

SESSION ONE:
PRIORITIES

pilgrim

In this session we explore Jesus' summary of the law as the foundation for the way a disciple is called to live.

Opening Prayers

Your word is a lantern to our feet

And a light upon our path

PSALM 119

You, O Lord, have charged

that we should diligently keep your commandments.

O that my ways were made so direct

that I might keep your statutes.

Then should I not be put to shame,

because I have regard for all your commandments.

I will thank you with an unfeigned heart,

when I have learned your righteous judgements.

I will keep your statutes;

O forsake me not utterly.

Almighty God,

We thank you for the gift of your holy word.

May it be a lantern to our feet,

a light to our path

and a strength to our lives.

Take us and use us

to love and serve all people

in the power of the Holy Spirit

and in the name of your Son,

Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Conversation

Without looking, how many of the Ten Commandments can you name as a group? Which are the most important and why?

Reflecting on Scripture

Reading

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’²⁹ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;”³⁰ 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.”³¹ The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’³² Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”;³³ and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbour as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

MARK 12.28–34

Explanatory note

At the time of Jesus, a scribe was someone who, in a largely illiterate culture, was able to read and write. As a result, scribes are thought to have been the people who read and interpreted the law for others. It is possible that the priests from the temple were scribes when they were not on duty in the temple.

The word ‘teacher’ is important here as the scribe is acknowledging Jesus’ authority as a teacher. The original word used was probably ‘Rabbi’.

Whole burnt-offerings (otherwise called Holocausts) and sacrifices were how God was worshipped in the temple. Here the scribe is acknowledging that what you do is even more important than how you worship God.

- Read the passage through once
- Keep a few moments’ silence

- Read the passage a second time with different voices
- Invite everyone to say aloud a word or phrase that strikes them
- Read the passage a third time
- Share together what this word or phrase might mean and what questions it raises

Reflection

ANDREW WATSON

Living well

‘He never did anyone any harm.’ It was the most generous tribute that an elderly woman could pay to her husband after 55 years of marriage. The context was a funeral visit, so my next question remained unspoken. But there it was, lingering at the back of my mind: ‘Yes, but did he ever do anyone any good?’

The widow’s tribute reflects an approach to living shared by many: that provided we don’t hurt anyone, we’ve lived well. As an approach it has its roots in the various ‘*you shall nots*’ of the Bible that we’ll be looking at later in this book – ‘You shall not kill’, ‘You shall not commit adultery’, and so on. As an approach too it fits in well with our legal system, which adds a large number of ‘*you shall nots*’ of its own – ‘You shall not drive at over 70 mph on the motorway’. And a Jewish teacher called Hillel, one of Jesus’ contemporaries, expressed it all as clearly as anyone: ‘That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Law ...’

When asked much the same question, though, Jesus gave a rather different response. The greatest commandment, he says, is to love: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.

In one sense it wasn’t a very original answer: both commandments are to be found in the Old Testament (in Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18 respectively), and the call to ‘love the Lord your God’ was part of the so-called *Shema*, a passage of Scripture that orthodox Jews still

recite each morning and night. But it's probable that no one before Jesus had brought these verses together quite like this as a summary of what these commandments were about; and it's certain that no one before Jesus had so brilliantly modelled this more positive, proactive approach to godly living, truly practising what he preached.

The '*you shalls*' of Jesus, of course, don't replace the '*you shall nots*' of the Ten Commandments. We love God by not cheating on him, by not taking his name in vain, by honouring his holy day; we love our neighbour by not stealing from her, not lying to her, not coveting what she has. But recognizing that love is at the heart of God's Commandments puts a quite different complexion on them, and on the way we're called to live. Not doing anyone any harm is just the start. Actively doing good is now the order of the day; and in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan it's clear that doing good, loving our neighbour, applies not just to our nearest and dearest but to everyone whom God brings across our path (see Luke 10.25–37).

In short

It is easy to think we are being 'good' if we do no harm. Jesus taught, and lived out, that what we do is more important than what we don't do. Jesus calls us actively to do good.

For discussion

- What gets in the way of us loving God and loving our neighbour? How might we try to change that, even in little ways?
- What does loving God really mean? And how do the words 'heart', 'mind', 'soul' and 'strength' fill out the picture?
- What kind of tribute/legacy would you like to leave behind?

How are we to love?

There is another difference, though, between Jesus' answer and that of Hillel, which is relevant today: because for Jesus, the first commandment was to love the Lord our God with all that we are and all that we have. Only then did he call us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

In 2013, the Girl Guides Association in the UK changed the wording of its vows from a promise to 'love my God' to a far vaguer commitment to be 'true to myself and develop my beliefs'. To live well, it seems, no longer requires God – at least, that is the view of the Girl Guides Association. But for Jesus, such an approach is both untrue and unwise. Loving God and loving neighbour belong together, and the best, most fruitful life is lived in loving communion with our Creator, as well as with our fellow human beings. 'Lord, you have made us for yourself', as St Augustine famously put it, 'and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you'.

How then are we to love? That's a big theme in 1 John, one of the shorter letters towards the end of the New Testament. In chapters 3 and 4, John teaches us that love is about the way we act rather than what we say or how we feel; he emphasizes that love drives out fear; he goes on to remind us that love of God and love of neighbour belong together; and finally, two great statements: first, simply, 'God is love' (4.16), and then, 'We love because he first loved us' (4.19).

We receive, we give – that is the secret of a life that earns a different kind of tribute: not just 'he never did anyone any harm', but rather 'Well done, good and faithful servant: come and share your Master's happiness!' (Matthew 25.21).

In short

We cannot split our love of neighbour from our love of God. As 1 John says, 'We love because he first loved us.'

For discussion

- If love is more about how we act than how we feel, what might it mean to love our neighbour as ourselves?
- Does loving our neighbour always mean giving them what they ask for? How do we best respond to the poor or homeless on our doorsteps?
- What do you think John means when he writes that 'perfect loves drives out fear' (1 John 4.18)?

Concluding Prayer

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind,
and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these.
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Eternal God,
the light of the minds that know you,
the joy of the hearts that love you,
and the strength of the wills that serve you:
grant us so to know you
that we may truly love you,
so to love you that we may truly serve you,
whose service is perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

AFTER ST AUGUSTINE (354–430)

Sending Out

During this week reflect on what you have learned and explored in this session. How can your life reflect these two priorities of loving God and loving neighbour? What will that mean for the ways in which you spend your time?

These readings may help you in your reflection:

The reason for our loving God *is* God. God is the initiator of our love and its final goal. He is himself the occasion of human love; he gives us the power to love, and brings our desire to its consummation. God is loveable in himself, and gives himself to us as the object of our love. He desires that our love for him should bring us happiness, and not be arid and barren. His love for us opens up inside us the way to love, and is the reward of our own reaching out in love. How gently he leads us in love's way, how generously he returns the love we give, how sweet he is to those who wait for him!

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1090–1153)

In the evening of our lives, we shall be judged by love alone.

JOHN OF THE CROSS (1542–91)

My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?

SAMUEL CROSSMAN (1623–83)