

TOP PRIORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

I am sure that this time of the year finds you, like me, feeling something of the pressure and the complexity of life. I think I could have gone to a graduation exercise every evening last week, and probably should have, but, because there were other demands upon me, I did not attend them. Sometimes life can get so full and busy that you wonder how in the world you can ever handle it all. Well, the answer to this complex riddle of life is what we will be looking at this morning in this passage from Mark's gospel. Where to begin? What do you do first? And where do you go from there? We will get great help from Jesus' words found in the twelfth chapter of Mark.

Remember the passage we are looking at takes place during the last week in Jerusalem after Jesus had cleansed the temple and cast out the money-changers. He has been confronted by the scribes, chief priests, Pharisees, Herodians, and the Sadducees as they had tried to trap him in his words. And now, in the midst of that great discourse, he takes the attack and begins to speak about things of very great import to us.

We will pick up this story in Mark 12, Verse 28:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall 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, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." {Mark 12:28-31 RSV}

Now in the answer our Lord gives to this insightful scribe's question, you have his listing of the priorities of life:

Number one is to begin with God. When you are troubled, when you do not know what to do first, when you feel you do not have enough resources to handle something, or are puzzled and bewildered, start with God and love him.

When we think about our own lives, we have to admit that we seldom start with loving God. Almost always we start with the demands made upon us, instead of looking to the God who will lead us through the puzzle, the problem and the pressures that confront us. We are so wrapped up with the problem that we can't get our minds off it and onto God. He says to start with loving God. When you start with God you start with one who sees the whole problem -- not just a part of it -- but the whole problem and everything involved in it. Our trouble is that when we start with our own situation, we are so limited that we do not see it in the right perspective. And so we are to start with God's thinking, with God himself.

But God himself does not begin there. There is something that precedes our love of God that our Lord takes for granted. What is that first thing? It is that God approaches us first. The command from Moses in Deuteronomy 6 that Jesus quotes here is a command that man is to love God. But that love is not possible until we have begun to see that God has loved us first. Our love, therefore, is the response of man to God. If all we were faced with was a demand for love from a God up there somewhere, we would find it difficult to respond. He would appear to be our enemy or our judge, or even our executioner. But the Scriptures never really start with our response. Do you remember how John put it in his letter, in First John 4:19: "We love, because he first loved us."

Man's responsibility is to respond to God's love, which is reaching out to us on every side -- reaching out in nature, reaching out in the supply of all that is being given to us day by day. We are never to forget that the things we enjoy -- the food, the air, the sunshine, the shelter -- all these material things of life that we need --

come from the hand of God. It is God who gives them. It is God's goodness protecting us, sheltering us, and watching over us that keeps us from being ravished and destroyed by the forces that are at work for evil in our lives. God's sheltering hand is protecting us. So when you think about the love of God, and especially the love that redeems us, the proper and only response of the heart is to love God back with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Now notice that Jesus tells us the process by which we are to love God. You see, love is not just a momentary feeling; it is a logical and specific action. If loving God is the key to life, the central truth of our humanity, how do we do it? Jesus quotes Moses as indicating certain processes by which this happens. The order given in the verse proceeds from the heart through the soul and mind to the whole man, the strength. This is reversed in our experience. In experience we begin with the mind. Truth comes to us from observation. We see things, we feel things, we hear things, we read things about God, we observe the record of our lives, the experience around us, and truth hits us first in the mind. That is why Jesus said that we are to love the Lord our God with all our minds and think about what God is doing for us and through us and to us in our life.

Next, the truth lays hold of the emotions -- or the soul, as it is listed here. Love the Lord your God with all your soul -- that is the quality of your emotional response. Truth hits the mind and then it moves to the emotions and grips them and you begin to feel moved by the truth your mind comprehends.

The third step is to assault and lay hold of the will -- the heart, it is called here. This word "heart" is used in several ways in the Scriptures. Sometimes it refers to the will, sometimes to the emotions, but here it is the will that is in view. We are to choose with the heart, choose with the will -- "For man believes with the heart and so is justified" {cf, Rom 10:10 RSV}, the apostle tells us in Romans 10.

Once our will (heart) is moved, then the whole man is involved. We love God with all our strength. Which means we obey what he says.

How do you love God? Observe the truth, allow the truth to touch the emotions, then to challenge and move the will, and finally to engage the body. We are to do this again and again and again. You start solving problems by responding to God's love in this way. Only then can you love your neighbor as yourself. That is putting things in the proper priority.

Now before we depart from the first commandment I want you to notice something: This progression of our love of God is beautifully portrayed for us in some of the hymns that we sing. When we sing hymns, we are worshipping God, and in many cases these hymns reflect the order in which we respond to God's love. One of our favorite hymns that we have sung here many, many times is Charles Wesley's great song, *And Can It Be*. You remember how it begins:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?

What is this hymn saying? It is challenging the mind about this amazing record of the Son of God. God himself in human flesh come to die and suffer on my behalf that I might have a part in all the great working of his universe, be involved with him, linked with him and all that he does. That truth staggers the intellect. The mind is called on to think about Christ's work and consider these questions:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?

The truth appeals to the mind. Then the heart responds; the soul, the emotions, come in.

Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

The following verses repeat the process of contemplating various aspects of the death of Christ on our behalf and then inviting the heart to respond again. In the fourth verse the will is called into play:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.

You see, the process is to look back over the past and think it through. Then God works.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.

Here is God at work in a darkened heart. Then the writer continues:

My chains fell off, my heart was free.

There is the freeing of the will to act. My heart -- the very term that Jesus used in the verse in Mark, my heart, my will -- was free.

I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Finally the body is brought in; the whole man must follow God. This is loving God with all the heart and soul and mind and strength together.

We are to solve our problems by responding again and again to God's love. When we start with God's love, then we are ready to turn to our particular problem -- our relationship to our wife, children, neighbor, friend, or boss. Then we are freed to love our neighbor as ourselves. The same process that reached us and won a response from us, we are now to pass on to somebody else. We can show them the same love that we ourselves have received. Our response to God's love makes it possible. If we start with our neighbor, we get so wrapped up with all the hurts, difficulties, and friction that we start responding in the same way they treat us. But when we start with God and we have experienced his love and responded to it with love, then we can pass it along to our neighbor. It never works when we start with "love your neighbor" first, as we always are trying to do. All the social humanities of our day teach us that we ought to love our neighbor and they are right. But if we start there, without loving God first, we find ourselves incapable of loving others.

This week a young man came to me and told me he had gone home this week and found his sister very upset with the whole family. She had railed against them one by one. Nobody could talk with her; she was very uptight, angry, and hostile. This had offended him and he responded to her with the same hostility. They got into an argument and they had threatened each other. It was the usual story that we all are so familiar with. I put my arm around him and said, "You know, I remember about five years ago a certain young man coming to Peninsula Bible Church. He had the most hateful look on his face that I think I have ever seen. He was hostile and angry and upset. He would scowl and snarl at everyone who tried to talk with him. He went around with a constant frown and nobody could get him to do anything. But you know, I have been watching that young man through the years and he has been changing. I see a smile coming to his face. I see a friendly grin for everyone now, and a whole different attitude, a wholly different outlook, an eagerness to help and a cheerful spirit." And I asked, "What do you think has made that change?" I knew that he knew that I was talking about him. He hung his head for a moment. I said, "You didn't change because people treated you the same way you treated them, did you? It was love that changed you. Somebody loved you in spite of the way you acted. Somebody reached out to you, showed interest in you, encouraged you, and hugged you. That is what made the change, was it not?" He stood there for a moment with his head down and then he said, "Yeah, I guess that is what she needs." He went home determined, I knew, to respond to his sister with love.

Love is not just a word to write on a plaque and put on your wall. Love is what you do to people that irritate you, when you are upset and angry and hostile and feel like striking back. You start with God. Remember his love to you. Remember his forgiving spirit, how he wipes out everything without requiring anything from you. Respond to it and immediately pass it on to the one you are involved with. Love toward God is the most

important thing in our life. Jesus is right when he says loving God is top priority. Everything else will flow from that love, but if you put anything else first, the whole process will soon run dry.

Last week some of the elders were talking together and discussing the problem that many here at PBC have mentioned loneliness. Somebody brought up the fact that people are saying we are too big. When you come to church now you are lost in the crowd and many people are suffering from loneliness. Many feel they are being neglected because the body is too large. I raised a question about that. I said, "You know, the common explanation of loneliness -- that there's too big a crowd. But I do not think that is true. Many times you can have just two or three people together and every one of them is eating his heart out from loneliness. It is not the size of the crowd that makes the difference. Loneliness is a love need that is not being met. It is the awful ache and agony of needing love but not finding the need met." And we do need love. Love is as necessary to humanity as air and sunshine and water and food. Without love, the human spirit withers, shrivels, and dries up; we begin to strike back and act hostile and angry.

Now we do need love. God knows that. To fill this need he sets us in families where we start out life being loved and babied. Love is poured into us, and we begin to see and learn what love is, and how much we need it. And for awhile those around us fill all our love needs. But we find out sooner or later that the cistern runs dry -- people are not an adequate source of love. They never were intended to be. If you keep depending upon people for love, you will find their love has limits; it can only go so far and it cannot meet your needs.

The whole purpose of life is to lead us to the final and ultimate truth that God is the one who loves us and can fully satisfy us. God's love meets the deepest needs of our life. I find that Christians resist that truth. They do not want to believe that. They do not even want to take love from God because they are so insistent that it come from people. But when you try to meet your love needs with people, you find out that those needs cannot be fully met, and you feel lonely. You can be with people who are trying to love you with all their hearts and yet be lonely. Love needs are met only by God himself and that is why we have to start with God.

Jesus goes on to point out something further.

And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." {Mark 12:32-33 RSV}

This scribe, unknown and unnamed, saw a great truth. He saw that God is not at all interested in the performances of our life, not interested in mere religious activity. But these things point to something that God is interested in. And this man had seen it.

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any question. {Mark 12:34 RSV}

Our Lord commends this scribe, but he points out that he is still not laying hold of the kingdom of God. He is close. He is seeing truth that is very, very important -- that God is concerned about the inner attitude and not the outward performance of life -- but the scribe still doesn't grasp the whole truth. He is still not able, in other words, to love the Lord his God with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his mind, and all his strength. He is missing something.

And now our Lord goes on to say what it is. I am sorry that in our English text the connection between these two paragraphs is lost. But in the Greek text it is very clear that the two are linked together. It says, "Jesus answered as he taught in the temple, and he said to him..." {Mark 12:35a Grk}. Jesus answered. Answered what? He answered the question that would be in the scribe's heart: "You say that I am very close to the kingdom of God. What more is necessary?" Jesus answered by putting a question to these scribes.

**"How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared,
'The Lord said to my Lord,**

**Sit at my right hand,
till I put thy enemies under thy feet.'
David himself calls him Lord; so how is he his Son?" And the great throng heard him
gladly. {Mark 12:35b-37 RSV}**

Now according to Mark's record, no one answered that question. But our Lord is thrusting deeply now and is driving home a very important point to these scribes. When David says, "The Lord (i.e. Jehovah) said to my Lord, sit at my right hand," he is calling the Messiah "my Lord." Now all these scribes would have agreed with that. Jesus' question is: How can the Messiah be David's Lord and still be his son? The answer, of course, is the mystery of his own person. He is descended from David according to the flesh but he is the Lord of Glory according to the Spirit.

Jesus' identity is the central issue of life. What is Jesus to you? Is he Lord? The whole issue of how to enter the kingdom and how to live in the kingdom of God hangs at that point: Is Jesus Lord?

As Paul tells us, the whole of creation is moving toward that final day when that question will be thoroughly and completely answered, when at last the whole record of human war and conflict and evil is ended. Then God will have finished his amazing and remarkable workings through human life and history. It will culminate in that great scene in which "God has highly exalted Jesus and given him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Phil 2:9-11 RSV}.

Jesus is the issue. Is He Lord of your life?

Is He the one who motivates you to act?

His lordship is the key. That is why all through Paul's epistles you find many practical exhortations which are linked always with "as unto the Lord": "Wives, be subject unto your husbands as unto the Lord," {cf, Eph 5:22}. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church," {Eph 5:25a RSV}. "Children obey your parents in the Lord," {Eph 6:1}. "Stop stealing for the Lord's sake," {cf, Eph 4:28}. "Masters be kind to your employees for the Lord's sake," {cf, Eph 6:5-9}. Everywhere Jesus Christ as Lord is the governor of life.

Now is that the way you are living?

Does Jesus govern all that you say and all that you do?

Jesus is the issue. His lordship is what releases the kingdom of God in our life. All the greatness and glory of God come pouring into us when he is Lord. Paul writes to the Colossians and says, "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus and to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Col 3:17}.

Mark concludes this account with a contrast that indicates how Jesus' lordship will manifest itself. The true expression of a heart submitted to the lordship of Jesus is demonstrated by a contrast between a pompous, proud, religious scribe and a humble, poor, and godly widow: Verse 38:

And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market place and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." {Mark 12:38-40 RSV}

That is the false expression of godliness. It is possible, we all know, to pretend to be godly. In some way or another we all fall heir to this temptation, do we not? We succumb to it. We love the places of honor. We love the salutations in the market places. We love to make long and impressive prayers for others to hear. If it is not these specific pretenses we use, it is the modern equivalents of them. We love to impress people by our godly talk, by our knowledge of the Scripture, by our attendance at church, by various and sundry religious performances, and we want others to know about these things. But in contrast:

And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." {Mark 12:41-44 RSV}

The religious performance among these scribes and Pharisees had reached such an absurd state of affairs, Josephus tells us, that some of the Pharisees, before they made their contribution to the great collection box Jesus was watching here, actually summoned a trumpeter to go before them to get everybody's attention. Then the Pharisees would come up and proudly deposit a bag of gold in the treasury chest. He wanted everybody to see his ample gift.

In some ways we do the same thing. I heard about a dear man standing up in a meeting where they were taking an offering and subscriptions of money, and he said, "I want to give \$100 -- anonymously." But Jesus said the one who really moved his heart and contributed tremendously to the kingdom of God was a little, unnamed, unknown widow who had no influence, who had no outward posture of being worth anything. She came and put in two tiny coins that added up to no more than a penny; but because she loved the Lord her God with all her heart, all her soul, all her strength, and all her mind, she gave it. And Jesus said, "She has done more for the kingdom of heaven than all the outward performances of all these others combined."

What is that saying to us?

We are so intent upon the fact that God wants some kind of activity on our part, are we not? We think that the way to serve God is to do spectacular or showy things -- to win a lot of people to Christ, or to give our time, or work in open ways. Yet the Scriptures tell us over and over that works are just the channel. God wants performance, but only if the attitude of our heart is right. If you cannot do anything outwardly, your attitude may still be right -- your attitude toward your neighbor and friends and your children and your husband and your wife and your boss and those who irritate you. If your attitude is one of love, love received from the God who loves you, then you are advancing the kingdom of God far, far more than all that is done outwardly by the greatest saints of our day and time.

Is that not amazing!

God says, "You can serve me in the quiet of your home and by the gentle, sweet spirit that you display in the midst of pressures and problems. You have done more to advance the kingdom of God than those who get out and proclaim the word on public address systems everywhere." That is the way God sees life.

Now that is both discouraging and encouraging. It is discouraging for those of us who have a public ministry. We are mentally jotting down in the back of our minds how impressed God ought to be with our performance. But God is looking at our heart. This is very encouraging for us to remember in those private moments when our attitude changes. Nobody was watching, nobody saw what we were thinking, yet, instead of being short and caustic and sarcastic, we were sweet and patient and gentle. God says the kingdom of God is advanced by that event, by that activity, by that attitude.

These words of Jesus really search our hearts, do they not? And yet how wise they are, how true they are as they put their finger on the thing that really counts. Here is a poor widow who loved the Lord with all her heart, soul, mind and strength, and God saw it.

Prayer:

Our Father, with the apostle we cry, "Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out." Confronted with this mystery, our Father, we can only respond with a heart of gratitude and joy and thanksgiving that you have given to us so richly of your love. Help us now to turn around and pass it to our neighbor -- for your sake, Lord Jesus, to love when our flesh cries

out to hate; for your sake to respond with patience and pity instead of with sharpness and sarcasm; for your sake, Lord Jesus, to go out of our way to meet another's needs instead of indulging our own selfishness Lord, you have called us to this way of life and you must empower it. We thank you that you are ready to do so when we are ready to obey. Help us to be joyful peaceful, loving instruments expressing your kind and quality of life in this day, this week, this month, this year. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

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