

# The Greatest Thing in Life

Message for Sunday, August 13, 2017  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Mark 12:28-34

Last week I talked about being great, using the story of the politician Joe Parker. Everybody aspires to greatness. We want to achieve goals, to accomplish worthwhile things with our lives.

In the Bible reading we're looking at today, Jesus answers the specific question, "What can I do that is great?" Jesus tells us what true greatness is.

**Mark 12:28-31, New International Version:**

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"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 neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

I've preached on this passage many times. Yet every time I read it, something new comes to mind.

## 1) The greatest thing you will ever do with your life is to love God

This is the first step of life. Without God, there is nothing. I could wax poetic here, but that doesn't help. The plain truth is that we need God, and we need to place God first and foremost in our lives.

Every part of the person is included: *heart, soul, mind and strength*. The modern idea that our relationship with God affects only the spiritual part of our life would have been a foreign concept to the Hebrew people. They didn't divide their lives into the "spiritual" and the "unspiritual." In fact, there are no words in the Hebrew language to express what we mean by "spiritual." For them, all of life was naturally connected with God.

I'll say it again: you want to do something great in your life? Then love God. There is nothing greater than that.

## 2) Loving others is closely connected with loving God

The man asked Jesus what is *the* most important commandment. Jesus answered by naming two commandments, instead of just one. I think Jesus is telling us that you cannot separate the two. This theme is repeated many times in the Bible.

**1 John 4:20, New International Version:**

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

"A liar"! That's strong language! It just shows us how vital is this connection between loving God and loving others.

**Matthew 5:23-24, New Living Translation:**

"So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God."

Going to someone and saying, "I'm sorry; please forgive me. And I forgive you, too"—that is not an interruption to worship; that's *part* of worship.

**James 1:27, Good News Bible:**

What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering, and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.

In that day, orphans and widows were the most vulnerable people in society. In our day, it might be another group of people who are the most vulnerable. In any case, the Bible makes it clear: true worship involves caring for other people.

In each example, the point is clear: our relationship with God *must* include loving relationships with the people around us. If it doesn't then it's just playing a game; it's a sham; it's a lie; it's certainly not Christianity.

## 3) Anyone can do this

Here is something wonderful about loving God and loving others: anyone can do this. Young and old can both do it. People with physical or mental handicaps can do it just as well as those who are strong and healthy. It doesn't matter if you're poor

and homeless or the CEO of a big company; everyone can do this.

There was an elderly man whose wife had died. The little girl next door asked her parents why he looked so sad. Her parents explained that he loved his wife very much, and he missed her greatly. That's why he was sad. That afternoon the girl again saw her neighbour sitting on the front porch, and looking very sad. She went over to visit him. When she came back, her mother asked her, "What did you and Mr. Carter talk about?" The girl replied, "I didn't say anything. I just held his hand and helped him cry." Anyone can do this.

#### 4) Put it in your own words; put it into practice

The person who had asked Jesus this question was impressed by Jesus' answer. This is how he responded.

Mark 12:32-33, New International Version:

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

He repeated what Jesus had said, but not word for word; he put it in his own words. In the culture of that day, the Temple in Jerusalem was heart of worship. Jews would bring an animal as a sacrifice for their sins. They would make every effort to come there at least once each year, even if they lived far away in another country. For that man to say that burnt offerings and sacrifices were not that important was a huge step.

You could say that's what a Christian is: someone who takes the words of Jesus, and puts them in her or his own words. Even more: someone who lives those words.

#### 5) What if Jesus had said...

Here's an interesting idea: when you're reading a Bible passage, and wondering what it means, try this: make it say something completely different.

Example: imagine Jesus saying the greatest commandment was "Don't make mistakes." In other words, don't stick your neck out. Be perfect.

Don't let anyone see that you're human. That's the most important thing you can do in life.

Or how about this: "Behave so that others will respect you." In other words, be absolutely proper and serious. Dress like others dress, talk like others talk, think like others think. Strive to be popular with everyone, and don't say or do anything which someone might not like. Listen to the latest poll, and then join the crowd.

Here's one that is very popular today: "Make lots of money and enjoy all the comforts of life." In other words, be successful—at least as far as our culture judges success. In this scenario, money becomes our god, and we sacrifice everything to get more of it.

When you think of it, anything but love, when taken to its logical conclusion, is an absurd way to live. It's also a sad way to live.

How much better, how much more fulfilling, how much more glorifying to God when our lives are based on the commandments Jesus gave: Love God and love others.

Jesus calls us to love God and others. Anyone can do this. I can do this. You can do this.

#### Next Steps:

- What is the most important thing in life for you? It's probably something or someone very wonderful and precious... but if it's not God, it's an idol. Put God first in your life, and everything else falls into place. Worship God and only God.
- Love God, enjoy God, cherish God. And receive all of that *from* God!
- Once you've experience God's love, then you have more than enough to share with other.