

"IS IT POSSIBLE TO LIVE UP TO GOD'S DEMANDS?"**Mark 12:28-34****THEME: What does wholehearted devotion to God look like?****DATE: 03/25/07**

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According to the Bible, this world is in a horrible state because the first man and woman didn't live up to God's demands. They disobeyed God's will when Satan invaded God's creation and tempted them. The whole human race and all creation came under a curse.

I don't have to try to convince anyone that there is evil in this world. How else can you explain wars, genocide, and atrocities against innocent little children in the neighborhoods of our so-called civilized society?

In a sick world how can we possibly live up to God's demands?

- The majority of Americans believe there is a God. But what is their view of God?

In a national religion survey by Gallup conducted last year responders described God in four distinct ways, An Authoritarian God, a Benevolent God, a Critical God, and a Distant God. The Authoritarian God is angry at humanity's sins and ready to throw the thunderbolt of judgment down on the unfaithful or ungodly. The Benevolent God sets absolute standards for mankind in the Bible, but he is primarily a forgiving God, more like the father who embraces his repentant prodigal son in the Bible. The Critical God has his judgmental eye on the world, but he's not going to intervene, either to punish or to confront. The Distant God is a cosmic force that launched the world, then left it spinning on its own. (USA TODAY, September 12, 2006)

People tend to form their concept of God according to their view of what God expects of us. If you believe God is distant and uninvolved, that conveniently removes all fear of divine judgment. But that view of God also removes any hope of divine help.

At some point in life I think most people deal with this "tough question": Is it possible for mortal, fallen human beings in an evil world to live up to the demands of a holy God?

Let us tackle this tough question by asking and trying to answer three **questions** that arise out of Jesus' interaction with a questioner, reported in Mark 12:28-34.

I. WHY DO YOU ASK? (12:28)

What is your motive in wanting to know if people can measure up to God's expectations?

Do you love God so much that you want to know how to please him? Or do you want to know how much you can get away with without facing God's wrath?

Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker: *'How much can I do and still go to heaven?'* That's crass! But that's exactly what millions of people would like to know.

- This portion of Mark's Gospel reports some of Jesus' interactions with religious leaders after he arrived in Jerusalem. They were hell-bent on discrediting and incriminating him. First it was the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders (11:27-33). Next came the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17), then the Sadducees (12:18-27).

These religious leaders wanted to get rid of Jesus. Why?

Jesus exposed their hypocrisy. On one occasion Jesus was invited to have dinner with some Pharisees. He confronted them about their phoniness. *'One of the experts in the law answered him, "Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also." Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.'* (Luke 11:45-46)

They liked the way people looked up to them and respected their piety. Jesus said it was a sham.

- Then an observer, also a teacher of the law, stepped forward with one more question. He was different. He was not trying to trap Jesus.

²⁸ *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?"*

He wanted to know which of God's requirements was number one.

- We all need to know what God wants from us.

Every human being falls short of God's expectations. That's one of the definitions of sin—not measuring up to God's perfect standards. So all people are sinners.

If you take God seriously, you care about this shortcoming.

- But we also know that God has oodles of love. He loved the people of this world so much that he sent his Son to suffer the penalty for our shortcoming—our sin. The Christian Gospel says that by putting our trust in Jesus Christ, his merits are imputed to us. So Christians don't have to fear God's wrath.

But still, the New Testament is chock full of warnings to Christians about their conduct. God is watching. God will eventually judge each person for what we do in this life. The Bible even implies that people who flout God's standards for holy living probably are not genuine children of God—just Christians in name, or hypocrites. (see 2 Corinthians 13:5)

- So your motive in asking the question, "Is it possible to live up to God's demands?" says a lot about your spiritual condition.

Do you have a deep longing in your soul to please God because you love him? Or are you trying to calm the nagging fear that your faith may not be real?

Why you ask the question may be as important as the question itself.

[Let's address a 2nd question]

II. WHAT IS THE TRUTH? (12:29-31)

What does God really expect? What is the answer to the tough question?

Eliphaz, one of Job's "comforters" asked this incisive question, "*Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless?*" (Job 22:2-3)

If God is complete in his nature and has no needs, does he care whether we meet his expectations or not?

Maybe we can afford to be a bit more laid back about this. After all, God knows that human nature isn't perfect.

Just do the best you can, and hopefully God will give you an "A" for effort.

My high school math teacher tried to motivate us with his favorite saying, *Aim for the stars, and you may reach the top of the telephone pole.* (An old doofus).

He advocated an unattainable goal as an incentive to doing our best.

Is that the way to view our spiritual aspirations too? Are God's commands the stars, but we can never really attain to anything higher than a light pole?

If you really believe that, you can justify a lot of junk in your life, because you're just another fallen human—and God understands.

- Let's see what God says about this?

²⁹ *"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

³⁰ *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'*

Jesus' answer was about love, from first to last.

Jesus cited the most sacred part of the Torah. It's called the *Shema*, from its first word in the Hebrew text: *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 strength.* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

After 40 years in the desert, the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land.

God told Moses to instruct families to teach this to their children when they sat at home and when they walked along the road, and when they lay down and when they got up (Deuteronomy 6:7).

- What does the fact that God is One have to do with this? God emphasized it when he gave his Law to his people Israel.

The nations surrounding Israel served many kinds of gods, which were only idols.

But Israel's God was the one and only true God. He was not a man-made idol. He is God over everything.

Therefore they were to love him with their whole being.

- It's a love so powerful; it expels everything that would threaten it.

There's a famous sermon, by the Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers in the 19th century. It has a fascinating title: *'The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.'* He said, *'We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our heart than to keep in our hearts the love of God'* (Grenville Kleiser, *The World's Great Sermons*. IV p.76.)

If you love someone with all your heart and all our soul and all your mind and all your strength—that's exclusive.

That kind of love excludes or expels any challenging affection.

That's what God has always expected from his people. It's a love so exclusive and so strong that you won't allow anything into that place reserved for God. And it's the first and most important place.

There's an ancient story about a young man who asked the Greek Philosopher Socrates to help him learn. Socrates took the would-be student and led him into the water. Suddenly he pushed the young man under and held him down. The fellow struggled to the surface, gasping for air. He looked at the great teacher and spluttered, 'Why did you do that?' Socrates answered, 'When you want to learn as much as you want to breathe, you will.'

It's the same with this first commandment: you want to please God as much as you want anything—as much as you want to breathe.

- It's easy to say you love God wholeheartedly, and it's very hard for anyone to prove you wrong. So Jesus tied a second command to the first.

³¹ *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."*

We can say we love God without feeling we have to prove it. But if we say we love people, there'd better be evidence.

When Jesus spoke of "your neighbor" he also meant people who may be very different from you.

- This second commandment is a quotation from Leviticus, '*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*' (Leviticus 19:18)

Jesus joined together love for God with love for people.

It's impossible to love God without loving your neighbor or your brother. The Apostle John made a point of this:

'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. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.' (1 John 4:20-21)

In Matthew's parallel account of this interchange Jesus said all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Jesus joined them together because they should stand together.

According to Jesus, you can talk about loving God all you like, but it means nothing unless you love people you can see and we can see.

- How do you love yourself? Do you look at yourself in the mirror and think, '*I adore you, you gorgeous hunk!?*' That's disgusting narcissism.

Jesus meant that you care about the spiritual welfare of other people as much as you care about your own. You care about their social, emotional and material needs.

If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will show it, not just say it.

- That's the truth. If you care about yourself at all, you must care as much about others. Otherwise there's no way you'll love God wholeheartedly.

[Let's address a 3rd question]

III. HOW WILL YOU RESPOND? (12:32-34)

What will you do about the truth that God expects the first place in your life?

If you believe what Jesus said, then you understand that God has first dibs on your life. He is first in your affections.

In all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength God is number one.

God refuses to be locked in some religious compartment of your life that you can lock and ignore most of the time.

- So, how will you respond? Let's see how the sincere questioner responded:

³² *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.*

³³ *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."*

The man got it! He saw that God isn't interested in the religious things we do. He's looking at who we are.

I think this man was probably fed up with watching people go through the temple rituals without even thinking of God or others.

- God had told Israel through his prophets that if they didn't love him their worship was loathsome to him.

The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. (Isaiah 29:13)

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps." (Amos 5:21-23)

This is the most basic principle of godliness. We can become so engrossed in all our programs and ministries that we neglect who we are supposed to be.

I'm sure there are many Christians in church every Sunday who are so busy in their ministries that it's been years since they have truly worshiped God.

- Deliberately giving the wrong impression about our spiritual condition is pretense. It's hypocrisy, and it's deadly!

If we could pile up in one place all the religious impressions people make, it would be the world's largest repository of misinformation.

We see the outsides. God sees our hearts.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones followed G. Campbell Morgan as the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. A lady in the church came to him and went on and on about what a great, godly man he was. He said to her, *'Madam, if you could look in my heart you would spit in my face.'*

The truth is that each of us needs to pray each day, *'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'*

³⁴ *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

Jesus said the man was not far from the kingdom of God.

- What does this mean?

The man was standing next to Christ, the embodiment of God's kingdom, and he was very close to putting his faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

It seems that this man was just a step away from becoming one of Jesus' disciples.

- How far are you from the kingdom of God? The Apostle Paul explained that Christians, those who have turned away from sin and put their trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior, have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's Son. The way to enter God's kingdom is only during this life, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Have you already entered by sincere faith? Living in God's kingdom while you are here in this sinful world is a huge challenge.

It means loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength in a world that tempts you to love things more than God.

It means God is first, and everything else is after God—and that's not just words. God is not mocked.

- Please don't give up and turn away in discouragement. God promises all you need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4). The Holy Spirit will help you to walk right, if you are sincere (Galatians 5:16).

God's kingdom is populated with people who love God with this exclusive love—people who love people sincerely, not just in words.

You can go away today having heard just another sermon. But this is not just another sermon. This is about what matters most in your life and in our life as a church, according to God.

Yes, God cares about your physical health and the challenges you will face this week. God cares about the bylaw issues we'll discuss in our meeting this afternoon. But he cares more about the way we deal with them than about the actual structure we decide on. Will it be evident that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength?

God cares about who we are much more than what we do. Who we are is all about the place we give him in our lives. That's first.

- Do you really love God? Do you really want to be all he expects you to be? That's what it means to love God with all your being. That's what God is looking for—not your religious performance.
- When you worship God, are things right between you and others? Loving God and loving our neighbors belong together. God joined them. Don't try to separate them.
- Are you close to the kingdom of God? What's keeping you from asking God to bring you out of the darkness into his light?