

RECOGNIZING OUR DEBT TO OTHERS

Jada rolled the vacuum to the closet and set it inside. When Jada heard her name being called, she went upstairs. She found Sister Green, her daughter's Sunday school teacher, in her bedroom sitting on the two-seat sofa and in her house robe. It was 4 p.m.

"Are you sure about letting the girls stay overnight?" Sister Green asked.

"I'm absolutely sure," said Jada. "Besides, my daughter can't wait to have overnight company again!"

Jada had been coming to Sister Green's house every week for the past five months. Sometimes she cleaned. Sometimes she cooked. Sometimes she just sat and was company. Several times she took Sister Green's two daughters home to spend the night.

Her husband had died suddenly in a traffic accident. It had ripped a huge hole in Sister Green's heart. She had taken a hiatus from teaching Sunday School and seemed to be having a hard time "bouncing back," as others had put it.

Early on in praying for Sister Green, Jada felt moved to go and see her. She didn't ask. Jada just showed up. She figured if Sister Green didn't want any company, she would turn her away. She did not. The first visit, Jada just sat on the couch with her. Few words were spoken. Each time Jada returned, she could feel a closeness developing. It wasn't spoken, but Jada felt it, nonetheless.

"Jada," Sister Green said, as Jada was headed out. "I can't thank you enough for everything."

1 Who is someone who demonstrates the love of Jesus through action?

2 If someone watched your life, would they see faith in action?

²⁸ And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

²⁹ And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

³⁰ And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

³¹ And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

³² And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.

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?”

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.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

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.”

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.

Love God and Love Your Neighbor

The Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had been trying to catch Jesus in His words to provide a reason for His arrest (Mark 12:13–27). In Mark 12:28, hearing the debate and impressed with Jesus’ answer, a teacher of the law poses what appears to be a sincere question:

Which commandment is most important? Ranking the weightiness of laws was a common practice among Jewish rabbis. Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Leviticus 19:18 (Mark 12:29–31). These two passages had been linked together by other rabbis because of their shared use of the word “love.” Jesus also links them, asserting that loving the one true God with your whole self and loving your neighbor as yourself (in that order) are the most important commandments. The second command flows out of the first. In other words, true love for God should result in love for one’s neighbor.

The teacher of the law is again impressed with Jesus’ answer and commends Him as correct (Mark 12:32). This makes sense given Jesus’ quotations. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 is part of the *Shema*, the central prayer of Judaism expressing the most important facets of Jewish belief: Yahweh alone is God and deserving of complete devotion. In response to Jesus, the teacher of the law asserts that love for God and love for neighbor is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33). Jesus affirms the wisdom of this response and tells the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). Presumably, what this teacher of the law still lacked was a proper recognition of Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah.

This scene put an end to the attempts to trap Jesus in His words (see Mark 12:34). Jesus’ Jewish audience would have recognized the truth of what He said, making it hard for His opponents to press Him further.

1 What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?

2 How is the command to love your neighbor related to the command to love God?

3 Why did Jesus’ answer make it hard for His opponents to press Him further?

¹⁴ What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶ And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Useless Faith

By James 2:14–17, James has already emphasized the importance of doing what the word of God says, not merely listening to it (James 1:22–25). Early in his letter, he seems to be correcting a form of piety that focuses on knowledge or assent to certain doctrinal beliefs but does not result in a lived-out religious ethic. For example, he calls the piety of those who consider themselves religious but do not control their tongues “worthless” (James 1:26). He forbids favoritism, especially regarding the treatment of the rich and the poor. To favor one and dishonor the other flies in the face of the scriptural command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18; James 2:8–9). James wants followers of Jesus to live differently than the world, which means, among other things, being merciful to the poor (see James 2:12–13).

James is ready to get to the heart of the matter. He does this by asking a series of rhetorical questions with implied answers. This was a common technique employed by moralists of the day. James’ first question asks, “What good is it . . . if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?” (v. 14). The implied answer is, *No good!* It’s as useless as listening to God’s Word without doing what it says. James emphasizes his point with a second question: “Can such faith save them?” The implied answer is, *No!* Again, James is making the point that mere belief in right doctrine is no good if not accompanied by

obedience to God. True faith should compel believers to right action, just as true love for God should overflow into love for others.

James illustrates his point by prompting his readers to imagine someone in the faith community—a brother or sister in Christ—who doesn't have proper clothing or enough food to make it through the day (v. 15). Perhaps James still has in mind the poor from 2:1–13. Verse 16 pictures someone responding to this poor brother or sister with mere well-wishing, saying, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed.” “Go in peace” was a common Jewish blessing, so again James may be correcting a form of piety that says and believes true things but doesn't put faith into action. James asks what good this well-wishing does if not accompanied by deeds to meet the person's physical needs. In other words, what good is it to say, “Keep warm and well fed” but not take steps to clothe and feed the person? The implied answer is, *No good!* Mere well-wishing is useless.

“In the same way,” James writes in verse 17, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Here, James makes his point emphatic. He is not saying that salvation is achieved or earned through deeds, but that true faith will be accompanied by deeds, just as Abraham's faith compelled him to offer up Isaac in obedience to God (see James 2:20–24). For the Christian, declaring that Jesus is Lord, but failing to follow Him as Lord, makes the initial declaration empty. Acts of obedience demonstrate that faith is genuine.

1 What does James think of faith that is unaccompanied by deeds, or action?

2 What is the point of James' illustration about the person who lacks clothing or food?

3 What is the relationship between faith and deeds in terms of salvation?

To Love Like Jesus

We had left the labor and delivery room and were getting settled in the postpartum wing with our new baby. It wasn't a restful place. In a hospital, the hours after a child's birth are full of interruptions. Nurses popping in to check on this and that. Friends and family eager to meet the new baby. And, of course, the little life in need of food and diapers and love. We were tired. *Really* tired. Then my phone dinged.

I checked my voicemail. It was a dear old woman from our church, just checking to see if we needed anything. She was in the hospital herself, tending to her sick husband. She had every reason in the world not to think of us at that moment, but she did. And I knew her offer to help was genuine, because we had known her our whole lives. That's the kind of person she is—a person whose love for God overflows into a love for others, a person who constantly demonstrates her love through actions, a person who is usually found wherever people are in need. She loves with a gentle, persistent love that seems almost second nature. Her faith compels her to love like Jesus. What else can she do?

I was almost embarrassed. *No, we don't need anything*, I thought. *You just take care of your husband*. But she stopped by the next day anyway. Her presence wasn't burdensome. It was like a calm in the storm. She stayed only a few minutes, enough time to encourage us, to tell us we were doing a great job, to let us know our family is precious to God and that God is with us. And then with a bright smile and a wave, she was gone.

I want to love others like that, with a love that flows out of a love for God and becomes second nature—a love that can't be mistaken for anything but sincere, because it's so clearly demonstrated through actions. I want to love like Jesus.

1 Who in your life serves as an example of Christlike love?

2 How do the people in your life know if you love them?

3 What does it mean to love like Jesus?

Find a Way to Love

Since love demonstrated through action is what God expects, your task is to make a concrete plan to demonstrate love to someone else this week. Maybe a coworker needs help with a project. Maybe a neighbor needs help with yard work. Maybe a friend needs a meal.

Pray for God to help you find a tangible way to love someone else as yourself. Keep a journal of what you do, reflecting on what it might look like to love this person like Jesus.

Key Text

To love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. —Mark 12:33 KJV

“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.” —Mark 12:33 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of March 2 through March 7

- Mon.** Proverbs 12:1–2, 10–14—Work and Discipline.
- Tue.** 1 Corinthians 6:12–20—The Temple of the Body.
- Wed.** 1 Corinthians 9:19–27—The Discipline of Right Choices.
- Thu.** Psalm 139:1–12—God Is Always with Me.
- Fri.** Psalm 139:13–24—Fearfully and Wonderfully Made.
- Sat.** 1 Timothy 4:7–12—The Superior Training in Godliness.

Next Week: Daniel 1:8–17; 1 Timothy 4:7–8

We will bring attention to our habits. What time of the day gives you the best opportunity to turn attention to God in gratitude for His provision?