



“One New Year’s Resolution”

Mark 12:28-30

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

December 31, 2023

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.'

Mark 12:28-30

At the start of a new year, we give at least a passing thought to New Year's resolutions. How do we make 2024 a little better than 2023, eat healthier, deepen our friendships, carve out time to read, and learn to pray in a way that fits who we are? How can our lives be less frustrating and more fulfilling? How can we be less distracted and more focused on things that matter? What do we need to hold onto, and what do we need to let go of? How can we get closer to our purpose?

On New Year's Eve, at least for a moment, we ponder the meaning of life. 26 centuries ago, Pythagoras writes, "Life resembles the Olympic Games. A few strain their muscles to carry off a prize. Others bring trinkets to sell to the crowd for a profit. Some seek nothing other than to see the show. They are merely spectators for other lives."

Gandhi suggests, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

Confucius says, "Wherever you go, go with all your heart."

A Native American proverb, "Life is a bridge. Cross over it, but build no house on it."

Pablo Picasso, "The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose of life is to give it away."

Thomas Merton, "Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another."

Dalai Lama, "Our primary purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them."

I like this quote more than most of you do, Ruth Verbree, "Life begins at 60."

George Bernard Shaw point to life's riskiness, "A life spent making mistakes is not only more honorable but more useful than a life spent doing nothing."

Diane Ackerman, "One can live at a low flame. Most people do. For some, life is an exercise in moderation (best China saved for special occasions), but given something like death, what does it matter if one looks foolish now and then, or tries too hard, or cares too deeply?"

Noted philosopher Forrest Gump stresses life's uncertainty when he says, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get."

Martin Esslin contemplates life's meaning and becomes depressed, "The dignity of humanity lies in the ability to face reality in all its meaninglessness."

Henry David Thoreau, "The mass of (people) lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation."

Rodney Dangerfield is succinct, "Life is just a bowl of pits."

In Eugene Ionesco's play *The Chairs*, an old man

prepares to give a summary of his philosophy. Out of his years of living, he has distilled his wisdom into a single speech, which he wants everyone to hear. He hires a professional orator to make the speech for him. When the speaker arrives on stage, the suspense is terrific. The audience is about to hear the meaning of life. He stands with his back to the listeners composing himself. Then he turns to deliver the old man's message. And the speaker is struck silent. He cannot speak a single word. It is the playwright's attempt to present the emptiness he believes lies at the heart of existence. Life has no meaning.

Fortunately, Jesus is more hopeful. On this occasion, Jesus is teaching in Jerusalem, spending the morning in a theological cross-fire free-for-all. After debating the chief priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, and other assorted defenders of the letter of the law, Jesus is ready to go home, but an unnamed scribe has been listening carefully.

He has been hanging around the edge of the crowd growing in his admiration for the way Jesus handles tough questions about taxes and the resurrection. Jesus says that we can count on both eternal life and a form 1040. The scribes are usually the bad guys in the gospels, wise guys trying to trip Jesus up, but this is an honest scribe with an honest question who gets an honest answer.

He asks Jesus the big meaning of life question, "Which commandment is the most important?"

In Judaism there is a double tendency—one to expand the law into hundreds of rules and regulations. The Torah contains 613 commandments—365 things they cannot do and 248 things they must do. They also have a tendency to gather up the law into one sentence, looking for the one

thing.

A student challenged Rabbi Hillel to teach him the whole law while he stood on one foot. The rabbi answered, “What you yourself hate, do not do to another. This is the whole law. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

The scribe wants Jesus to sum up the law. If you could hang everything on one nail, what would it be? Jesus gives a familiar answer. Devout worshippers recite this first commandment three times a day. The other laws are judged on the basis of this one supreme law.

The key for Jesus is not so much in finding the right answer—it has been there all along—as following the commandment. It is less a question of information than transformation.

You will love the Lord your God “with all your heart”—the center, the well-spring of what we do. “With all your soul”—your feeling and will. The soul gives life. “With all your mind”—what you think and believe. “With all your strength”—the totality of who you are.

Love is the central teaching of Christianity. Righteousness is not strict obedience to a complex set of laws. The one commandment is that we should give our ambitions, emotions, thoughts, and commitments to God. It sounds simple, but it is not.

“All my heart?” I can’t even keep my ambitions straight, much less give them to God. Every time I think I know what I want,

I see someone with a gift I did not get, and want a better deal.

“All my emotions?” Some days I do better than others, but I frequently offer unwanted, unsupportive advice to pedestrians who have no idea they just hit me with their

backpack.

“All my thoughts?” Forget about it. My thoughts are all over the place. Does it make you feel less guilty to know that sometimes during the sermon I wonder “What’s for lunch?”

“All my strength?” I talk a far better game than I play. My commitment seems small when so much of my energy is spent on myself.

Loving God seems impractical and mystical. God is usually at the edges of our thoughts. We do not pay much attention, though we are glad, in a general way, that we believe God is present. When we give God a fraction of ourselves, God becomes a fraction of our lives. Most of the time we operate without a guiding love for God.

We are practicing polytheists whose concerns change several times a day. Sometimes we want professional success. We forget how unimpressed we are with the people above us on the ladder we are frantically climbing. Or we focus on keeping our job and forget why we wanted it in the first place.

Other times we want to be good family members. We decide to spend more time caring for those to whom we are closest. Then we remember they are not exactly who we wish they were.

Sometimes we are after a good time. What is the point if we are not having fun? We work hard at amusing ourselves.

Other times productivity is the goal. How can I make the best possible use of every minute of every hour? We forget the emptiness of a merely busy life, and do not see beyond the next thing. Our days become a mile wide and

an inch deep. We major on minors, so busy around the edges that we do not think about what is at the center.

We need a guiding passion, because raveling without direction is frustrating. Think of our lives as drawing a circle with a compass. If we get the center right, then the circumference will come out fine. But until the center's set, it will not work.

For centuries, everyone thought the earth was the center of the universe. Then Copernicus argued that the sun was at the center. The old assumptions had to change. When we follow this command and place God at the center of our universe, everything changes.

Augustine says, "Love God and do what you like."

If God is at the center, the rest will follow. Sometimes Christians think the big question is, "Do we believe in God?" It is not. The big question is, "Do we love God?"

Jesus says, "Our attention needs to go beyond us, beyond our families, beyond our jobs, and beyond our church to God."

The love of God is the focus that gives our lives meaning. What would happen if we spent the new year, learning how to see that God is with us and calling attention to those moments when we recognize them? What would happen if, in the middle of an argument, we suddenly realized that the friend frustrating us is also a gift God has given us—and declared it? What would happen if, in the middle of a routine class or a dull committee meeting, our perspective shifts and we see how this ordinary gathering could be life-changing—and announced that to everyone? How would this year be different if we recognized how often God nudges us to say, "I'm sorry," or "I forgive you," or "I want to be a better friend"?

Love God with all that we are, do, feel, and think. If we make loving God our goal, we will have fuller lives. We will move from wanting everything to seeking the one love. We will be free from the compulsions that get in the way and set our hearts on the one necessary thing. If we love God, we will fear less, hope more, talk less, say more, whine less, breathe more, eat less, chew more, hate less, and love more.

The Broadway director Julie Taymor tells of a visit to the island of Bali. One day she is alone in a secluded wooded area at the edge of a clearing. She is listening to the music of a native celebration. Suddenly into the clearing 30 or 40 old men come dressed in the full splendor of warrior costumes. They start to dance, and Taymor, who is hidden by the trees watches with fascination. She is delighted to realize that they are dancing to—nobody. They are performing for God. They do not care if an audience is watching, they do it from the inside to the outside and from the outside in. They do it because they love God (Miroslav Volk, “Dancing for God,” *Christian Century*, September 6, 2003, 35).

What will our lives look like if we act as if God is the one watching? If we play to the audience of one? Some love God in music, some in the harvesting of a garden, some in sharing freshly baked bread, and some in affectionate words to a friend. We will find our own ways to love God.

Utter our own prayers, in the language of our own hearts, setting aside a time and place to give God our undivided attention. Thank God in worship for what has given us joy, though it seems so insignificant that nobody else would think it worth mentioning. Go beyond just thinking on the love of God and feel it deeply. Be grateful

to God for the closeness of God and the greatness of God.

Do not try to love God like we have heard others do. Let our adoration be our own. Love God with our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. Live as if God is the only one watching.

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