

October 27, 2024

Mark 12:28-34

You may have noticed, but I have some extra pep in my step today. It's Reformation season! What is that? For a long time, Christianity in Europe had been slowly mutating into something entirely different than what was taught by Jesus and his disciples. It didn't happen all at once- but by the 1500's things had slid completely across the tracks. The church in Luther's day taught that in order to be saved, you had to put in the work! Sure, Jesus died on the cross to forgive your sins, but not all of them. God's grace had to be earned. You could earn some by going to church and giving a lot of money and praying and confessing your sins to a priest. Still need more grace? You could pray to the saints and angels and you could get God's grace that way! Still need more? Go on a pilgrimage! Go to Rome and see (supposedly) John the Baptist's severed head, or a thorn from Jesus' cross, or even to a church in Germany which claimed to have a flame from the original burning bush! Does it seem a bit crazy? Well, the Roman Pope at that time had final say when it came to spiritual truth, and he said going on these pilgrimages could earn God's grace for you- so it must have been true! If that wasn't enough, you could buy an indulgence- an official piece of paper declaring that your sins, or the sins of your loved ones, were forgiven. You could physically *buy* God's grace!

Eventually, a priest named Martin Luther started reading the Scriptures and found that Jesus, along with his disciples, and the Old Testament, taught that you aren't saved by what you do, but by Jesus' death on the cross in your place, and because of that, you don't have to wonder if you are saved! You don't have to do all these ridiculous acts to earn God's favor- it's already yours because Christ earned it for you! That beautiful truth had been mostly forgotten by Christians, and Luther and his colleagues rediscovered it and preached. Therefore, we celebrate what God did for his people through Luther, that he rediscovered the Gospel- the message of Jesus saving you all for free. Yet, there's a lot more that Luther and his friends rediscovered: The Law. It wasn't just the good news of Jesus that was neglected by the Roman Catholic Church, but also the rules that were actually in the Bible. We see today that this isn't just an issue in Medieval Europe, but in Jesus' day and ours as well. The theme today is, "**Rediscovering the Law:**" **1. The Law *actually* is love. 2. The Law *actually* condemns. 3. The Law *actually* defines good works.**

1. The Law *actually* is love. At this point in the Gospel of Mark, it's the last week of Jesus' ministry- he's going to die in a few days, and now he's in Jerusalem having these intense theological debates where the top experts in the Bible are purposely trying to trap him in his own words.. A Pharisee, a biblical expert sees that Jesus treasures the Old Testament as God's Word, he knows it well, and he's not just some crazy cult leader, but a genuine teacher faithful to God's Word, and he asks a genuine question: "Which is the most important law in the Old Testament?" Why does he ask this? Like the Roman Catholics, the ancient Jewish biblical teachers added rules to the Bible- they had 613 specific rules people had to follow in order to be truly confident

that they were good with God. That's a lot of rules! So a constant debate went on among the religious experts about which laws were more important than others. Some said, "the laws about sacrifices are the most important!" Others said, "No, the cleanliness laws, the eating, the washing, those are the most important!" And they all had sophisticated arguments why their opinions were correct- and so this Bible expert, likely sick of all the convoluted arguments, asked Jesus, "What do you think?" Jesus then quotes the book of Numbers where God says, "Hear this, Israel! The LORD is our God, and he is one! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's the Law of God! That's more important than tithes, worship rituals, spiritual washings or avoiding pork. That is what it all boils down to- and it always has- that has always been the first and most important law. And the Pharisee is delighted! He says, "That's what I'm saying! To love God neighbor is much more important than all the ritualistic minutiae that the rabbis are always going on about." And Jesus says, "You're close." Which means that although this pharisee has a lot right, he still doesn't get it. How?

2. The Law *actually* condemns. Unfortunately, modern people, especially Christians, hear Jesus speak like this and say, "How nice. Isn't that great? It doesn't matter about all the little works we're supposed to do. It's not about having the right beliefs about God, it's not about worshiping the right way, it doesn't really matter how you choose to live your life, just love God and love your neighbor, that's it." We get so comforted with parts of the Bible that talk all about love like 1 Corinthians 13- "Love is patient, love is kind, love does not envy, love does not boast." *Hold on.* Let's test that- Love is patient- can anyone here say that they are always patient, always willing to let other people go first and never get annoyed or frustrated when people don't do what we want when we want? Love is kind- can anyone here say that they are always loving and nice and kind to those who don't deserve kindness? No one here shows any kind of disdain or thinks any unkind thoughts about those they don't like? Love doesn't envy- no one here ever thinks, "they don't deserve that, I do" to themselves? Love does not boast- does anyone here ever look down on others for any reason? Does anyone brag, or humble brag, or bend the truth to make themselves look better? Need I go on? "Love the LORD your God with all your everything." Does your every thought, every desire, every thought, every word, every action line up with what God commands in his Word? Are you always obedient- letting God's Word dictate how you spend your money, spend your time, speak to your spouse, speak about your enemies? You've never thought, "I know what God says, but I deserve this. I need this. I want this." Who in this room can stand before God's throne and say, "Yes! I've been exactly and done exactly what God wants, and I've perfectly loved my neighbor and put everyone's own desires and needs before my own?" That's the point Jesus is making, and that is why the Pharisee is close to God's Kingdom, but not in it. Because the Pharisee, along with many of us moderners, haven't actually considered how high, how perfect, how demanding, and therefore how crushing and condemning Jesus' command to love actually is. It's not the command that's the problem- it's perfect, we're the problem because the deeper we look into what Jesus love actually is, and how high his

standard is for love to be true and perfect, the more we see how hateful, how selfish, how hopeless we really are. The problem with the Pharisee's rules weren't that they were higher than God's standard, but lower. Even if you were to obey all the rules perfectly, if you did it with even a hint of ambition, a hint of fear, it's not up to God's standards. His standard of love is infinitely higher than we would ever dare imagine.

But so is his love for us. Notice how the pharisee quotes what Jesus quotes- it's not quite exact. Do you notice what he leaves out? "*The LORD is our God.*" What does that change? *Everything.* The reason Jesus came was not to be our example for how to love, nor was it to just express his love, but to be punished for our inability and refusal to love up to his standard. That's why he had to die- because love is such a beautiful, foundational, perfect thing and to not do that makes one evil, disgusting, and wrong, and therefore not worthy of God's presence. Jesus needed to die in our place, and in doing so he showed just how free, how patient, how kind, how relentless, how compassionate, how active, how deep, wide, and high God's love for you really is. That's how we can truly love the way God wants us to. We love not in order to gain anything, not because we're afraid of punishment- all the punishment went on Jesus- we love because he loved us. And because of what Jesus did, because we've been saved completely and have nothing to earn from God, because he's already given us everything in Jesus, every hope for Heaven, every assurance that because of Jesus we are absolutely good enough to be his people, the Law of Love doesn't have to destroy us, it can guide us to do what we were meant to do- serve God and neighbor.

3. The Law *actually* defines good works. Perhaps by now you see the pattern that shows up in the Pharisees and at Luther's time. At Jesus' time, the religious teachers and Bible experts seemed to overlook all the times where God loves and forgives his Old Testament people, even as they consistently rebel against him, and they instead created a theology where God loves the Jews more than everyone else, and if you *really* want to be loved by him, you must obey the Laws, and then go above and beyond the Laws God put in the Scriptures- and it turned into this hypocritical and superficial religion that had not only lost God's beautiful promise- that he loves and forgives sinners, but they actually forgot the Law- Love for God and neighbor must be the beginning of and ultimate definition of every good work- so the Pharisees encouraged people to hate people of other races, cheat and abuse their parents by taking their possessions and giving them to the Temple! In Luther's day, something similar happened. The message of Jesus' free gift of salvation was muddied and over time they added so many ridiculous rules that true Christian love was absolutely lost. Sure, the priests did pilgrimages and prayed for hours on end, but they were also often drunks and could be found in the brothels- even the Pope at the time had several illegitimate children! And with indulgences that allowed people to pay for forgiveness, people stopped coming to church and confession because they didn't need it anymore to get God off their backs! I've heard people talk like this today! "Yeah, I'm going to have a crazy Saturday night, but I'll make up for it in church the next morning!" "Yeah, I have some bad habits, but I

give a lot to my church.” Do you think that’s what God wants? God doesn’t just want your hour on a Sunday morning, or your offering in the plate. He wants *you*. *He wants your heart. All of it.* He wants you to obey him not because you have to, but because you love him. But if you’re doing it to earn anything, you’re doing it for you, not him. That’s what makes the Gospel, the message of Jesus and his obedience in your place and his death in your place so beautiful. It frees and enables us to actually obey the law the way God wants- to follow his rules, to keep his commands and serve our neighbor out of love, not fear or obligation. Consider this quote from Luther: *“Now you tell me, when a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool—though that father is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith—my dear fellow you tell me, which of the two is most keenly ridiculing the other? God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith..”* That’s the beauty of it. Christian love for God and neighbor doesn’t always mean big and noticeable and seen by everyone. When you change a dirty diaper- and it smells awful- the fourth time in a day. When you forgive your idiot husband. When you honor your parents, respect your government and boss- even when you don’t agree with them. When you could gossip about someone with all the others, but you stand up for that person instead. When someone snubs or insults you and you don’t get them back. Are those things big and noticeable? Maybe not to people, but they are absolutely perfect, beautiful, meaningful, and they bring him joy. How? Because of Jesus, you bring him joy. Amen.