

HAPPY NEW YEAR: A VISION FOR 2022 (Mark 12:28-31)

1.2.22

INTRODUCTION

Well, there it is — another year in the rear-view mirror. What started out as a trying to figure out, “Who was that masked man, or woman, or child” saw the masks go away only for another version or two of this wonderfully affectionate virus to make their appearance. We saw the continued divisiveness in our politics become the continuing hallmark of our politics. That’s the national news, so to speak.

But here at home, we saw new members come into our church family as well as other people choosing to continue attending our services. We also bid a fond farewell to Lauren Krause as he went on ahead to wait for the rest of us in heaven. Overall, it was another great year of blessing from our faithful Heavenly Father.

As I prayed over what to say at the beginning of another year, God kept leading me back to one passage, the one in which we are going to focus, to use as the filter through which we are going to look at a number of challenges as we head out into the uncharted waters of an unknown year, knowing that the huge blessing of the unknown is the presence of our Father to lead and guide us, as He knows all that lay ahead. And it is to Him that **we begin this time of study with a word of prayer.**

TEXTS (Mark 12:28-31)

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 (Greek, “protos” — “foremost”)?” “The most important (foremost) 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” — Mark 12:28-31 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18).

Now in the context of this moment, Jesus and His disciples have arrived in Jerusalem for what we now call Holy Week. This week, which began with the triumphant entry in front of crowds calling out, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,” will end with the viciousness of a crucifixion in front of crowds shouting, “Crucify Him; crucify Him!” But in between those two extremes will be profound teaching moments, such as this one, taking place between Jesus and one of the teachers of the law. This particular guy had been standing by listening as Jesus answered, argued and debated sort of a “who’s who” of opponents: According to Mark, Jesus faced off against the chief priests, the teachers of the law, the elders, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Sadducees. But nobody could trip Him up in His words, and nobody could show any falsehood in His answers — just like always.

So, after the “dust” settled from all those other conversations, this teacher of the law had his turn, and he asked a great question: In view of all the commandments of God

contained in the law as given through Moses, which commandment was the greatest one? Now one of the first things to consider here is what is really happening. While this teacher of the law may have thought he was asking a question and seeking a response from this famous but rather Radical Rabbi, this Jesus of Nazareth, in truth he is directing his question to the Author of the commandments — in fact, the Author of the entire Law and Prophets and everything else contained in their holy scriptures. There was no higher authority to which he could go.

So, Jesus gives him an answer, but Jesus gives His response by couching it in the context of “ordinal numbers.” And what are ordinal numbers? They are numbers that the dictionary defines like this: “A number defining a thing’s position in a series, such as first or second or third.” In other words, to put it in a sports context, if all of God’s commands were considered the Olympics, these two commands would be standing at the top two spots on the podium. And the gold medal winner, the top spot above all, would be: ***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 Christ, Mark 12:30 (quoting Deuteronomy 6:5).*** It is why A.W. Tozer began his book, *The Knowledge of The Holy*, with this simple observation: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*, page 1). And why should we give the Lord our God all that love? Jesus tells us why: ***“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” — Jesus Christ, Mark 12:29b (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4).*** There is no other God other than Yahweh, the Lord God, the one true God: that’s why.

And then notice something that Christ does. As only the authority of the original Author could do, Christ adds to the original command from Deuteronomy by adding the word “mind,” which would have had particular resonance in a world being more and more molded and influenced by Greek culture, that literally worshiped the brilliance of the mind. Jesus took that cultural signpost and stamped it with His own meaning. The mind was just as integral to a complete love of God as any other component.

And the silver medalist in this Olympics of God’s commands is one taken from the book of Leviticus in the OT: ***“The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” — Jesus Christ, Mark 12:31a (quoting from Leviticus 19:18).*** And then Christ Himself, the righteous Judge of all that takes place at these Olympics, declares His final judgment on the validity of these results: ***“There is no commandment greater than these” — Jesus Christ, Mark 12:31b.***

So, what is Christ saying? Simply this — that everything in our lives in Christ flows from love for the Father. Without that, nothing else matters. This is more than simple acknowledgement; this is calling for response and interaction — in other words, relationship.

APPLICATION

So OK, let’s put these two commands into practical terms. Moving ahead into 2022, what are they telling us?

First, loving God: Now some of this may be a bit of a rerun but, for something really important, reruns are OK — and this is really important. You know, what I love about little kids is that they have the ability to be in awe of something, to be “wowed.” And then, as we grow older, we lose so much of that ability. Even if there is something amazing around us, it seems like, if we’re around it too much, we lose the ability to be impressed, to be “wowed,” to simply be in awe of something. Let me ask: When was the last time you were in awe of God, that He left you literally speechless at His greatness and His glory?

Any body of believers, any church, is in trouble if it loses its ability to be “wowed,” to be in awe of God, to be genuinely moved by our Everlasting Heavenly Father. He has done everything, He is capable of everything, we owe Him everything. Take Him away and we have nothing. How can that not leave us in awe for all He has done, for all the “amazing grace” He has without ceasing poured out on us? It’s what the nation of Israel realized at their deliverance at the Red Sea when they rejoiced and sang: “*Who among the gods is like You, Lord? Who is like You— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*” — *Exodus 15:11*. It’s what the psalmist pointed out in Psalm 33: *Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast* — *Psalm 33:8-9 (NASB1995)*. That last verse should resonate with us, for that’s how Christmas — that baby in that manger we so recently celebrated — came into being: God spoke, and it was done; God commanded and it happened.

Now it may be relatively easy and obvious to be in awe of God when He does things like the Red Sea. And I’m sure that Nebuchadnezzar was in awe when he saw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego waltzing around inside the fiery furnace. I’m sure that Darius was in awe when he realized that Daniel had survived a night in the lion’s den. Amazing things, stupendous things. But what about some other examples? Your own life? Your spouse, your kids? Same thing: God spoke, and it was done; God commanded and it happened. How about your health? How about your abilities, the things you are able to do? Do you think any of that happened apart from God? So does that make you “stand in awe?” Looking at all the ways in which you have been blessed by God’s grace, does that leave you speechless?

As a church family, we should never get used to the wonders of God. Instead, we should pray to become like little children — in awe of everything God has done and continues to do for us. Every one of all those things is a product of His amazing grace. It’s all about getting into the details of that grace — and the smaller, the better. For instance, having the ability to drive, making all the decisions one makes while driving, is His sustaining grace — has being able to drive, arriving back home, pulling safely into your driveway, ever left you in awe? How about being able to walk down a grocery aisle — has that ever left you speechless? Young people, what about the ability to run on a football field, or dribble a basketball — or even get up from your desk at the end of class? Try doing any of those things without God’s sustaining grace. How about the ability to understand and complete

school assignments, the ability to play an instrument, to understand music, the ability to read your Bible — all those abilities are products of God’s amazing grace. And I haven’t even mentioned the ability to see, and to hear, and to touch, and to taste, and to smell — all things we do all day. Do we see the sustaining grace of God in all of that? Does having those abilities ever leave you in awe of the One who created them?

So, what’s that mean? Basically, that everything we are able to do can be, and should be, a praise to God. And the more detailed we see God’s sustaining grace, the more in awe of Him we will become. That’s one way to *pray without ceasing* — **Paul, I Thessalonians 5:18**. Keep looking for God’s sustaining grace — and then praise God for everything you see. The more you see, the more in awe you will become. And the more in awe, the more in love. You will find more in your relationship with God than you ever thought possible.

OK; that covers our “gold medal” winner. Now how about that silver medalist — *love your neighbor as yourself?*

I’ll phrase it this way. This church, any church, is a hospital — a spiritual hospital containing people spiritually sick and broken in many ways. There are no perfect people here. This side of heaven, there will never be any perfect people here.

Let’s dive into this a bit more. Just look around, and you’ll see that no two of us are alike. We are all different in our looks. But it obviously goes much deeper than that.

We are all different genetically, God using two people that He brought together to make us. And even within that framework, we are different. I am different from my brother. My two daughters are extremely different from each other, despite the fact they came from the same “factory.”

In addition to those differences, we function with different personality types — all of which will often create a negative response from someone with an opposite personality. For instance, somebody may be the type that is extremely well organized and efficient. Somebody else not that way may see that person as stubborn or obsessive. Somebody may have a personality that makes them outgoing and comfortable in the spotlight. Somebody else not that way may see that person as attention-seeking or domineering. We have personalities that always see the humor in things, others that see only serious issues to consider. We have people that in consideration of an issue can see the right response almost immediately, while other people need to study the situation for a while. We have people that are incurable optimists, while others are just as incurably pessimists. In short, for every personality type represented here, there is likely another personality type here that drives the first personality crazy — and vice versa.

Now let’s add to that the weight of experiences. None of us were hatched; instead, we have also all been shaped and molded by experiences. Some of us, maybe many of us, may have had some profoundly impacting experiences, often negative ones, at different stages of our lives. Those experiences may have had a hand in building personalities that cause us to quickly become fearful, or angry, or maybe extremely sensitive to where we hear everything directed at us as criticism because that’s what those experiences taught us.

Someone who was constantly told as they were growing up that they would never amount to anything may be this very morning sitting next to someone who was told as they were growing up that they could be and do anything they put their minds to. And all those are just samples of what makes up this, or any, church family.

And yet the scriptures tell us two very important things: First, ***God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be — Paul, I Corinthians 12:18.*** In other words, everyone here — complete with their genetics, their personalities, their experiences, their good stuff, their bad stuff and their completely puzzling stuff — are here because, in God’s perfect wisdom, this is exactly the body He wanted to create here. Second, ***If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us — I John 1:8.*** Again, no perfect people here. The only perfection here is the One we worship. Otherwise, this is a spiritual hospital where we are all inpatient. And none of us are the exception to that reality.

Which brings us back to ***love your neighbor as yourself.*** Moving forward into this New Year, we are reminded that learning to love as Jesus loved mean to ***love one another, as I have loved you — Jesus Christ, John 13:34a (NKJV).*** This means relying completely on Christ to enable us to love in a way that pleases Him because we are otherwise simply unable to love like He did.

And, because this is a hospital, because there are no perfect people here: ***Forgive as the Lord forgave you — Paul, Colossians 3:13b.*** Mistakes and failures are going to happen; if I can guarantee nothing else in 2022, I can guarantee that. But the question is, what are we going to do when those things happen? The Bible says: “Forgive!” But when it comes to forgiveness, it’s not just about the fact that the Lord forgave us but also how He forgave us — completely, no sins left behind:

- 1) ***If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness — I John 1:9 (ESV).***
- 2) ***[Y]ou will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea — Micah 7:19.***
- 3) ***When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; hHe has taken it away, nailing it to the cross — Paul, Colossians 2:13-14.***

In other words, if Christ is truly our model for everything we are to be doing, including forgiveness, then that should become a fact of life around here, being extended as naturally as a smile or a handshake or a hug. And it is in the difficult things, the things that are not easy to do, that we will show exactly who has lordship here.

CONCLUSION

And finally, as we close, two final considerations as we look at the new year that is standing before us — and I’ll just use myself as an example.

First, I love you guys. I’ve made that connection over these 3+ years enough to know that that is not mere fluff, but a conclusion that comes from getting to know y’all. But you

know what? I may be your pastor, but I'm impatient here, too. Which means that, no matter how much I love you, I'm going to make mistakes. My mistakes are not saying anything about your worth or value. My mistakes are simply saying, in that moment, "I'm dumb as a post." That's on me. But I will need your forgiveness for those things regardless because I am impatient here.

And second, a few months ago, a situation came up where I felt it appropriate to pray that God would change the heart of somebody involved in that situation. And God came back to me with these words: "Dan, what about your heart?" Wow; how important is that? Since there are almost always two people involved in a situation, why should I think my heart is somehow perfect and the other person's heart needs changing? It's far more appropriate to ask, "Is my heart pleasing to God in this moment, in this situation? Is He pleased with my actions, my attitudes?" And, if I'm needing to change, how willing am I to let God change my heart; how willing am I to acknowledge that my imperfect heart probably contributed just as much as anyone to that given situation? Seeing my heart as imperfect is critically important to keeping all our relationships forgiven, reconciled and restored.

Moving forward, that's what I pray for this church body: that we find "awe" in our relationship with and love for God, and that we use that love for God to mold and shape our relationships with each other and, realizing that we are all imperfect, that we are all impatient in this hospital we call the church, that the hallmarks of this year in our relationships would be quickness to forgive, to reconcile and to restore, remembering that Jesus did all that for us. If that becomes what our church is known for, 2022 is going to be a great year. Let's pray!