

DAY 1 - (week beginning Mon 14 Jan 2019)**Read - Mark 12:28-34**

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “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.” v 29-31

We continue this week our preparation for the Covenant Service on 27 January. We have looked at the road we are on and getting our priorities right, and this week we look at what is called the Great Commandment.

William Barclay notes that there had always been a tendency among the Jewish scribes to try to summarise the 613 precepts that Moses had received on Mount Sinai into one sentence. As we read the Old Testament we see various attempts to make this summary, with Micah reducing it to three: “To do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”. [Micah 6:8]

But here the scribe was wanting Jesus to tell him which was most important. Maybe he was feeling that if he then got that one right, he could feel good about himself even if he did not get the others right.

Jesus took him back to 10 commandments and summarised them, and the whole law, into two: Love God fully and love neighbours as you love yourself. If the scribe was looking for an easy way out, he did not get it!

We need to understand what Jesus was saying.

Prayer: Father please show me how to love You fully.

DAY 2**Read - Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” v 5

At Mount Sinai, God told the Israelites that they must love Him with all their heart, and soul and strength. We need to understand why these three aspects of a person were specified.

In the Bible, the word ‘heart’ is often interchanged with ‘spirit’ and means the very essence of a person. This is the eternal part of a person – the part which can’t be touched or explained but is the part of us that separates us from animals and will live forever.

God is saying that we need to love Him with the very essence of our being. In the verses in Deuteronomy that follow He explains that this must be what we talk about with our children, when we walk on the road and when we lie down and when we get up.

Loving God with our heart is not something we do when the mood or music is right in a time of worship, or that arises when we read the Bible or at special emotional moments. It is to be the very essence of our being – what makes us tick!

It is crucial that this comes first in the list because only when we love Him with our heart can we then love Him with the rest of our being.

The question we need to all ask ourselves as we prepare for the Covenant is: what is the essence of who we are? Is it ‘one who loves the Lord’? If not, then we need to allow God deeper into our lives.

Prayer: Father, fill my heart with love for You.

DAY 3**Read - Romans 12:1-21**

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” v 2

The second part of us that must love the Lord is our soul. The soul is a little bit more difficult to define but it is the place where our emotions, thoughts and will reside.

It is possible to love the Lord with all your heart, but still make bad decisions, think things that are not good, worry about things we should not worry about and be emotionally wobbly. I think we can all bear testimony to that!

Having a heart that is fully for God is a good start, but that heart needs to permeate more deeply into who we are if we are to satisfy the Great Commandment.

It is interesting that Jesus did not quote Deuteronomy 6:5 exactly – He added in the word mind! We will be spending a few weeks looking at ‘Renewing the Mind’ in February because while our spirits may have been transformed at our conversion, the conversion of the mind takes the rest of our lives.

Jesus says we need to show that we love God not only in our hearts, but also in the way we make our decisions, in the way our emotions guide us and also in the way we think.

This is what Paul was urging the Romans to do – to change the way they think so that they will be transformed into what God wants them to be.

Think: How attuned is your mind to God’s love? Are there ways you think and feel that are not aligned with loving God?

DAY 4

Read - Romans 13:8-14

“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.” v 12

The final aspect of our love for the Lord is to love Him with all our strength. The word strength needs to be understood in the context of the time it was written but essentially it means we must love God through our actions.

It is often said that the law must not only be fair, but be seen to be fair. In the same way we must not only be Christians, but be seen to be Christians. There are two important aspects to this.

The first is, as Paul says, doing the deeds of light rather than darkness. This is talking about our sinful actions that betray the love for God in our hearts. We can only overcome these deeds if our heart, soul and mind are attuned to loving God. We can't start with our actions and hope to move the other way.

The second aspect is the good deeds that God wants us to do to, and for, others. These are the actions which flow out of our love for God and which bring hope and light to those in the world who don't get to see much hope and light. Jesus said that they would know we are Christians by our love. He meant 'by the acts of goodwill, caring and loving that flow out as a natural result of our love'.

What we do, both our lifestyle choices and our acts of charity, are evidences of our love for God that flow as a result of His love for us.

Think: How obvious is it to others that you love God?

DAY 5

Read - Mark 12:28-34

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “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.” v 29-31

But Jesus added a second command to the first one. We are also to 'love our neighbours as we love ourselves'.

Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment, and it would have been expected that loving God was it. But Jesus made it clear that we can't really love God if we don't love our neighbour – because God loves our neighbour as much as He loves us.

Note that this goes beyond the 10 commandments which say don't murder or steal from your neighbour. Note also that Jesus gave us a good description of who our neighbour is when He told the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10.

There is no way of getting out of Jesus making it clear that loving those we come into contact with (the needy and not so needy) is second in importance only to loving God, and Jesus would not have us separate one from the other.

But Jesus does say we must love others the way we love ourselves. So it has to start with loving ourselves (some may battle with this) and then to love others in the same way.

But all of this comes from knowing God's love for us.

Prayer: Thanks You Lord that you love me!

DAY 6

Read - Matthew 7:13-14

“Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life”. v 148

In preparing for the New Year and covenant we have been asking what road we are on and what our priorities are. The important thing for us to realise is that, although we may be far from the mark laid down by the Great Commandment, we are on a journey.

William Barclay put it this way: *The Christian must give continual evidence in his daily life that he is indeed working out his own salvation: day by day it must be more fully accomplished, more completely perfected. The great tragedy of so many of us is that we are never really any further on. ... The truly Christian life cannot stand in the same place; it must be continual progress. It cannot be otherwise, for the Christian life is a journey towards God.*

The challenge for us in this new year is to be making progress along the road towards God. We will not get there in one step, but it is important that we are not standing still. If we are standing still it does not matter what road we are on!

The road maps out a route to a destination. The Great Commandment gives us much insight into where we should be, and also helps us to understand how much we have to do. But we keep moving in the hope that we will get there.

We don't stop our road trip after the first kilometre because it is so far. We know that we have to complete the first kilometre, before the second ... but we know that the journey will be worth it.

Prayer: Father I know I fall short of what I should be. Help me to make progress this year towards what I can be.