

Mark 12:28-34 "Love God"

1. Part of the human condition is that we wrestle with existential questions. (eg. Why am I here? What is the meaning, the purpose of my existence? Is there more to life than this?) What kinds of answers does our culture offer to such questions and are they satisfying?

As we have been reaching out to small group leaders this summer asking how we can better resource you for the vital work of small groups some of you expressed a desire to have a question designed to be a little of an "ice-breaker". This is such a question. If you don't need it feel free to by-pass it. As always these questions are simply a guide, feel free to adapt, change, shift, skip as you discern the needs and attentions of your group.

Ice-breakers best serve to get everyone talking and thinking in the same direction but can carry with them the risk of taking time away from the "meat" of the discussion. Let this question serve the end of getting people talking and connected and then quickly press forward.

There would potentially be many answers to this question. The one I mentioned in the sermon was this:

Now the answer that our culture often gives to that existential question is that the meaning / purpose of life is to be happy? – and indeed that motivation seems to sit under most – if not all - of the decisions that we make in life right? Decisions of career – relationships - the use of our time – our money – and yet as we seek to lay a hold of that happiness – it's often fleeting – slipping from our grasp like sand through our fingers – leaving that existential question intact – is there more to life than this?

Read Mark 12:28-34

The scribe is asking an existential question. It doesn't sound like one, so we have to hear it from the scribe's perspective. As a scribe he is committed to the Torah, the law of God, and would carry some core assumptions. Namely that humanity was created by God, and as such God holds the key to the meaning and purpose of our existence. The law is the means by which God communicates that purpose. So to ask what is the most important command, what is the law really after, is to ask why was I created? What is the purpose / meaning of my existence?

2. Reflecting on the passage you just read what is Jesus' answer to that existential question and does that resonate with your experience and understanding of human life?

Here is the unedited section of the sermon related to this question which may help to guide and support your discussion.

Now there was a spectrum of responses to this question – most seeking to whittle down the law to make it attainable - but here we have Jesus' response – Hear O Israel the Lord our God – is one – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart – soul – mind – strength – and love your neighbour as yourself.

Why was I created? What is the purpose of my existence – love – love – says Jesus - love God – love others.

Now I suspect that resonates deeply with us right? – love is as vital to our being as is oxygen to our lungs - when we know that we are loved and accepted we thrive – we flourish – there is no greater joy or satisfaction than to be in a loving relationship – whether that be friendship – family – community - marriage – many of the ills that plague human society can track their source back to an absence of love.

Mother Theresa led an order of nuns whose primary purpose was to serve the impoverished – the hungry – the downtrodden – often in places like India - and she was once asked - if that is the intent of your order – why are you setting up chapters in the US – Australia – England - where there was so much wealth – wouldn't it be better to set up in places where the need is greater – to which she responded – I'm establishing there – because in places like America people are suffering from terrible loneliness – despair – and hatred because they are hungry for and have forgotten love.

Why was I created? What is the meaning of life? Love – love God – love others.

Jesus' response resonates with the scribe but then he adds this is much more or exceeds whole burnt offerings or sacrifices. In the scribes mind life works like this. God wants us to live the good life, to live in obedience to the law, to try our best, but when we fail we can go to the temple and offer sacrifices. I can do 80% on my own, the other 20% I can get covered by a sacrifice. To which Jesus responds "You are not far from the kingdom".

3. What is Jesus affirming about the scribes' response? How is being in such a place a necessary part of the process for transforming the human heart toward love?

Again here is the unedited section of the sermon that will help support and guide the conversation on this front.

I think he's saying then – I think you might be right Jesus – we were created for love – a love of God that takes hold of every aspect of my being – a love of others that seeks to meet their needs with the same intensity as I would seek to meet my own - but if you are right – there is no way I can live up to that – and the difference exceeds what any sacrifice in the temple could cover – I'm done for...

To which Jesus responds – you aren't far from the kingdom – and then surprisingly -he just leaves him there – no more conversation – there's no – let me tell you what you are missing – there's no - let me tell you about God's lavish love, grace and forgiveness – which will ultimately be displayed in what I am about to do on a cross - he just ends the conversation there – the scribe left distraught – stupefied.

Years ago I was meeting with a young man named Antoine to read the bible together – he arrived one day for our meeting shattered – distressed – make it stop he said – make it stop – throughout the week God had been revealing to him his holiness – his perfection – the life for which we were created – and in light of that God was showing Antoine – in sharp contrast - his own sin – his own falling short of God's glory – and it was agonizing - make it stop he said – make it stop – I probed the edges of what he was feeling with a few questions – only to sense that this was indeed of God – not a feeling that should be avoided or escaped – but rather embraced - for resting in such a place is a necessary part of God's transforming work – the conviction of sin – the conviction of a failure to love is vital – necessary for the healing of our hearts

Let me put it this way - I suspect many of us – sadly have been in a place where we have seen the mental or physical decline of someone we love – they don't see it themselves – and so they aren't going to the doctor – they're not seeking help – and so we have to in love first convince them of their need – those are not easy conversations – hard to say – harder to hear – even harder to accept - but absolutely necessary if there will be any change - healing – wholeness

In love Jesus has brought the scribe to such a place – in love seeks to bring us all to such a place – not just one and done but continually - for before Jesus can root us in the good news of forgiveness and new life – he must first bring us to see our need of it - before he can comfort us with his grace - he must first disturb us by showing us the beauty of life for which we were created and yet fall far short of – in that place he affirms us – as he affirmed the scribe - you aren't far from the kingdom – you aren't far when you see your inability to love – you aren't far when you see that you cannot fulfill love under your own strength – you aren't far when you see that you'll need

more than offerings and sacrifices to cover it over –you aren't far from the kingdom...

From such a place a yearning begins to grow – a yearning for forgiveness – a yearning for love to be the marker of our lives

In the sermon Tim pointed out that Jesus highlights the Shema as the most important command. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" The command is to see the living God as Lord of all and alone worthy of our worship.

4. If the primary command is to worship – it tells us that the problems in our world, in our lives, arise from loving things other than God – from ascribing ultimate worth to things other than God. How does loving things other than God (which the bible defines as idolatry) lead to the problems in our world, in our lives?

Two illustrations may help here. The first was given as a quote in the sermon:

The late American writer - David Foster Wallace – not himself a religious person –gave a commencement speech at Kenyon college in which he said - Everybody worships - The only choice we get is what we worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god...to worship...is that pretty much anything else will eat you alive.

Worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough.

Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure, you'll always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you'll die a million deaths before [your loved ones] finally plant you...

Worship power, you'll end up feeling weak and afraid, and you'll need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear.

Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you'll end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

Everybody worships – Wallace says - The only choice we get is what we worship –

The second illustration that might help is that Martin Luther once said that you can't break commandments 2-10 without first breaking commandment

one. Meaning that what sits under our disobedience of the commands of God which are meant to undergird human flourishing is idolatry for the first command is to worship God alone.

For example, if we ascribe ultimate worth to our career, our accomplishments, we will find it inconceivable to honour a sabbath rest where work is to be laid aside.

If we ascribe ultimate worth to male or female affection we will find the command to not commit adultery (not have sex outside of the covenant of marriage) or to not covet our neighbours spouse to be beyond our ability or desire.

If we ascribe ultimate worth to our self-determination we will find the command to honour our mother and father – literality “give weight” to them - to be a perceived hinderance to our full potential rather than undergirding our living into our full potential as a human society.

Read 1 John 4: 7-12, 19

5. These verses express a theme found throughout scripture, that our love of God flows from his love of us ultimately in Jesus. In what ways does coming to know the love of God more and more in Jesus lead to a love of God expressed in worship?

This section of the sermon may help in your guidance of this question:

When Jesus quotes the Shema he brings the context with it – and in the verses surrounding it says - if your child comes to you and asks – what’s the meaning of these rules and statues – you should respond.

Do this or God’s going to get us! – no no – that’s not what it says.

Do this and God will bless us – no – no – that’s not what it says.

Instead it says - God rescued us from Slavery in Egypt – brought us out with a mighty hand – and gave us the land he promised – that is the meaning of these laws and statues.

God did not come to the Israelites in slavery and say – have I got a deal for you – here are my commands – live them out – and I will rescue you - NO – he rescues them from slavery and calls them to live a new way

In other words our worship – our love of God – is a response – it flows from his grace, forgiveness and love ultimately displayed in Jesus' death and resurrection – Jesus leaving the scribe not quite there drives him more and more to come to know the living God – as our reading from 1 John puts it – we love because he first loved us – know his love in Jesus – and the only fitting response will be worship – worth ship – seeing what he is worth – giving him what he is worth – loving him with all that we are - heart – soul – mind – strength.

6. We become what we worship. How does our worship of the living God in Jesus lead us to reflect his love in our relationships with others?

Again this section of the sermon will help guide your reflection on this question:

It was Anglican scholar N.T. Wright who wrote - One of the primary laws of human life is that you become what you worship.

Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers, rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it, their preferences, practices, past histories, and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns.

You become what you worship – which is exactly what Jesus is affirming when he says – the second is this – love your neighbour as yourself – a phrase that comes to us from Leviticus 19 – a grouping of laws that cover a whole host of different topics – but one phrase holds them all together – I am the Lord your God - leave the edges of the field uncut to provide for the poor – I am the Lord your God – don't take vengeance or bear a grudge – I am the Lord your God - pay fair wages to your workers – I am the Lord your God - don't bear false witness – I am the Lord your God – love your neighbour – I am the Lord your God.

What is this telling us? Do this cuz I'm God – no - It's telling us that when we live this way – we are reflecting the character of the Lord God – becoming what we worship.

It was Augustine who wrote – Love God and do what you like – in other words we become what we worship – we become what we love.

What does that mean practically? Well let me put it this way – if you are seeing an absence of love in your community – your relationships – your hearts – the primary question we need to ask ourselves is – to what am I ascribing ultimate worth - who – what am I worshipping – for from worship of the living God in Jesus – love flows...

Some of you are struggling with bitterness – anger – a hard heart borne of unforgiveness – yes repent – yes commit to forgiveness – but ultimately behold his lavish forgiveness of you in Jesus - for there you will find the resources to forgive – we love because he first loved us.

Some of you are despondent – feeling as if you have no value – forget self-esteem – forget positive self-talk - behold his love – you were chosen before the foundation of the world - adopted as his child – in Jesus God’s word over you is – I love you – I delight in you – we love because he first loved us.

It was Richard Loveless who wrote – If we start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God, and the sacrifice of Christ, we are inevitably moved to discouragement and apathy (we won’t love) - But the faith, gospel faith, that is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love and what Jesus has done for us, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources (like our idols) - is the very root of peace, go to this fire, it is merry, it is bright.