



Theme: Jesus and the Earliest Gospel...Mark
"The Most Important Things"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber
February March 20-21, 2021

Weekly Memory Verse:

"Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."—Mark 12:31b

VIDEO Sermon Bumper

SLIDE "The Most Important Things"

My name is Jeff Huber and I'm Lead Pastor at Summit Church and we are so glad you have joined us for this time of worship. Today we continue in reading through the gospel of Mark. The focus of Mark's book is on Jesus' life and ministry. Mark is a book of action because of the circumstances in which it was written. Mark is trying to answer two important questions for his readers, and they are important for us today as begin this study of Mark's gospel.

SLIDE Who is this man Jesus?

Who is Jesus really? What can we learn about him?

SLIDE What does his life mean for our lives today?

Today we continue our journey through the gospel of Mark by

remembering what Jesus told us was the most important things. We find this both in the Hebrew Bible, or your Old Testament, and then reiterated and expounded upon by Jesus in all the Gospels. Both Jesus and Moses agreed on the first of these commandments. Here is how we hear Jesus sharing this in Mark's gospel, and I'm sure he shared it on multiple occasions. It was something that Jesus would've learned as a young Jewish boy because this was a central teaching in Judaism, and still is today.

SLIDE Shema Israel

It's called the Shema, which means "to listen", Israel, which refers to the people of Israel. Moses shares it several times in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and it is meant to summarize all Jewish law. Everything after this is commentary. In Mark chapter 12 we read these words.

BIBLE

²⁸ One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.'

We are meant to see this commandment in two parts, with the first part recognizing that there is one God who is the Lord of all life, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer of everything. The second part is our response to the Lord who makes everything. These two commandments are central to Judaism and for a faithful Jew they will say them every morning when they get up and every evening before they go to bed, and multiple times during the day.

Moses goes on to say we should bind them around our head, to remind ourselves to love God with our mind. We should bind them around our arms to remember to love God with our strength. Many Orthodox Jews use these little black boxes called phylacteries that they wear on their heads and bound around their arms. We saw many people wearing these at the Western Wall when we were in Jerusalem two years ago around this time.

GRAPHIC Jews at Western Wall

You see in this photo a man at the Western Wall with a black box on his forehead and another wrapped around his arm. Inside each of those would be the Shema Israel, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord alone is God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” You may even find a mezuzah, like this one I purchased in Israel, at the front door of the Jewish home where they would have a scroll inside with the Shema.

GRAPHIC Mezuzah

When you walk out the door you are meant to touch that mezuzah and say in your heart, “I remember that the Lord is God alone. I am not God and nothing else is God. The Lord, and the Lord alone is God. I am to love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength.” When I leave the house I remember, “This is who I am. This is my mission.” When we return home each day, we place our hand on the mezuzah and remind ourselves that the day belongs to God. God is God and we are not, and we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The hope and the dream of a faithful Jew is to recite these words with their dying breath. As you lay in your bed, you have enough strength to say, “Yahweh, the Lord alone is God, and I will love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Then, we are prepared to meet our maker.

Jesus is asked here in Mark’s gospel what the greatest commandment is, and he instantly responds with the Shema. Why did Jesus reply with this?

He did it because he knew this was the foundation of Judaism, and Jesus was a faithful Jew. Jesus said that every morning when he got up and every day when he walked outside and every night when he came home and every night when he went to bed. This has been the tradition since the time of Moses and these words form and shape who Jesus was and how he understood the world. If these were the most important words for Moses and for Jesus, then we need to take him seriously. This is the most important lesson for us to know and all of life, according to the Scriptures.

The Shema is often called the fundamental truth of the Israelite faith and the fundamental duty of every Israelite. If we are to follow Jesus and recognize him as Lord and Savior, then we too must be willing to grab onto this fundamental truth and live out this fundamental duty. For us, that might mean getting up every morning and reminding ourselves that we are not God, and God alone is. Throughout the day and into the evening and before we go to bed, it would be good for us to have this most important thing on our hearts so that it reminds us to turn to God and love God with all that is within us. This is one of the reasons we give you the Meditation Moments each week and we hope to use them, so that each one of us is taking time each day to remember these truths.

SLIDE Why do we believe in God?

These most important things are broken into two parts, and the first part begs this question. Why do we believe in God? More and more people are wondering if science answers most of the questions or if the idea of God is outdated. The fastest growing groups of people, according to pew research, are those with no religious affiliation or those who are done with religion. They are called “nones” and “dones”.

GRAPHIC Pew Research on Unaffiliated

In this graphic from pew research in 2014 we see a steady decline from

one generation to the next of those who connect with ANY faith tradition here in the US. Those in the gray area represent those who are atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. For the youngest generations those groups are now more than 36%. In some of the most recent research we see that number becoming larger in younger generations, and just this past year, for the first time ever, those who call themselves Christian are LESS than 50% in the two youngest generations.

Of course, all of us have doubts about God sometimes. We can't help that with our life experience and the questions that we have as we claim faith as our own. We all ask ourselves if this is a pious myth, or if we have made up the idea of God to help us feel better, or is there actually a God who is the source of everything? What are the reasons for God we would give to a friend who was in one of those gray areas on the far right of that chart? Here's a few that I have thought about and they each deserve more time than we can give them today, but I think it's helpful to think this through in today's world. This is a taste of the conversation I might have with somebody if they asked me, and let's be clear that we need to be asked before we give these out or they will fall on deaf ears.

SLIDE I believe in God because of the beauty, order, and majesty of creation.

The creation itself paints a picture for me of something more and something greater, some kind of intelligence. When I look through a telescope and can see galaxies thousands of light-years away, or I study physics, or I read about mathematicians who study the laws of the universe, I see the need for a creator. Is it possible that all of that came out of nothing by itself, brought itself together in these forms, without any help? It's hard for me to imagine that is the case. When I look at our planet and the simplest of life forms, along with the DNA and genetic structures, and see its

complexity, I wonder how that could have all happened on its own. Did it just organize out of chaos on its own? While I believe in evolutionary theory and that things have developed over time, and I love science, I can't imagine this all happening on its own without a loving creator to urge it along without any creative intelligence.

How many of you remember alphabet soup? It was one of those special treats when I was a kid. Imagine you sit down to have a bowl, and someone brings it to you, and it looks like this.

GRAPHIC Alphabet Soup

We might think that's cool, that whoever served us alphabet soup took the time to organize it in such a great educational fashion. Then, the person tells us, "I didn't do that. It just came out of the can that way." Or maybe they tell you the microwave organized for you. Or perhaps, even worse, you get this message which maybe was how he felt during the last year of the pandemic!

GRAPHIC Alphabet Soup Help Me

How would you respond? You most likely would say, "Give me a break. Alphabet soup does not come out of the can spelling something for us with some hidden message. That's impossible." I realize this is a very simple illustration and every metaphor breaks down, but let's be honest. How many millions of years what you have to open trillions of cans of alphabet soup and pour them into bowls before this bowl of soup comes up?

GRAPHIC Alphabet Soup

Someone might argue that it is theoretically possible, but I cannot imagine pouring alphabet soup into a bowl and having it come out in order, even over 4.5 billion years or so. This is simply 26 letters in alphabet soup, but you look at the genetic combinations which make up the most simple of

life forms on our planet and it makes this bowl of soup look like child's play, in terms of getting everything into the right order.

Those of us who are people of faith simply look around the world and recognize the complexities and the scientific learning is that we have and believe it points to something that is the creator of everything that we can see. I find it fascinating that the more we learn because of science, the more we seem to realize we don't know all the answers. When I was a kid the smallest thing with a molecule and then it was an atom and now it is a quark and then it is a string and who knows what it will be next.

GRAPHIC Albert Einstein and George Lemaître

George Lemaître was the Belgian Catholic priest who first hypothesized the Big Bang theory. He was a physics professor trying to explain the universe and how we see it and what we can understand. His theory went on to be the primary way of explaining the origins of our universe, but he never felt like the Big Bang diminished his faith. Knowing an explanation of a process didn't take anything away from the mystery that God was behind it, or the need for intelligence that launched it and guided its expansion that continues in our universe. I believe our universe reflects a creator and each one of us reflects that creator as well.

SLIDE I believe in God because of the witness of other people.

When I read the Scriptures, I see people who have had encounters with the living God. I wrestle with the Bible and how we read it in light of the time in which it was written, and I also see people like Abraham being asked to leave his retirement and comfort to follow God. He is asked to go to a land where he's never been and leave behind his resources and take his family for a new adventure that God has in store and he is willing to go. Something happened to him!

Moses, at an old age, experiences the burning bush and is commanded to go back and confront Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the face of the planet, and tell him to let the Israelite slaves go free. Something must've happened there if he was willing to go back and put his life at risk. What prompted him to do that?

We know the stories of David and how he writes psalms in the wilderness after having a profound experience of being a shepherd boy and then elevated to king. He made mistake after mistake, but still was seeking after God's heart. Something happened to him in those experiences that changed him and shaped him to write this beautiful literature which touches us even today. The prophets were willing to risk everything to share this message that was burning in their hearts because they had experienced something from God. Ruth, the great-grandmother of David, experiences healing and hope by following this God of the Israelites.

The stories of Jesus are compelling and clearly something happened to those early followers that made them want more and gave them a willingness to risk their lives to share his message. I love this man Jesus, what he stood for and what he said. I find it interesting that many people who are not religious find Jesus compelling. It's also interesting that Jesus said things like, "The Father and I are one. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." We see Jesus going out in the wilderness speaking to his heavenly Father and experiencing that voice as the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove at his baptism, "You are my child, my beloved."

We hear Jesus hanging on the cross, crying out to God in ways that I find myself yearning to cry out to God. The Jesus that I discovered in the Bible also believes in God has a relationship with God and is the Son of the living God.

Philosophers and scientists like Kierkegaard, Schleiermacher, Galileo,

Newton and Pascal all believed in God and testified to their experience of God. Humanitarian heroes of the last hundred years like Dr. Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn all talked about how their faith sustained them and how their relationship with God change them and gave them strength to do what they were being called to do. Along the way, we have to acknowledge that something is a part of their experience and they can't all be having hallucinations or vivid imagination, living in different parts of the world at different times in history.

SLIDE I believe in God because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus was crucified and then buried. On the third day the disciples testified that the tomb was empty, and Jesus came forth from the grave. We do have to decide if we believe the disciples or if we think they made it up. The disciples were willing to die testifying to the truth they experienced which is that Jesus was risen from the grave. If Jesus was risen from the grave, there had to be a power greater than death who raised him from the grave. This points once more to a belief in God for me, because something happened to those disciples to change them from being locked in a room, scared for their lives, to being willing to go out and share the good news.

SLIDE I believe in God because of the impact God has had.

I think of all the people whose lives have been changed because they have experienced God. I meet with people constantly who were not believers in God and then something happened, and it changed them. I have met with people who found God in prison and were willing to finally turn their life around and give their life over to something greater than themselves. Their best efforts had brought them to prison and until they asked for forgiveness, nothing had changed. When they gave their life to God, everything changed. I have met people with addictions and I have seen them overcome them because of their willingness to make something else in the Lord and Savior

besides that addiction.

One woman wrote and said, **“My faith in God has taken away fear and the illusion of control. I’m not afraid because I trust the worst thing is never the last thing, which I never considered or repeated to myself in my head before finding God. It’s not that God makes certain things happen in my life, but God certainly helps shape however respond and that has made all the difference.”**

Another man shared, **“Facing God has filled me with a desire to be better today than yesterday. To be better tomorrow than the day before.”** I believe in God because of the impact he has on people’s lives and how I have seen God bring people hope and a new perspective changes everything.

SLIDE I believe in God because God, “answers the questions implied in our existence.”

Theologian Paul Tillich is the one who came up with this phrase to describe how it is that we humans all ask deep questions at some point in our lives. Throughout history we have asked questions about our existence and why we exist and what ultimate meaning is about—questions like this:

- Where do I find unconditional love?
- Where do I find companionship when I’m all alone?
- Where do I find meaning and purpose?
- How do I deal with sickness and tragedy?
- Where do I find forgiveness and a second chance?
- Where do I find peace in the face of despair?
- Where do I find hope in the face of death?

These are questions with which we all wrestle and it is fascinating to me that they all point to the same answer. There is a God who is the answer to these questions and the very fact that we wrestle with these questions

points to the fact we are meant to be searching for the answer, and the answer is the one who created us; the I AM who is the source of life. God is the ultimate answer to each of these ultimate questions.

Leonid Brezhnev was the premier of the Soviet Union when I was growing up in the 70s and early 80s. He became premier in 1964 and I was born in 1963. He died in 1982 and I graduated from high school that same year. George HW Bush was vice president at that time under Pres. Reagan. He went to the funeral of Brezhnev and Vice-President Bush could see the open casket from his front row seat. At the conclusion of the service, they lowered the lid of the casket. Before they could close the casket, Mrs. Brezhnev came and held it open, stopping it from being closed. Bush was stunned to see her make the sign of the cross over the body of Brezhnev.

He was the leader of, at that time, the most powerful, formally, atheist nation in the world and yet his wife, in that moment, sensed that the only possible hope she had was in the one who bore the cross. He is the answer to the questions implied in our existence.

SLIDE I believe because of my own experience with God.

When I put my trust in God, I have sensed God's presence. I have heard God speaking to me, not audibly, but in my heart. I have heard things loud and clear in times of prayer. I have felt the nudging of God in moments to do things I never would've done on my own. God has made me a better husband, father, a better person. Reading the words of Jesus has helped me learn how to forgive and how to admit when I'm wrong. The last person I talked to before I go to bed at night and the first person I talk to when I get up, is God. Not every moment, but most times, I sense God's presence beside me and with me. When I spend moments in dedicated prayer, I feel more human and more alive and more focused than any other time. The best experiences of my life go back to the decision I made in high school, and then

reaffirmed in college, to make faith the central part of my life.

There are people who become Christians and they become nastier and meaner, in which case I would argue they may never have experienced Jesus in person or the true gospel. The gospel is meant to lead us to become more loving, more gracious, more generous, more forgiving, and more like Jesus Christ. While I know I am not the person I want to be, and I still have a long way to go, I am more like those things day then I would be if I didn't follow God.

I'm a pragmatist as well so I realize that if I get to the end of my life and all of these things I have taught and preached my whole life turn out to be some illusion or figment of my imagination, as some skeptics claim, and I find when I die there is no God after all, I still prefer the life I have lived believing in God and the person I became by believing in God, to the life I would've lived without God and by not believing. I believe I have had more joy, more hope, more meaning, more life because of my trust in God.

This idea is called Pascal's Wager. Pascal reversed this logic and said that if my friend who is an atheist get to the end of his life, and he suddenly discovers there really was a God, forgetting even what happens after that, but just looking back over his life Pascal believed his atheist friend would say, "Look what I missed out on. I missed out on peace I might have had in the midst of the storm. I missed out on hope, forgiveness and grace. I might've been a different person if only I had believed there was a God and understood the God who I now stand in front of really exists."

I've come to realize that someone who is a convinced atheist is not going to be converted by any of these arguments, just like they will not convince me there is no God with their arguments. What I do know is that each of us makes the choice somewhere along the way. We choose to trust, and this is the central assertion in Jesus and Moses and the great

commandment of the Shema Israel, “There is no other God but Yahweh and God knows your name. We belong to God and God loves us more than we can possibly imagine or believe. Life is found at its fullest in God.”

Of course, God is not looking for us just to believe in him. I love how James tells us that even the demons believe in God, and they shudder. Believing is only the first step and sometimes that even comes after following. God is looking for something more. God wants our hearts. God wants us to love God so we are in a relationship with God, and then have our hearts be filled so we can love others. We are invited to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. This is the greatest of all the commandments and it’s meant to be a response from us towards God. When we live into this commandment, we find what the Scriptures promise, with his joy, meaning, purpose in life. It enables us to do what Jesus says next in Mark’s gospel.

BIBLE

³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

The word that is used for loving God and loving others in the New Testament is Agape.

SLIDE Agape

You should be familiar with this because we have talked about this often. Agape love is not about how we feel but it’s about our actions and how we choose to do the loving thing for someone else, and even for God. It is why Jesus tells us to love, or have agape, for our enemies. We don’t have warm and fuzzy feelings for them, but instead we choose to do the loving thing. This does not mean we put ourselves in harm’s way, but we do kind things for them and do what will bless them, even if we don’t feel like it.

When we talk about agape towards God, we talk about doing what

would bless God, even if I don't feel like it. This is about actions and not so much about emotions of the heart. I think about the everyday things that we do because we are a follower of Jesus. When we remember this is our mission, to love God and others with agape, we live differently when we walk out the door of our house. We treat people differently at the restaurant and we treat people differently in the workplace. We treat our enemies differently in the different kinds of decisions because in everything in our life we are seeking to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In case you want a picture of what that looks like, it is no coincidence that Jesus gives this teaching at the end of the chapter after talking about the two great commandments. He talks first about religious leaders who love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets, yet shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. To drive this point home, Jesus then does this.

BIBLE

⁴¹ Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴² Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins.

⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. ⁴⁴ For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on."

This is meant to be a physical metaphor for loving God with all that we are. This picture is meant to change our lives and change our hearts. It is why we give away anything you designate as your Easter offering each year. This year we have chosen two recipients and I want you to hear about them this weekend.

VIDEO Easter Offering

The Durango Food Bank provides meals for those most in need in the Adaptive Golf Program reaches out to students tell them experience a great game and the outdoors. We love God more fully and we love others when we are willing to practice agape who are giving and through our lives.

I realize that many of us wonder how we can have a relationship with an invisible God, but we practice agape with God like we would any human relationship. Even when people live far away, we text them or send them an email or even snail mail to let them know we care about them. Don't you love it when people text you back something encouraging? If we never take the time to text or connect with those who live far away, what happens? We gradually drift apart because, "Out of sight, out of mind."

That very same thing happens in our relationship with God. We are never out of God's sight, but we must be intentional, or we will lose touch. I talk with my wife every day. I talk and she listens. She talks and I listen. We text each other and buy things for one another. We sacrifice for each other and try to do the loving thing for each other. We try to go out on a date once a week where we spent time sharing life together and being close to each other.

When we gather for worship, either in person or online, is meant to be date night, one day in seven to concentrate on our relationship with God. I love to keep old letters and artwork are kids made when they were younger. I get them out and read them, especially the nice ones, when things are going tough. I keep this one in my bathroom and I have for many years. It reminds me of how much I love my daughter and I have saved it all these years because every time she stopped and said she loved, it meant something. I savor every text and every hug and I think that is what God is hoping for from his children.

God has given us everything. God has given us life and hope and peace and grace and mercy and a second, third, fourth and umpteenth chances. God loves us and is inviting us to love God in return. **“Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ And love your neighbor as yourself.”**

When we do this, we find joy and meaning in life. Let’s talk with God right now.

SLIDE Prayer

First, in the quiet, I invite you to thank God in your own words. If you have never invited God into your heart, you might use the quiet to simply say, “I choose to trust in you, oh, God. I believe in you, and I want to love you.” I encourage you to express love for God and offer your life and all that you are into God’s hands.

... God, how grateful we are that you made everything which exists, that you are the source of all things, that you are the great I AM. How grateful we are that you are the answer to the deepest longings of our hearts. How grateful we are that you love us deeply. We trust you with our lives. Help us to love you with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves, now and every day, in your holy name. Amen.