God to unbelievers is making Him known in the person of Jesus – telling the neighbor of the great cosmic love story of the creation where God has shown His love in Christ, which He reveals in His Son. If we want to love God, we must love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. Jesus, who spoke of the command to love the neighbor fulfilled it in His own life. Romans 5:8 says [8] *but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* The speaking of the Gospel of Christ dying for us, shows the ultimate love of God for sinners. He loves us by creating us and giving us a good world to live in but we sin so God sends His Son to resolve that problem in the death of His Son on the cross.

I pray for you, God's people of Briarwood, as I don't have much more on this earth, for I know that your humble practice of God honoring love will become more and more costly in the culture in which you live but you must persist in speaking out the truth of the love of God as Creator and Redeemer. The day Harry Reeder died, your senior pastor, Franklin Graham was addressing the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Orlando, what he said to them, I want to say to you. He said, "The world wants you to sit down and shut up. No, don't you do that. I want you to stand up, shout out and lift up your voice to lift up the truth. Every demon from hell has been turned loose in our culture today. The world has deteriorated so quickly and we cannot be deceived and we can't be fooled. We need to get ready." Amen.

As we do that, I want to leave you with one of Harry Reeder's favorite hymns, titled A Mighty Fortress (is Our God). Martin Luther wrote this hymn in 1529 almost 500 years ago, about God's love that will last. It's still the same truth. The words of that hymn are as follows;

*A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.*

***Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He;
Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.***

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us;
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

*That word above all earthly pow'rs, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth;
**Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.***

This I pray, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.