

“Axioms: Ministry is Simple – Love God, Love People”

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Asbury Church

May 15, 2022

- Friends, today, we are continuing on in our current sermon series titled, “Axioms.” We are in week three of this series.
-But, I figured a fun way to begin this sermon today, would be to have a little quiz recapping where we’ve been the last two weeks. Does that sound alright?

- Okay, I’ve got three questions for you. There first one is a fill-in-the-blank question:
 - 1) An axiom is a _____ saying for everyday living. Is it a funny saying, a worthy saying, or a short saying?
-Yes, it is worthy! Axioms can be funny and they can be short, but they don’t have to be. They do, however, have to be worthy to be considered an axiom. Alright, next one...

 - 2) Finish this sentence: Show me your friends, and I’ll show you your _____. Future!
-Correct! That was what we talked about in week 1 of this series. The people we hang around with certainly affects the way that we live and the direction of our lives.
-That’s why it’s so important to be here at church, and be a part of a community that loves the Lord and loves you so well.

 - 3) Now, final question (You all are two for two now). Finish this sentence: Lower your expectations, raise your _____.

Commitment! Correct. Life can be difficult. We all go through caves. But, being proactive and raising our commitments can make a tremendous difference.

-Okay, we're all caught up now on where we've been the last two weeks. Today, we're looking at a new axiom.

-And, if I'm being honest, this is my favorite of Pastor Tom's axioms. He's got over 200 of them, but this one is my favorite. So, I'm very excited to sharing about this one today.

- The axiom for today is: "Ministry is Simple: Love God, Love People."

-This axiom is grounded in so many passages throughout the Bible. Today, though, we'll specifically be looking at Mark 12:28-34. If you have your Bibles, I invite you to flip there with me.

-There are pew Bibles beneath you if you don't have a Bible. This passage is found on page 1009 in them.

- Out of the reverence that we have for the Word of God, let's stand together and read these words out loud.

-(Read Mark 12:28-34)

-28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And 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 neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one,

and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

-This is the Word of God for the people of God...

- Alright, this passage of Scripture begins with a question: “Which commandment is the most important of all?”
- Now, that’s a really good question. Let’s unpack it by looking at this question’s importance, inquirer, and interpretation.
- So, to begin with, it’s **importance**. Why was this an important question? Why did it matter?
- Well, this was a question that many people throughout the years leading up to Jesus asked. What commandment is first? What commandment is the most important? This DEFINITELY wasn’t the first time a person asked this question.
- Even more, though, during this day, there were two schools of thought on the laws. One said that all of the laws were of equal weight and importance, while the other said that some of the laws were weightier and more important than others.
- Thus, this question about the most important commandment was a loaded one, and inquiring minds wanted to know the answer.
- Now, let’s talk about the **inquirer**. The questioner. Who asked Jesus this question?

-He was a scribe! And, let me just say, it doesn't seem like this particular scribe had malicious intentions. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the religious leaders and teachers and scribes would purposely ask Jesus questions to trap and test him. But, that doesn't seem like it's the case here.

- This scribe had previously seen Jesus answer other questions well, so he wanted to ask him a question about what he was most interested in: the law.

-Because, the scribes were the EXPERTS in the law. That's what got them going in the morning. That's what they loved to talk about and discuss – the law.

-Have you ever met a person who always talks about the same thing, every time you see them? Maybe it's cars or sports or politics.

-Well, the scribes were like that with the law. Always talking about it and discussing it! And, this particular scribe jumped on the opportunity to ask Jesus a question about the law.

- And now, let's talk about the **interpretation**, and the possible interpretations, of this question.

-To put it very simply: there were a lot of possible laws and commandments Jesus could have chosen from. In fact, there were 613 in the Old Testament alone. 365 of those laws were positive, meaning they said "Do this, do that," while 248 of them were restrictive, meaning they said, "Don't do this, don't do that."

-So, to say the least, Jesus had a lot of laws he could have chosen from. 613.

- And I don't know about you, but I have trouble deciding between chocolate or vanilla ice cream. Just two options. It's even more difficult when they throw in the third option: mixed.
 - But here, Jesus (faced with a much greater question than what flavor of ice cream to choose) has 613 laws or commands to choose from. And, he gives his answer: Love God, love people.

- That was Jesus' response. Those are, according to him, the two greatest commandments. None top these two.
 - And when Jesus gave his answer, he wasn't just making it up as he went along. He wasn't pulling answers out of thin air. He wasn't doing a Michael Scott from "The Office," who said, "Sometimes I'll start a sentence, and I don't even know where it's going. I just hope I find it along the way. Like an improv conversation. An improversation."
 - No, Jesus knew what his answer was. He knew what his response was going to be... And it was grounded in the Scriptures. Both of his answers were from Old Testament passages.

- We read about the first commandment in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This is a foundational passage of Scripture for people of the Jewish faith. This passage is called "The Shema," which is the passage's first word in Hebrew, meaning "Hear."
 - This is what this passage says:
 - "Hear, O Israel:** The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie

down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

-Thus, when Jesus says that loving God is the greatest commandment, he is pointing back to this passage in Deuteronomy 6.

- Additionally, the second greatest commandment Jesus gives (to love our neighbors as ourselves) is also found in the Old Testament. In the exciting book of Leviticus.

-In chapter 19 of Leviticus, we read all of these very practical commands. Some of them include not lying, not stealing, leaving grapes in your vineyards for the poor, and so on.

-And then, we read this in Leviticus 19: **“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”**

-Here again, we see that Jesus isn’t just pulling out these answers out of thin air. Instead, Jesus is firmly, deeply rooted in the Scriptures – and his responses certainly reflect that.

- And so, let me just pause here for a second, and ask: How is your Scripture reading going? Have you been able to have consistent time in the Word of God recently?

-And, I ask that to myself as well. I don’t just want to come here and talk about the Bible. I want to be immersed in the Scriptures, and let the stories found within its pages shape and guide and transform my life.

-Jesus knew his Scriptures. And, whenever he was questioned, or whenever he was tempted, or whenever people tried to oppose him even, the words of Scripture came out.

- Which leads me to my own axiom. I definitely don't have as many axioms as Pastor Tom, but I do have a few. And this one is number one for me: **Good ministry is an overflow.**
 - And, like Pastor Tom with all of his axioms, I have a story connected to this one. As a freshman in college, I was invited to a preaching workshop. I think it was put on by Southern Baptists, but somehow I was able to fly under the radar as a little Methodist.
 - And there, a speaker was sharing some insights upon preaching. And he said something that stuck with me. He said, "Good preaching is an overflow."
 - In other words, good sermons simply overflow from a heart filled with the love and word of God.

- And so, I've kinda tweaked that some statement some and say, "Good ministry, or good living, is an overflow."
 - When our hearts are so filled with the love of God, when we are continually striving to love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind, then that is going to overflow into our words, and our actions, and our deeds. Good ministry is an overflow.

- And I think Jesus knew that very well. Jesus knew that loving God and loving neighbor are intricately connected. You can't separate the love of God with the love of neighbor.
 - And that's something that 1st John 4 reminds us of so well. John writes:
 - We love because he first loved us.** [That's my favorite Bible verse. 1st John 4:19. John Wesley said that is the sum of all religion: we love because he first loved us.] 20 If anyone says, "I

love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot[a] love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

-So let's keep this simple. Ministry is simple. Love God. Love people.

- I want to share a really inspiring story about a person who embodies this so well.

-So, some of you may know, this is my first Sunday morning sermon to preach as a married man. **Here's a fun picture of our ceremony**. And, we had the best officiant in town, Pastor Tom Harrison.

-But something we did at the reception following the ceremony, was have this pretty container out and some cards by it that said...

-And so the day after our wedding, Madison and I went through and read all of these different cards with date night ideas on them. Here are a few...

-But then, we came upon this one...

- And, when I read that, I thought, “Wow.” This person truly is filled with the love of God and neighbor. So much so, that when he's asked what a good date night idea is, he suggests, “Help out someone in need. Meet one of their basic needs.”

-I actually shared with him later how encouraged I was by his answer. And he shared with me that that was he and his now-wife's third date. They were living in Kentucky at the time, and knew a homeless person who needed shoes, so they tracked him down and gave him some shoes. And then, the two of them had lunch together.

-But again, what a cool example of someone being filled with the love of God and neighbor, and how that just OVERFLOWED into his date night idea answer.

• So, sticking with our theme of simplicity this morning, I have two questions I'd like to ask us. And, I encourage each of us to think and reflect upon these questions this week.

① **What helps me fall more in love with God?**

-Loving God is THE most important commandment of all. So, this is a pretty important question. What helps me fall more in love with the Lord?

• What I've found, is spending time with the Lord and conversing with Him is what helps me fall more in love with Him each day.

-And I do that by praying through the Scriptures. It fills my soul, simply going through passages of the Bible, and reading them, and praying while I read them, and it's just this beautiful two-way conversation with God.

-Worship, too, helps me fall more in love with God. As I sing about how good and kind and holy He is, in His presence, with my church family. That, too, increases my love for the Lord.

-And so, what is it for you? How do you fall more in love with the Lord?

② The second question is this: **How can I better love my neighbors?**

-How can I better love the people around me, the people that God has strategically placed in my life?

- I actually want to share about a new, really exciting opportunity for us as followers of Jesus to love our neighbors.
 - So, let me just ask you, have you ever found moving to be stressful? Whether you're moving across town or moving to a new town, it can be very stressful!

- Well, we have a fun way to show love to new neighbors. Today, we are rolling out these. These are "Welcome to the Neighborhood" bags.
 - Here's how they work. If you see someone or know someone moving into your neighborhood, you'll grab one of these bags. In this bag, is this instructions sheet. It includes items you can purchase to place in this bag, and give it to your neighbor to make moving day a little less stressful.
 - Also in this bag is a notecard, where you can write a handwritten note, welcoming your new neighbors to the neighborhood.

- Friends, this is a GREAT way to love our neighbors, welcome them to your neighborhood, and maybe open up a door for them to visit Asbury.
 - We ordered 200 of these bags. I hope that all of them are gone by the end of the day and we have to order more.
 - So, if you would like to take one or a few home with you today, stop by any of the guest services stations and pick them up. They will also be available for pick up in the office this morning, and throughout the week as well.
 - If you see or know of anyone moving, this is a great way to show extravagant hospitality to them.

- Alright, let's look at how this passage ends in Mark 12. We talked about the scribe's question, we talked about Jesus' simple answer and how it was grounded in Scripture, now let's look finally at what Jesus says to the scribe after he agrees with him.
 - The text says, "And when Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."
 - You know, we talk a lot about the Kingdom of God, verses the Kingdom of self, here at Asbury. God desires us to be living fully in His Kingdom, not stuck in the Kingdom of self.
 - And, whenever we strive to love God with all of our everything, and whenever we go out and love our neighbors, God's Kingdom is spreading and expanding.
 - As we pray each Sunday, God's Kingdom is coming and God's will is being done, when we both love God and love people.
- I'm reminded of the lyrics to Jason Gray's song, "With Every Act of Love." It goes...
 - God put a million, million doors in the world For His love to walk through; One of those doors is you; We bring the kingdom come; With every act of love; Jesus, help us carry You; Alive in us, Your light shines through; With every act of love We bring the kingdom come.
- And so I have one more story I'd like to share this morning. I heard this story as a little high schooler, and it stuck with me over the years and reminded me of the power of loving those around us.
 - Forty years ago, there was a professor at John Hopkins University. He told his class of graduate students to go to the worst slums in Baltimore and, there, pick out 200 boys, ages 12

to 16. Look at their living conditions and attitudes, and then make a prediction about their future.

-The graduate students did just that. They investigated and looked at statistics and eventually came to this conclusion: most of these 200 boys would be failures in life.

- Well, 25 years later, a new professor decided that he wanted to carry that survey to a conclusion.

-So, he put his students on the job. After extensive searching, these students were able to track down 180 of the 200 boys that were observed 25 years earlier.

-And the thing was, only 4 of the 180 boys had gone to prison. They were shocked at their findings, and sought to find out why this was the case.

- Well, in talking with these boys, they found that they kept getting the same answer: “Well, there was this teacher...”

-They kept hearing that over and over again, one boy after the next.

-And so, the graduate students tracked down this particular teacher. And they kept asking her all of these questions: Why did you have such a strong influence in their lives? What did you teach them? Why do all of them remember you so well?

- But the funny thing was, the teacher seemed puzzled, and couldn't give any specific reason as to why these boys ended up doing so well in life.

-But finally, as she reflected upon the years, and remembered the past and her time with these boys, she said out loud (more to herself than to those interviewing her): “I sure loved those boys.”

- That's one of my favorite stories, and it's stuck with me over the years.
- Life can be tough. There's decisions to make. Often, we make the wrong ones. I know that very well as a young pastor!
 - But, we will never, ever be in the wrong for loving God and loving neighbor.
 - Even if we fall short everywhere else, may we get this right. May we love God and love people.
 - Friends, ministry is simple: Love God. Love people.
- And we can do that, we can love God and love people, because God first loved us. We remember and celebrate that so well every Sunday when we come forward for communion.
 - Know that you are so loved. And, if you've never experienced the love of God in your life, if you've never experienced what a personal relationship with God is like, may this be the day that everything changes.