

## Importance of Vision

Vision Statements are important because they enable people, both within and outside of an organisation, to be very clear about their values and direction. And so for a few random examples:

- McDonalds: "To be the world's best quick service restaurant experience"
- Netflix: "To help content creators around the world to find a global audience"
- Harley Davidson: "To fulfil dreams through the experiences of motorcycling"
- General Electric: "To be number 1 or 2 in every market that we serve"
- Alzheimer's Association: "To have a world without Alzheimer's"

But to develop such a Vision can be challenging. What qualities or activities do you emphasise? Do you focus on yourself, your customers, or the whole world? Should your Vision be idealistic or realistic? And, in the case of big business, how do you hide the fact that your true Vision is to make lots of money?

## Riverbank's Vision

So it's good for us to ask, what's our Vision for Riverbank? What's the reason for our existence and our direction for the future? And that's really important. Because even though we may think the answer's obvious, we also know there are many churches and Christian organisations with very different ideas about what the focus should be. And we know that over time many have changed direction in a way we'd seriously question.

So what's our Vision? Well as Reuben mentioned, we have a distinct advantage because we have the Bible. The Bible is our ultimate Vision document. And so what we're really doing here is seeking to honestly and accurately distil God's will, God's vision for us, into something concise. And as a result the Vision we've settled on is this: "To be people who love God, love our Community, and love the Church".

Of course there's much more we could say, and we will, but this is what we believe it boils down to. We believe the very core of the Lord's will for us is that we love God (that's him), love our community (that's the lost), and love the church (that's each other). Everything else should flow from these 3 priorities.

## Our Vision to be people who Love God

And so this morning we want to especially focus on the first, to be a people who love God. And the first thing I want to say is that this is absolutely foundational. We could talk about evangelism and growing the church and caring for the poor, and we're going to do that. We could talk about discipleship and pastoral care and teaching each other, and we're going to do that as well. But all these other activities, and in fact everything we do as Christians, must flow from the underlying reality of our love for the Lord.

That's why in his book *Organic Outreach for Churches*, Kevin Harney titles the very first chapter, "Loving God – Without This, Nothing Else Matters". And he goes on to say: "Love for God is the foundation of organic outreach. If we fail to love God, he will not draw people to our church. When we love God passionately, he will entrust people to our congregation so we can lavish them with his grace."

## The Biblical Basis for Loving God

But before we go further we need to ground this claim in Scripture. And we'll do that by looking at our reading from Mark 12. For there we find a religious leader approaching Jesus and asking him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" He asks Jesus, the Son of God, of all the Bible's many statements describing how we should live, the Lord's will for our lives, which one sums it up best? And notice Jesus didn't dismiss him. He didn't say that's a stupid question. He didn't say just go away and obey them all. No, even Jesus agreed that it's profitable to seek out the heart of God's Word and be clear on what's foundational.

So Jesus answered him: "The most important one ... is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Now today we'll put aside the second command, to love your neighbour. We'll come back to that next Sunday and the one after as we look at loving our community and church. But Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the most important instruction the Lord has ever given is the first one, to love him. In the similar passage in Matthew 22 Jesus says, "This is the first and greatest commandment."

And there he also says, "All the Law and ... Prophets hang on these (commands)." In saying Law and Prophets, Jesus refers to the entire Old Testament. So this calling to Love God doesn't only summarise the commandments in the narrow sense, but summarises God's will for us throughout the whole Bible.

And we see this reinforced in various places. First, we should realise Jesus isn't inventing this command but quoting it from Deuteronomy 6. And that passage was extremely well-known to the Jews, for it's part of what they call the Shema, words they recite every single day.

But we can also look to Psalm 18 where the author proclaims, "I love you, Lord, my strength." and Psalm 33 which says, "Love the Lord, all his faithful people!" In Daniel 9 he prays, "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him".

In 1 John 4 it says, "Whoever claims to love God yet hates his brother or sister is a liar." In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul says, "If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed!" And in Ephesians 6 says, "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love."

Loving God is a central theme of Scripture. But we must understand that this theme is much broader than just the word love. Rather it incorporates a variety of ways that we're called to respond to the Lord. And while there's many, I'd like to mention 3.

First loving God incorporates the whole idea of trusting, believing and putting our faith in him. In Proverbs 3 we're urged to "trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." In 1 Peter 1 it says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him".

Second, loving God also incorporates the whole area of worshipping, praising and glorifying him. In Romans 8 in his great doxology Paul writes, "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever!" And concluding that same letter Paul writes, "Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, ... to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

And thirdly, loving God incorporates obeying, serving and submitting to him. In Joshua 22 he says, "But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." And in 1 John 5 we're reminded, "In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands."

So hopefully this helps us see why the first and most foundational part of our vision for Riverbank is for us to be people who love God. For to love God, Jesus said, is the first and greatest command, it's a calling we see throughout Scripture, and it's a concept that encapsulates trusting the Lord, worshipping the Lord, and serving the Lord.

But there are 2 further questions that we want to consider today. And they are, why should we love the Lord, and how should we love the Lord?

### Why Should we Love God?

So first why should we love him? Well as we come back to our text in Mark 12, Jesus tells us. For before calling us to Love him, he also quotes these words from Deuteronomy 6, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." In this statement Jesus very simply reminds us that the Lord is the one true God. And I don't know how often you think about this, but I really want you to do so today.

My friends, the Lord is the one and only Creator of the heavens and the earth, the designer and maker of the entire universe, of everything around us, both seen and unseen. The Lord is the one and only giver of life, and sustainer of life, he's the source of abundant blessing and all things good. The Lord is the ruler over all he's made, the King of kings and Lord of lords and nothing is outside his control. The Lord is all knowing and all seeing, he's righteous and just, he's faithful and reliable, he's completely holy and perfect in all of his ways.

And my friends, as if that were not enough, the Lord is also compassionate, forgiving, merciful and gracious. He's the one who looked down upon us in our wickedness and defiance and decided that even though he had every right to tell us to go to hell, that instead he'd send Jesus to take our place, to bear the wrath and to set us free. So any love we might have toward God is in fact a grateful response to the far greater love that he first showered upon us. And I think one of the best ways this has been expressed is in this beautiful hymn:

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder consider all the works Thy hand hath made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, Thy power throughout the universe displayed;

When through the woods and forest glades I wander, I hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze;

But when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in,  
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin;

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation, and claim his own, what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, "My God how great Thou art!"

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee: How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee: How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, why should we love the Lord? Because he's the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because he's the perfect Creator of this world and the merciful Saviour of our souls, because he's wonderful, he's great, he's awesome, and he's magnificent. And I truly hope that your heart is gripped by this truth.

## How should we love God?

But the other question is how should we love our magnificent God? And again Jesus provides the answer. For he says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

Jesus calls us to love God with a fiery passion, and with every ounce of our being, and with the total resoluteness of our will, and with every possible reserve of our energy. He's calling us to love God by putting him absolutely first in every single part of our existence, in our church and our homes and our work and our leisure, in our decisions, motivations and ambitions, in our thoughts, our words and our deeds.

He's calling us to love God above everything else in life, because without him we're nothing, but with him we have everything. So he's utterly worthy of our undivided devotion, our sacrificial service and our heartfelt praise. Jesus is calling us to recognise that God should be everything to us, for he's the very reason for our being and our only hope for the future, and so we should live with that reality planted deep in our hearts, stirring our very soul, at the forefront of our minds and lived out with every ounce of our strength.

And that's why in Vision 2030 we've said that at Riverbank we want to be a church where God is truly glorified in all that we do, where we're utterly committed to the authority of his Word and dependence on him in prayer, and where we gather regularly with the primary purpose of worshipping his holy name.

## Application

But you know it's one thing to write this in a document and talk about and to have a sermon on it. But it's quite another thing to actually live it out. And so every single one of us need to ask ourselves, what place does the Lord have in my life? Do I worship him with passion? Do I trust him even when things go sour? Do I obey him and serve him with utter sincerity? Can I honestly say that I seek to love him with all my heart, soul, mind and strength?

Maybe you're here this morning and you've never truly loved the Lord? You come to church, grew up in a Christian home, go through all the motions, but it leaves you cold. You'd rather scroll through facebook than open your Bible, you'd rather follow the footy than follow Jesus, you get more excited about a booze-up than about Church, you're more passionate about money than about God. If that's you then I hope and pray that you'll wake up and consider what's missing. If that's you then I hope and pray that you'd open God's Word and ask him to open your eyes to the truth. If that's you then I hope and pray that the Lord would soften your heart to accept this message today and to change you, to draw you into a loving relationship with himself.

Or maybe you're here today and you realise that you once loved the Lord but your love has grown cold. Like the Ephesian church in Revelation 2, you've forsaken the love you had at first and have fallen far from God. You can remember those days when you were on fire for Jesus, but the fire has burned low as other things got in the way. Well you know as well as I do that you can't be satisfied with that. You need God to stoke those embers in your heart, to fan the flame of your passion, to fall in love with him all over again. So ask him to fill you with his Spirit, and then don't stand in his way. For if you pray for a renewed devotion to God, then I guarantee he'll hear you and transform you. Like a prodigal Son he'll welcome you with open arms.

But perhaps you're here today and your love for God is strong. You know that you're but a wretched sinner who God in his grace has rescued and redeemed. You know that the Lord is a good, good Father who has blessed you so richly and so you love him with all your being. Well if

that's you then I truly hope that this message has helped you to love him even more. That you'll trust him more confidently, worship him more fervently, serve him more faithfully. I hope that you'll be even more committed to putting God first and making your love for him the fundamental purpose of your existence. For that's his will for our lives.

## Conclusion

But now I'd like to finish with 2 more quotes from Kevin Harney. First he says: "If a congregation is gripped by God's love and lavishes it freely on each other and their community, God will draw people to this church. God is the one who draws people and softens hearts. He is also the one who will stop spiritually curious people from coming to a church that will not introduce them to the amazing grace and love of Jesus. This means we need to do a spiritual check on our congregation's heart. Does our heart, as a church, beat with the love and compassion of the living God? Can people see our compassion? Can they feel it? Are we fulfilling God's call to lavish him, each other, and our neighbours with love?"

And secondly: "Heart healthiness begins as we examine our love for God, both as individuals and as a church. And as we rediscover our first love – our passion for God – we repent and begin to do the things we used to do. We begin to love the world again and find our hearts stirred with longing for people to meet the great Saviour who has changed our lives. Reaching out to the lost with love is the organic overflowing of a heart that is intimate with God."

My friends, the first part of our Vision for Riverbank is to be people who truly love God. For only then will we be able to love each other and the lost. May God truly bless us as we strive to be the Church he calls us to be. Amen.