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Sermon Summary #37

I Love You, Lord! Mark 12:28-34

If somehow it were possible to **lay bare your soul** in the presence of everyone here this morning, **what would it reveal about the priorities of your life?** If your **thoughts** could somehow be recorded and played back in stereo for all to hear, **what would we learn about what matters most to you?** If your **efforts and actions** in the course of a single day could somehow be written down in descriptive detail for all to read, **what would we discover about what you cherish most?** What is it in life that is of **supreme value** and importance to you?

I have to admit, those are some scary questions! But my reason for asking them isn't to frighten you, well, maybe a little bit, but rather to highlight the fact that a very similar question was once asked of Jesus. A religious leader, a very scholarly and learned man, once approached Jesus and said: "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment? In your opinion, Jesus, of **all** that God has required of us, what is **most** important?"

I wonder if your answer, or if my answer, would be the same as his. Who was **this man** who approached Jesus with this question?

Mark refers to him as a "**scribe**" (v. 28) while Matthew tells us that he was a "**Pharisee**" and a "**lawyer**" (22:34-35). This man was an expert in the Law of Moses, a man highly skilled in adjudicating religious, social, and legal disputes. He was probably the most learned and astute expert on scripture and rabbinic law in their ranks. To put it bluntly, the Pharisees send in their **top gun**, the smartest, most savvy, and most articulate spokesman among them all. If anyone could get Jesus to stick his foot in his mouth, this is the guy.

It's interesting that in Matthew's version of this story, the Pharisees decide to have one final go at Jesus after seeing how he "**silenced**" the Sadducees. The word translated "silenced" literally means to "muzzle". In other words, the Sadducees were verbally incapacitated by Jesus. They were rendered speechless. Utterly tongue-tied! The Pharisees were thrilled with this. The only thing they would love more than seeing the Sadducees made to look foolish is seeing Jesus exposed. Listen again to his question: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

It's important to remember that the Jews loved to make distinctions among the laws of Scripture: some were considered great and others small, some were described as heavy and others as light. All the laws were equally inspired and authoritative, but some took precedent in their thinking over others. The Rabbis would spend hours debating which ones were more important, which ones were more or less binding. Perhaps they thought Jesus had his own hierarchy by which he ranked them. Perhaps by getting him to name the most important one he would commit some embarrassing theological error.

Our Lord's answer is found in vv. 29-31. Several things should be noted here.

First, our highest, greatest, most pressing and preeminent responsibility is to love God. Contrast this with the beliefs of actress and author Shirley MacLaine:

"The most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself . . . the only sustaining love involvement is with yourself . . . When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you've been and where you're going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your marriages, your children, your pain, your happiness – when you examine all that closely what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself."

Second, if our highest and greatest duty is to love God, our lowest and most grievous sin is the failure to do so. "If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed" (1 Cor. 16:22)!

Third, our love for God will only be as good and as deep and as intimate as is our knowledge of him. Note the relation between Jesus' statement concerning God's nature in v. 29 and our responsibility to love him in v. 30.

Fourth, our love for God must be comprehensive. Notice that Jesus says it is a love that is found in your

heart and your soul and in your mind, a love that requires your strength. These are not separate parts in human personality. His point is that **every fiber and faculty** of your being must love God. Your love for God must be expressed in your thinking and choosing and feeling and speaking and acting.

Fifth, our love for God must be complete. Jesus says we are to love God with *all* our heart and *all* our soul and *all* our mind and *all* our strength. Our love must be whole-souled and whole-hearted. Half-hearted love won't cut it. Half-souled love won't cut it.

But it isn't enough to be told the importance of loving God. We must know *how* to do it. What does it *mean* to love God and *in what ways* should it be manifest in our lives?

Ann and I will celebrate our 39th wedding anniversary in less than a month. She really is the love of my life. But how would anyone know that's true? Simply telling you I love her won't work. After all, **I could be lying**. What proof is there? Where is the evidence? How does *she* know that I love her? If I truly love my wife, there are certain things I will do and feel and say. Likewise, if I truly love God, you will know it in the same way. Consider the following proofs of my love for Ann and, by way of application, the evidence of my love for God.

First, if I truly and whole-heartedly love her, she will be the all-consuming passion of my life. If I love her, there should be a deep and intense affection in my heart for her.

As you can see, I strongly disagree with those who say that love is not a feeling but merely a choice. That isn't to say there's no truth in the assertion that love is what you do. As John Piper points out, "the good in this popular teaching is the twofold intention to show (1) that mere warm feelings can never replace actual deeds of love (James 2:16, 1 John 3:18), and (2) that efforts of love must be made even in the absence of the joy that one might wish were present" (DG, 1986, 93).

In other words, **whereas love may be more than feelings it is by no means less than feelings**. For true love to exist in its highest and purest form there must be *both affection and action*. To argue that love is simply what you do and not also what you feel is irresponsible, boring, and worst of all, it dishonors God.

So let me ask you something. Do *delight* in God (Psalm 37:4)? Do you *rejoice* in him (Philippians 4:4)? Do you seek in God and his presence the *pleasures* that last forever (Psalm 16:11)? When you meditate on his beauty does your heart beat faster? When you reflect on his saving grace do you weep with gratitude?

When I'm with Ann, I feel rich and complete and whole. After thirty-nine years I still get goose-bumps when I see her. I love her. I love God more. No, I don't *always* feel it. I live in a fallen world and in a fallen body. My passions aren't always aflame. I get depressed and feel lonely and sluggish, just like everyone else. But when I do I pray that God would restore unto me the *joy* of my salvation (Ps. 51:12). I pray that the Spirit would rekindle in my heart the fire of passion for the God who loves me and gave himself for me.

Second, if I truly and whole-heartedly love my wife, she will be the sole recipient of my affection. That is to say, I will be loyal to her. I will love only her.

I can't very well claim to love her if I'm involved in an extramarital affair with another woman. *The proof of my passion is fidelity*. Love that isn't loyal isn't love. Likewise, if I love God I will be faithful to Him. ***I will not sleep with other gods***. I will not run after another lover. I will not give myself, either in body or soul, to any rival paramour. I will forsake all others and cleave only unto him. I will not commit idolatry. I will not love money. I will not covet the praise of men above the approval of God.

If I do, I risk provoking God to jealousy. If I violate my love for Ann by giving myself and my affections to someone else, her response will be one of outrage and godly jealousy, and rightly so. Likewise, if I commit spiritual adultery, I inflame the jealous passions of God. "You adulterous people," writes James, "don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). God simply will not tolerate a cheating wife.

How, then, does my love for Ann show? It is seen in my relentless commitment to be loyal to our marital vows. When we were first saved we, in effect, pledged unto God to be faithful, "and forsaking all others to cleave only unto him." You can't love God and play the field.

Third, if I truly and whole-heartedly love Ann, I will oppose and resist anything or anyone that seeks to do her harm. I will be diligent to protect her. I will defend her name.

What kind of love would it be if I stood by idly and indifferently while her enemies launched a vicious assault? My love for God reveals itself in the intensity with which I cherish his name. If I really love God, I will cringe each time I hear that precious name used profanely. My love is measured by my reaction to public contempt for his honor. If I were to hear someone defaming my wife, you can be certain that I would rush to her defense. Yet so often we turn a deaf ear to the blasphemous railings against the name of Jesus Christ. He has become little more than a cuss word for many. How can true love do nothing when the Beloved is besmirched?

Fourth, if I truly and whole-heartedly love my wife, I will want to spend time with her. We don't have to be doing anything special. Just being together is enough.

How much time do you spend with God? Do you visit him briefly on Sunday or do you live in his presence every day? How often do you meditate on his word (Psalm 1)? Do you fill your mind with his principles? Do you rehearse in your heart his mighty deeds? Do you enjoy his fellowship? I enjoy Ann's presence because of who she is. She is gentle. She is smart. She loves me. She satisfies my soul like no other person on this earth. I enjoy God's presence better still. He is gentler. He is smarter. He loves me more. He satisfies my soul like no other person in the universe. No wonder the psalmist said of God, "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps. 16:11). "One thing I ask of the Lord," wrote David, "this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). Now there's a man who loves God!

Fifth, if I truly and whole-heartedly love Ann, I will talk with her as often as I can. How many times have we heard it said that communication is crucial to the success of any relationship? It's true. My love for her is revealed in my effort to open my heart and let her in, so that she might share my struggles and hear about my hurts. My love for her is seen when I make time to listen to what she has to say. She knows I care when even the most important of tasks is set aside to hear what is on her heart or what filled her day.

So, *how is your prayer life?* Your love for God is measured by the depth of your communion with him in prayer. I've heard it many times from embittered wives: "How can he say he loves me when he never talks to me?" That's a good question. How can you say you love God when you so rarely talk to *him*? How can we say we love God when we so rarely *listen* to what *he* has to say?

Sixth, if I truly and whole-heartedly love my wife, I will seek to do those things that please her and increase her joy.

How, then, do we love God? Jesus said it best: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Again, "Jesus replied: 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me (John 14:23-24).

Jesus is **not** saying that loving him **equals** keeping his commandments. He says that loving him **leads** to keeping his commandments. First we love him and then from the overflow our obedience comes. Love is not synonymous with obedience; it is the root of it.

Seventh, if I truly and whole-heartedly love Ann, I will brag on her to others. I will boast of her beauty and rave about her godly life. I will be quick to tell the world how wonderful a mother she is to our two daughters. I will be careful never to demean her or question her worth in public (or private).

And if I truly love God I will brag on him! That's right. Our boast is in God! "Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done" (1 Chronicles 16:8). That sure sounds like bragging to me. Tell the world how great he is. Boast aloud of his goodness. "Glory [literally, 'boast'] in his holy name" (1 Chronicles 16:10). The person who truly loves God will praise God. The lover of God will ache with anticipation for those times of corporate worship when with the believing community he can raise his heart and voice to magnify the beauty of the Lord. Here is the passion of the lover of the Lord: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. . . . Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you" (Psalm 84:1-2,4).

Eighth, if I truly and whole-heartedly love my wife, I will tell her so! The dumbest thing any man could ever say is: "Oh, I don't need to tell her I love her. She knows it by my actions." Nonsense! Love is more than merely "saying so," but it certainly isn't less than that!

Wives have every reason to doubt their husbands love if they never hear them say so. Perhaps I go a bit overboard on this one, but I tell Ann that I love her at least a half-dozen times a day. But I've never heard her complain. She's never told me to shut up. She's never given me the slightest indication that it's repetitive or irritating. Nothing like: "I'm sick of hearing you say that! Can't you get it into your thick skull that hearing someone say the same thing a dozen times a day for nearly 40 years is going to get old? Shut up! Say something new. Can't you come up with something a little more creative?" No.

I have to confess, though, that telling Ann how much I love her hasn't always been easy. When we first began dating I frequently told *others* how much I cared for her. But when we were together, I found it difficult to say *to* her what I freely said *about* her in the presence of friends. I never had a problem doting on her when others were around. But when it came time to look Ann in the face and say "*I love you*," my stomach knotted up, my throat contracted, my mouth became a desert and I generally made a fool of myself.

Why? Because we fear letting our real feelings be known to the person for whom we have them. We are afraid they won't feel about us the way we feel about them. The prospect of not being loved back is terrifying. No one wants to be left emotionally stranded. Putting ourselves in such a vulnerable position with someone whose response we aren't sure we can trust is too scary for most people.

But that's no longer a problem. I still tell others how much I love my wife. I talk *about* her every chance I get (as you can from listening to this sermon). But I'm not afraid to tell her face to face. After thirty-nine years of marriage we've grown to trust each other. The fear is gone. Our love has deepened and we feel free to share our innermost feelings and thoughts.

Think of this in terms of your relation to God. To tell others *about* God is certainly good. It's important for us to join with other believers and sing what I call "third-person" praise: "*He* is good and gracious," "We love *him*," etc. But there's something extraordinarily special about "second-person" praise. Third-person praise is telling others *about* God, about *him*. Second-person praise is *you* telling God himself. It's one thing to say "We love God." It's something else and altogether more intimate to say, "God, *I love You*."

So let me ask you a question: How often do you tell God that you love him? Is your heart filled only with detached and potentially impersonal "third-person" praise? Or do you turn your eyes toward heaven, look your Lord in the face, and say: "O dear God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *I love you*?"