

First Things First

Mark 12:28-31 (parallel Matt. 22:34-40)

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In preaching, I like to explore topics while maintaining a textual focus. A favorite style is to use a passage to present the topic that is the central focus of the passage. A theme of Scripture – love God, love neighbor. I preached a series on this theme -- three gospel passages, other New Testament passages, priorities, discipleship, evangelism.

When we pursue God with reckless abandon, we will win the world, we will succeed.

We have a great opportunity. Having opportunities does not make us uncommon — what we do with an opportunity makes us uncommon. Churches have tremendous ministry and mission opportunities that are not seized. In some cases, they are not seen. In other cases, current activities distract from seizing the opportunities. Satisfaction may contribute, personal preferences, doing our own thing. Pursuing God means we seek to catch the vision because it is from God. What will we do?

I begin with an extensive review. Some will read or listen to this sermon without the benefit of the previous sermon, without the benefit of the series.

A cornerstone teaching of Jesus is found in Mark 12:28-31. A question was asked. Knowledge is having right answers, wisdom is asking right questions. Right questions will lead to right answers. Jesus is asked a question. The most important is love God, fully! Not haphazardly--fully. Of second importance is to love neighbor as yourself. No greater commands.

This is review to get to the primary point. Lesson #2 about how we can grow in our love for God. The 21st century church, many Christians, tend to think of #2 as #1, and #1 as #2. Churches focus first on #2. Churches focus on loving people. Which is preferable? That church really loves God, or that church really love people? Can we see ourselves? We have things in reverse. How do we get #1 as #1?

Focus on #1. We cannot do #2 without #1. The primary objective of life is #1. Understand #1 to do #2. God has #1 as #1 for a reason. Few ministries consistently call attention to the need to love God. We should first hold one another accountable for #1, not #2. We overcomplicate it. It is simple. Love God, and we will do what he wishes, accomplish his purpose.

Later in this sermon series, will get to the question: Did you follow me, or did you do your own thing? Do not settle for mediocrity. Number your days to gain a heart of wisdom. Do not watch doors of opportunity pass by. Pay attention to commandment #1.

When I love God, I want to connect with God. Establish your God-connection. How do you connect with God? I remind myself that the first priority of my life is not the rescue mission, the first priority is the treasure hunt. #2 is a rescue mission to save world. #1 is a treasure hunt, seeking and finding the treasure in a field, buying the field.

When we learn how to pursue God, that will last. When we teach people to pursue people, that will not last. The primary connection is with God. That is first. Love God with all my heart, maximum my connection with God.

I want to love God, first foremost. Put down strong spiritual roots. Here are seven disciplines that encourage my one on one time with God. These could be part of a job description for the Christian, expectations. Do not let your search for God, your love for God, depend only on corporate time, Bible class, worship, the sermon. When you love God wholeheartedly, you will listen and obey. Here are seven things – all related to what God says.

Reading God's word. God has spoken, but his communication is not only verbal—it is written down. He asks, what do you think of my book? I want to read God's word. I want to learn something new, I want to see and understand God, his revelation. I am not just read, just studying. I am always learning about God, seeing Jesus more clearly.

Studying God's word. Are we students of the Word of God or students of someone else's ideas, teachings, interpretation? God has a plan for your life. God has a way. God has a plan for your ministry in this world—even if you are an official church staff member. I summary – be a student of God's Word.

Memorizing God's word. Ps. 34:1, "I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth." We suffer from a lack of praise because we do not know, memorize the word. We do not guard it, have it within us, as a fire within us. Ps 119:11—hide the word in your heart. Matthew 4, Jesus quotes Scripture, know the heart of God. If you are not spending time in Scripture, knowing, retaining, you do not know the heart of God. Hold yourself accountable. Describe your journey, your time with God, time listening, learning. Even the pursuit of ministry can overtake the pursuit of God. Grab onto God's word.

Meditating on God's word. Chew it, digest it. Have the word available for life, think it through. Read it through. Every time we contemplate God's message, it is fresh and new; the word applies to life, wherever we are.

Praying the Word of God. The word of God will lead to prayers of humility, open confession, submission, obedience. Give your heart the opportunity for repentance and confession. Praying the word of God is humility, requests, petitions, intercessions. Paul asked people to pray for him. We should intercede for others; we can do that by praying God's word. We get in touch with God through his Word. How many people do you pray for each day? How many pray for you each day? We are under-prayed for and we under-pray. God will have his way when we see the strength of numbers. God word is God's power within us.

In Exodus 17, Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands. What's the plan for loving God and obeying God today? Intercession -- lift up your hands for others in the work of God. We need intercessors, we need someone on the hill praying for us, regardless of how strong we may be. Why would we live prayerless lives?

Listening to God: Hearing the Word of God

We live too fast; we live in a 90-mph culture. The most important thing in life is not speed, but direction. We need a spiritual compass. Get quiet before God and listen. Precious times, middle of night, not what I need to do, what about God? Opportunity to focus, we need listening times. Try a personal retreat, one day monthly, in addition to regular listening. Spend a whole day listening to God, recharge, refuel. Listen to God, be hearers of the word.

Personal Worship: Personalizing the Word of God

Personal worship is a spiritual discipline! Not corporate worship – this is me and God. Personal worship enhances corporate worship. We were created for God's glory. Get out of bed, how and when will I spend one on one time with God today. Out of that encounter flows Christian living. Praise God, send God a love note—pray! Listen as God attributes worth to you. Give him majesty, splendor.

These tie to passion—Mark 12, Matt. 22. To love fully is passion. Then, “love your neighbor”, that is compassion. Passion comes before compassion. When these are combined—wow! Begin with passion. My passion for ministry and mission comes from my passion for God. My passion for God leads to compassion for people.

Keep track of what Jesus gives. Agape, love, all-consuming, unconditional, never-ending, intensified love. Love the Lord your God... That is passion.

Compassion is people. Compassion grows out of my passion for God, it enhances my passion for God.

When we connect with people, we fail to put down deep roots, we often build surface roots. We do not share private life. Such love for neighbor cannot hold us up in difficult days. What am I talking about?

- Self-dependent, faith in me.
- Self-sufficient, no need for God's help, lack of faith in God.
- Self-centeredness, glorify self. One said there are three types in ministry: called, self-centered, uninvited.
- Self-righteousness, I do not need grace, I have my own. Therefore, I do not extend grace.
- Self-absorption, the opposite of self-abnegation. I do not need others, I have me.

I am saying that everything in the Christian life begins with God. Connection with God helps us find spiritual north on spiritual compass. With shallow roots, we are prone to crash and burn. Commit your life to intimacy with God, let him do what he will with your ministry. We want to control what cannot control. We fail to control what we should control. I have no control over what God does with my life/ministry. I have absolute control over my personal time with God.

One author wrote of the Messiah complex. Am I Messiah or messenger? There is only one super-hero in the universe, we are not him or her. If we focus on the rescue mission, is easy to develop a Messiah complex. I believe we are more prone to adopt unscriptural ideas and practices. We want to be accepted, to fit in. Here is the key: we must attract people to Christ, not to self, not to the church (members). When we seek God first, we tell of God, we become messengers. Those results will endure.

We have a lust for appreciation—being on a rescue mission is fun, people appreciate us, we get our strokes. We become victims of circumstances, up one day, down the next. That is the result of focusing on people. Focusing on God establishes stability on the roller coaster ride. We are only the messenger. We point people to God, not to ourselves. Salvation is not from us. We are not it. Point people to God, glorify God, not self. Understand the order correct. We seek numbers, we seek glory. Get back to God. Get back to Christ. God acts in spite of us, not because of us. Let us be content with serving, rather than seeking to be sensational.