

As a kid, my friends and I debated the age-old question: which is the greatest superhero?

Along the same lines, which is the greatest chocolate bar?

As adults, of course, we are more sophisticated. So now we debate which quarterback is the greatest of all time. Which café makes the greatest coffee? Which city is the greatest to live in? And here in Yountville, which restaurant is the greatest?

We love to debate 'which is greatest'!

What does this have to do with our Bible passage? Well our passage begins with a question about which of God's commands is the greatest. And Jesus gives the greatest answer. So stick around and we'll find out what he said in just a moment.

INTRO

Fathers Day Video

Well good morning and welcome to Yountville Community Church. Let me start by saying Happy Father's Day to all the dads amongst us! We appreciate you!

My name is Dan Bidwell, Senior Pastor here. It is so great to have you with us today, as we take time to rest from our usual busyness and make time for God. I pray that our time today will help you draw near to God as we worship him, as we hear him speak from the Bible, and as we pour out our hearts in prayer.

As always, if you are new with us today, a special welcome. We are really excited about what God is doing in this little church, and we're excited to have you along with us on the journey. We'd love to know that you watched or listened today, and what you thought, and how we can join you on the journey of faith. The best way to do that is to fill out a Connect Card at our website www.yountvillechurch.org, and if you're local I'd love to catch up and hear your story in person.

If you've been with us for a while, you'll know that we are right at the end of our building project, which will see our historic chapel from 1876 given a new lease of life. And so we are looking forward to moving back into the building very soon, and we'll let you know the exact dates as soon as we are able. In the meantime, you can catch us each week right here on the internet, on our website, on Youtube and on your favorite podcast platforms.

If you have children in your life, make sure you check out Yountville Kids Church online. Our Kids Minister Charlotte does an amazing job of sharing Jesus with the littlest ones in our church family, so please watch yourself and share those videos with your family and friends.

But that's enough news for today. It is time to turn our attention to the Bible. So why don't we pray that God would speak to us as we open his word:

Our heavenly Father, as we read your word today, help us to hear your greatest commandment to us. Help us to hear and listen and take it to heart, so that we love you more every day. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

INTER

Which is the greatest? That is the question that a Jewish teacher of the law asks Jesus in today's passage from Mark 12:28.

Out of all the commandments in the Bible, he asks, which Commandment is the most important? Which one is greatest?

Mark 12:28

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating [that is, he heard Jesus and some religious leaders debating about the resurrection and what that means for marriage]. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Mark 12:28

The Jewish teachers of the law loved a debate, they loved an argument. They were experts in the Old Testament part of the Bible.

And so I wonder if they had this debate often – **which is the greatest commandment?**

It was an important question – there are 613 commandments in the OT – 248 *do's* and 365 *do not's*... That's a lot of commandments. A lot of things you should be doing, and lots of things you shouldn't be doing...

So this question goes straight to the heart of what it means to be Jewish, and what it means to follow God - how do you sum up the Law of God in a single Bible verse?

I wonder how **you** would sum it up? I wonder what **I'd** say if I was put on the spot like that...

The answer for Jesus is easy. Reading from v29...

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'³⁰ 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: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'³¹ There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

Jesus sums up the greatest commandment as this – Love the Lord Your God, and Love your neighbour as yourself.

BTW did you notice Jesus picks two commandments, not one? We'll forgive him for that! We're going to focus on the first one this week, Loving God, and we'll look at Loving Our Neighbour next week.

So, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...

First things first: where did Jesus get this verse from?

It's from Deuteronomy 6. And for Jewish people this is one of the most important scriptures. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is known as the *Shema*, which is the word in Hebrew for "Hear" – (because the passage begins, "Hear O Israel...")

The *Shema* is recited twice daily by devout Jews, in their morning and evening prayers. It is traditional for Jews to say the Shema as their last words, and for parents to teach their children to say the Shema before they go to sleep at night.

It was super important to Jewish people, and this is the passage that Jesus shares as his number one greatest commandment:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

First thing I want to say, how great is it that Jesus uses *the* central Jewish scripture when he's talking to Jewish teachers of the Law. Jesus could have given a different commandment, or a new commandment, or declared the OT obsolete. But he doesn't.

By choosing this daily recited scripture, Jesus is saying that the Jews are correct: God *is* one. The God of the OT is the same as the God of the NT. You can't play off Yahweh v Jesus. Same as you can't play off the OT scriptures against the NT. No, it's one big story going in the same direction.

You know, I wonder for some of us if we don't spend much time looking into the OT in our quiet times because we don't see the relevance. If we quietly think the NT makes the OT irrelevant, obsolete, unprofitable... Can I say, persevere!

I read Ezra and Nehemiah in my Bible reading over the last couple of weeks. And at times I thought, just give me some Paul. But right there on the page was this story of God's faithfulness to his unfaithful people. A story of God forgiving his people's sins, bringing them out of danger and back into the promised land. Treating them better than their sins deserved. A story of prayer, and depending on God, and heartfelt repentance...

The OT is full of riches for us. Take it from Jesus – it is well worth drinking in God's words from the beginning all the way through to the end.

That's the first idea – Jesus teaches us to read the OT as part of understanding God's character, and God's commands, and God's priorities for his chosen people. So don't neglect the OT!

The second idea is this: this is a scary commandment.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength...

It's the word *all* that makes it scary... God wants us to love him with *all* our heart, soul and strength.

We think of our **hearts** as the place where emotions come from – love & affection. But for Jews, the heart was the source of understanding, of reason, decision making, and conscience. So to love God with all you heart meant to make the decision to love God daily. I suppose that's what they reminded themselves of morning and night –

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart... and with all your soul.

Your **soul** is your essence, your being, your whole 'self' as a person. So you're to love the Lord with all your being and self and everything that you are. And the same goes for our **strength**. Every ounce of our energy is to be poured into loving him. In one of the Aramaic translations at the time, strength is rendered 'wealth' – so love the Lord your God with all your wealth, with everything you have.

Altogether this sounds like the promise we make in marriage – with all that I am and all that I have, I honour you...

Jesus says every part of our life is to be given to loving the Lord our God. *All* our heart, *all* our soul, *all* our mind and *all* our strength.

How are you doing on that? What does it even mean to love God with everything?

Let's change tack for a moment...

I saw a meme on the internet the other day. It made me laugh because it's so true.

An atheist, a vegan and a crossfitter walk into a bar. (Crossfit is a gym class BTW)

Do you know the punchline?

I only know because they told everyone within 2 minutes!

Did you ever notice that, when people have something that is really important to them, they can't stop talking about it? Somehow within 2 minutes they've gotten onto the topic of whatever it is that's most important to them.

What does it look like to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength?

Perhaps it looks like the crossfitter who just has to tell everybody about this gym program that has changed their life. It's become such a major part of their life, just like the vegan who literally eats and breathes veganism, because it makes a difference to every bite they eat. Or the atheist who is so certain of their convictions that they need to let everyone know what makes plain and obvious sense to them.

Maybe that's what it looks like to be a Christian who loves the Lord with every fibre of your being. Your faith is abundantly clear to everyone around you, hopefully not in an annoying way, but in the way it just overflows into every part of your life. It's who you are...

And so as we imagine the sort of church we want to be, wouldn't it be wonderful to be a church that loves the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, so much that our delight in Him bubbles over into every aspect of our lives together and in the world.

Can you imagine the impact that church could have? In Yountville. In the Napa Valley and beyond. In our families. In our schools. People known for our love for Jesus, a love which changes the way we use our time, and money, and homes, and prayers, and speech... It'd be great, wouldn't it?

So again I ask, how is your delight in God? How is your love for the Lord our God?

I said before, the word 'all' is the scariest word in this passage. Loving God with *all* our being seems impossible.

But it is the standard that God demanded back then, and it's the standard Jesus demands of us now.

Because it's the standard God demands of himself.

God is love, and in Jesus he has shown us what true love looks like – love that spares no expense, makes no compromise, love that is willing to die for the sake of the other, love that is cross-shaped.

And it's by looking at Jesus that we learn to love as Christians, not grudgingly or out of duty, but because he first loved us. And with the gift of the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, God is

making us more like Jesus day by day, making possible what seems impossible – to love God with all our hearts.

So from the inside out, God is changing us. But like a good crossfitter or vegan, the kind of training we do and the food we eat also makes a difference.

In the Shema, Deuteronomy 6, did you notice the kind of diet and training that God commanded his people to follow?

God said,

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and ... soul and ... strength.⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

God asks his people to create daily routines that keep Him at the centre of our lives, to train ourselves to remember Him throughout the day, to coach one another like we coach athletes, so that our heart, soul and strength are given to the Lord each day.

What are some of those daily routines?

In v6, God says his commandments are to be upon our hearts.

Primarily I think this means seeking God in his word – otherwise known as reading your Bible. And as you read, taking it to heart means listening and hearing God speak, hearing him challenge and rebuke you, encourage you and exhort you. It means taking sin to heart and making repentance earnest. It means pouring out your heart in prayer in response to the words that God has spoken to you. It means growing in your faith from year to year, not just becoming stagnant in your middle age or soft in your retirement. It means having a hunger to know and serve the Lord that renews every season of life...

When you have a faith that is growing like that, as you take God to heart, people will notice. Husbands, your wives will notice if you start to pick up the Bible daily. Wives, your husbands definitely notice when you make the Bible part of your daily routine. Young mums, I know it is hard to find time for the Bible when there are babies and toddlers around. But keep trying! It

matters to your children that your faith is growing. And dads – what better gift could there be on Father’s Day than hearing your kids say: “My dad taught us to love the Lord...”

Because God wants us to share our faith with our children – to impress upon them what we are being taught, to talk to them about Jesus at home and on the road and at bedtime, and at breakfast.

And it’s the same in families and friendship groups and with your Bible study group and at BBQs, we are to talk about what God is teaching us.

*when you sit at home, when you walk along the road,
when you lie down and when you get up.*

When you get up... What’s the first thing you do in the morning?

A couple of years ago, the team at Desiring God did a survey about Christians and their spiritual disciplines.¹ Desiring God is the website for John Piper’s Bible teaching ministry. Anyway they took a survey of 8000 Christians who subscribe to their website. And they discovered that on average 73% of switched on Christians check their email and social media before their spiritual disciplines. The survey was skewed towards people under the age of 65, but still the numbers are stark.

As the article accompanying the research says: we are quick to Facebook and slow to God.

Our mobile phones and iPads have changed the world, but they might be destroying our souls at the same time...

So come back to the greatest commandment, from Deuteronomy 6. God teaches us to build daily rhythms that bring God back into focus.

Perhaps that’s making your devotional the first thing you do each morning. It’s something that I try to do every day. I make coffee, then I read my Bible.

I do read the Bible on my phone. I’ve really enjoyed the YouVersion Bible app for a number of years. I like that you can set an alarm to remind you to read the Bible. I like that the app lets you choose from lots of Bible reading plans. This year I’m reading the Bible in a Year with Nicky

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-wrong-reasons-to-check-your-phone-in-the-morning>

Gumbel. I'm finding it really thought-provoking every morning as I read Gumbel's commentary and then some OT, some NT and part of the Psalms or proverbs.

Maybe that would work for you? I like that YouVersion has some accountability tools built in to remind you if you've done your reading for the day, and it tells you how many days in a row you've read. That works for me too.

But there are lots of ways to read the Bible, and lots of ways to start a spiritual discipline. The biggest thing is just to get started, and then to keep going. If you'd like help with that, please get in contact via the Connect Card and we'll share the resources we've found helpful. Or of course, you could ask someone else from church how they keep God in their daily life.

Because this is how we keep God at the centre of our communal life. We encourage one another, we help one another, we pray for one another, and we spur one another on to love and good deeds...

So how are you planning to keep the greatest commandment this week? What will you do tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that?

I want to finish with a story – a parable from the Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.

A parable about a town where only ducks live.

On Sundays all the ducks would *waddle* off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. On this particular Sunday, the duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go, there was no God-given task the ducks could not accomplish. With those wings they could soar into the presence of God himself. The whole duck congregation quacked "Amen"! At the conclusion of the service, the ducks left, commenting on what a wonderful message they had heard -- and waddled back home.

Brothers and sisters, let's not waddle back home. Let's be a church that soars into the presence of God himself as we love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength.

Will you pray with me?

