

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Scot McKnight
The Essential Teachings of Jesus: The Greatest Commandment
Mark 12:29-34

Good morning! I'm honored to be with you. I come as a Chicago Bears fan. Les Frazier is a friend and a former colleague of mine so our second favorite team is the Minnesota Vikings. But the one thing I can promise you is that we will never, ever cheer for the Green Bay Packers nor will we ever wear cheeseheads on our heads. I get to participate in a series on *The Essential Teachings of Jesus*. I think I could just deal with the most important words Jesus gave to live by, but I would like to begin with a question for you, and that question is this: Where do you think today that we see the best vision of the Christian life? Where do you see the best vision?

Some people think it is in social activism. I think of Jim Wallis with the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C. and the many, many young adults today who have become enamored with social activism and seeing the world become a better place. Some people think this is the way that Christian life is to be framed and that the best Christians are the most active. Others think it is about personal holiness. I grew up in a tradition like this, and our favorite writer was A. W. Tozer. We read his book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, and it was all about becoming holy in our inner beings and being separated from sin and not doing the things of this world. Is that the best vision for the Christian life?

I have friends in high places, academics and pastors and priests, who see the best vision for the Christian life in sacramental terms or Eucharistic terms. I think of people like Alexander Schmemmann, the great Russian Orthodox thinker. They picture the whole Christian life through sacraments. Sometimes people, who grew up as I did, when we hear people talk about the sacramental life or the Eucharistic life, we have no idea what these Eucharistic Christians are talking about. Is this the best vision for the Christian life? For some people today, the best vision of the Christian life is in the words of the spiritual disciplines, developing things like prayer time and solitude and contemplation and fasting. They talk about Richard Foster and Dallas Willard and see the Christian life as about learning to practice the disciplines. Is that the best vision for the Christian life?

For other people the best vision for the Christian life is a theological life. These people run off to seminary. I used to call it cemetery until I started teaching again at a seminary, and now I can't do that. The older vision of InterVarsity Fellowship on university campuses was about learning to study the Bible inductively, even diagramming sentences as a part of the devotional life. I think of people like John Piper, who is a pastor in Minnesota if you haven't heard of him. John Piper is a man who envisions the Christian life through the lens of theology and knowledge. What is the best vision of the Christian life?

One time I was teaching a course on the history of spiritual formation and the church. When I finished that class, I walked across the hallway and taught a course on Jesus of Nazareth. Almost every day as I walked across the hallway, I found myself asking the question, how would Jesus have entertained this whole set of questions of what is the best vision for the Christian life? Would He have said *justice* or *holiness* or *sacraments* or the *disciplines* or *theology and knowledge*? How would Jesus have understood the best vision for the Christian life?

Well, Jesus was asked this question one time in a very Jewish way in a very Jewish world, a world known to Jesus. They were first-century Galileans asking questions the way first-century Galileans asked those kinds of questions. In Luke, chapter 10, at the beginning of a parable we all know about the Good Samaritan, we read this,

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law

which is often translated scribe, a *Torah* teacher, someone who taught the Law,

stood up to test Jesus.

Theologians liked to do this. They liked to ask questions which you think is a question but is actually a trap. What is your view of Scripture? That is usually not a naïve question. They are not asking for information. They want you to declare your colors. So the scribe says to Jesus,

“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

That was his question. What is the best vision of the Christian life? What is the way to God? How can I find connection with God that will last forever? Before we get to Jesus’ response, I want to set the context because I think there is a bit of a clash of civilizations here, a clash of two worlds where a scribal world comes into contact with Jesus’ world. Jesus grew up in a very pious Jewish family. When He was a little boy, He was *Yeshua* and maybe *Yeshi* to his friends. We know what He looked like because He was in Mel Gibson’s movie, a little Jewish boy with black, curly hair. When He was a little Yeshua, Miryam, His mother, or Yosef, His father, would have called Him to their laps and would have said this to Jesus. They would have said it every evening, which is when the day begins in the Jewish world, and every morning. They would have said it to Him every time He left the house and every time He was out in the back with His father and entered the house. They would say,

*Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.
V'ahav'ta eit Adonai Elohekha b'khol l'vav'kha uv'khol naf'sh'kha uv'khol m'odekha.*

Which being interpreted is

²⁹ ...‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

God, a great Hebrew word!

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.’ [Mark 12:29-30]

And they would have said to Yeshua every day and many times throughout the day, “We say this because Deuteronomy teaches it and because God wants us to be reminded that our first duty is to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.” So in the Jewish world Jesus grew up in, He developed habits of recitation and routine and rhythm, the sacred rhythms of reciting the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God....” In Psalm 55:17, the psalmist says,

¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon, I will complain and murmur,
And He will hear my voice.

That’s a bit of a threat. Daniel, chapter 6, tells us that Daniel went to the housetop and prayed three times a day. We know what the psalmist and what Daniel were praying. They were praying, in part, the *Shema*. They were reciting the Ten Commandments as their spiritual lubricant, as their warm-up for their own prayer life. In Acts, chapter 3, we see the apostles go to the temple in midday at the hour of prayer. It was customary for all pious Jews to pray in the evening (what we call vespers), in the morning when they got up, and at midday, approximately two or three o’clock in the afternoon. That was the way they prayed.

So the scribe comes to Jesus and says, “What can I do to inherit eternal life?” But the scribe who asked that question was a scribe who was committed to the *Torah*. He was committed to following *all* of the *Torah*, not only the Commandments but all the interpretations of the *Torah* called the *halakhah*. So the scribe is like a Jew at the first century who is learning what the essence is of the *Torah*.

One time a would-be convert comes to the conservative rabbi Shammai in his school and he says, “Teach me the whole *Torah* as I stand on one foot.” Well, it is an insult to Shammai because he knows there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament and thousands of *halakhah* rules. So Shammai takes out a club and whacks the would-be convert on the head and says, “We don’t ever do this sort of thing.” So the would-be convert goes to the left. He goes down to a softer church, Greg Boyd’s church [Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota]. He’s a friend, okay? And he says to Hillel, the great rabbi of the first century, “Teach me the whole *Torah* as I stand on one foot.” Hillel says, “Do not do to others what you don’t want done to you. This is the whole *Torah*.”

So this is the world of the scribe when he encounters Jesus and asks, “What’s the best vision of the Christian life?” But Jesus asks him a question back, and this is one of the great lessons you learn in reading the Gospel. Don’t ever ask Jesus a question because He will turn your question inside out to a question that is about *you*. Jesus being a good teacher turns to the scribe and says, “What is written in the *Torah*? How do you read it?” Well, that’s not exactly what the scribe wanted to hear because the scribe knew about Jesus. The question, “What is the best vision of the Christian life?” is actually asked of Jesus but the answer is indirectly spoken by the scribe in his own words. This is recorded in Mark, chapter 12, “Of all of the commandments,” Snow White-type fashion, “what is the fairest of them all?” and Jesus says,

²⁹ ...‘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.’

And the scribe would have said, “I didn’t ask You for two. I asked You for one.” And Jesus would have said, “Don’t interrupt me. I’m the teacher.” He plucked from your and my favorite Book of

the Old Testament, Leviticus, from chapter 19, a text that had not flowed in the Jewish sources that we recovered from the time of Moses until Jesus.

¹⁸ ...love your neighbor as yourself.

When Jesus combines the *Shema* of loving God with loving your neighbor as yourself, He gives a fuller vision of the Christian life. Jesus' vision of the Christian life is not that it is marked by justice. It is not that it is marked by holiness or by the Eucharist or by the spiritual disciplines. It is not marked by theological mastery. It is marked by loving God and loving others, far more difficult than all the others combined. Jesus gave to His disciples, and they repeated this over and over, the *Shema* combined with Leviticus 19 which I call the Jesus Creed, loving God and loving others. He gave to His disciples a new recitation pattern for life to recite every evening and every morning and every time they left the house and every time they entered the house that they would become loving people.

I learned the importance of recitation and routine in a new way one time when my wife and I were in Italy. The first time we went to Italy, we chose to find a villa and stay a week in Umbria, which is in the center of Italy next to *Toscana*, Tuscany. Everybody knows about Tuscany but not so much about Umbria. Umbria was the home of St. Francis, whom I consider the first Presbyterian or Protestant. We stayed in a villa near Spoleto, just south of Assisi. We went to Assisi three different times, but one of the places I wanted to see was a place called Norcia. Norcia was the home of St. Benedict, the greatest preacher in the Roman Catholic tradition from the fourth century.

So one morning we got up early and drove through the hills of Umbria. We came upon Norcia about 9 o'clock in the morning, and we parked our car outside the city walls of this great walled city. There is a large gate that you walk through called *Porta Romana*, which must mean Roman gate. I never did figure out whether it was the gate to Rome or from Rome but it didn't matter. We came into this city and as we walked down the main street, the people of Norcia were beginning to open up their shops. One of the first places that opened up was a coffee shop so we stopped and sat and had a cup of *cappuccino* and a *caffè latte*. The Italians know how to make coffee, no Folgers or any of that stuff in Italy. It was good, so we sat there and delighted ourselves in the morning heat of the sun of Umbria. After a few minutes we started to walk down the street and a grain and cheese shop opened up. We walked in and after 20 seconds, my wife Kris said, "I have to leave. I think I'm going to vomit from the smells." I came to the conclusion that the odors and the molds of the cheeses were probably there when St. Benedict was there, so I took a deep breath thinking if Benedict ate it, I will eat it as well. Then we walked a little bit farther down the street and came to the *Piazza San Benedetto*, the Piazza of St. Benedict. In the middle is a statue of St. Benedict preaching. I got out a fake book and got my wife to take a picture of me standing in front of St. Benedict so I looked like a Baptist preacher in front of a Catholic preacher trying to show him the way.

It was hot. It was in the 90s, a hot day in Norcia. We looked off to the side, and there was the *Basilica di San Benedetto*, the Basilica of St. Benedict. We walked in, and it was cool. The walls were thick. It must have been 30 degrees cooler inside. We sat in the back row just to cool off and smell the incense of this austere and completely empty basilica. It turned ten o'clock and suddenly we were treated to a concert by Benedictine monks. They chanted in Latin from memory Psalm 119, and the basilica was flooded with the glorious Psalm of the Bible.

Well, after about five minutes I got really curious. I wanted to know where these monks were because we couldn't see them. I walked all the way down to the front of the basilica, and there was the altar. I thought, I could go up behind the altar but I thought, if they're not there, who knows what would happen to me if they catch some Protestant behind the altar of Benedict. So I walked down the right transept. At the end was a shrine but the monks weren't there, so I looked over to the far left transept. I walked to the end of it and there were some stairs. Up at the top of the stairs was a door that said *Privato*, so I turned the door handle because I don't know Italian. To my luck, it was locked, so I came back and sat down next to my wife and took in another five or ten minutes of this concert of the Benedictine monks chanting Scripture.

Then I noticed just to the left, there was a little stairway going down with a white chain link fence across the opening. I walked over to the chain link fence, and it said *Proibito*, so I stepped over it. As I said, I don't know Italian. I walked down about a dozen steps when my Baptist conscience began to get to me. I got to thinking that I am in illegal territory here in Italy. The monks were starting to get louder, and it seemed I was getting warmer but I thought, what if I open some door and some monk has a heart attack? Where will I be in two years? So I came back upstairs and sat down, and we listened to the end of the concert but I realized this. Since the fourth century, seven times a day in that location, monks stop and they pray. The psalmist says in Psalm 119,

¹⁶⁴ Seven times a day I praise you....

The Benedictines think that is the model of the Christian life, *ora et labora*, pray and work. They stop, they pray, and they work. Seven different times, think about this, for 1,600 years, they prayed without stopping. When Hitler was bombing, they were praying. Nothing has interrupted the Benedictine routine of praying the Psalm from memory in Latin through every week. They don't go back and check their notes. They had this memorized [176 verses]. I thought to myself, this is very, very Jewish. This is the way Jews pray. They pray throughout the day. Jesus wants you and me to repeat the Jesus Creed of loving God and loving others over and over and over until it becomes a part of our bones and our heartbeat so that we become people who love others, who respond to people because we repeat this. So here's my challenge for you. The challenge is that every day when you get up in the morning, you are to say the Jesus Creed. And every night before you go to bed, the last thing you are to do is say the Jesus Creed again. And then any time it comes to mind throughout the day, say it again.

²⁹ ...'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."

Here's what I promise you. I promise you it will be dangerous for your moral health. I promise you that it will make your life more inconvenient. I promise you that you will become sensitive to people in your life you have no idea that you could ever become sensitive to. As we remind ourselves that our central best vision for the Christian life is to love God and to love others, we become sensitive to loving others all the time. This is why God gave Israel the rhythm of daily recitations.

I forgot what time I'm supposed to finish, John [Pastor John Crosby]. I grew up Baptist and we didn't have clocks in our church. So the challenge is to repeat this, and I am really serious with

you. This is an extraordinary challenge in life. Far more difficult than justice, far more difficult than the spiritual disciplines is this daily challenge because it's easy to love people we like, but it's extraordinarily difficult to love people we don't like. Loving is a great idea until you have someone to love, and that's what Jesus gave the Jesus Creed for. But this always raises the question that the scribe asked next. After the scribe answered the question with the Jesus Creed, repeating what he had heard Jesus teach, Jesus said, "You've answered correctly. I'll give you an A on that paper. Do this and you will live." But what happened next is amazing. The scribe wanted to justify himself, so he asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Now that's the question. In other words, "Okay, it's great. I'll love my neighbor, but who's my neighbor?" Neighbor in the Jewish world was understood as fellow Jews. Neighbor in the Pharisee world was understood as fellow Pharisees. Neighbor in the Essene world was fellow Essenes, so Jesus told a parable.

He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is like the parable of the good Packer fan. It's a stereotype. I'm using it because Jesus did. Jesus told this story. There was a priest, now that's a stereotype, and a Levite, a wannabe priest, and they were walking from Jerusalem, high on the hill, down into the Jordan River valley to Jericho. On their way they came upon a half-dead body. The priest knows his *Torah* well. In Numbers it says a priest is never to defile himself with corpse impurity. That is the rule and what that means is, he is never to touch a dead body unless it is of nearest of kin. So the priest, because he loves God and follows the *Torah*, walks around the body, perhaps far enough away so that his shadow did not touch the body because the shadow was seen as an extension of the body. He felt quite good about his *Torah* obedience.

Jesus said, "And then there was a Samaritan." Now this is the way to make the priest and the Levite and all the religiously scrupulous people of the world irritated, to use a stereotype. It is like telling a story of a Muslim who did what Christians should do. It's enough to get under your skin. "That's not the right answer, Jesus." But it's Jesus, so you let Him tell the story. The Samaritan picks up the body and he cares for it. And Jesus said, "There are some people who love God by following *Torah*, and there are other people who know that loving God means loving your neighbor as yourself." So He says to the scribe indirectly, "You ask me, 'Who is my neighbor?' But I ask you back, 'To whom can you be neighborly?'" He is asking the great question, and the answer is this. Anyone who is in your path is your neighbor. Jesus calls us to respond to and love all those people who are in our paths. It is easier to love people in South Africa than it is in our own neighborhood. It is easier to get involved with sending our money for orphanages in Russia than to go to soup kitchens in St. Paul and Minneapolis, far easier.

One year I was teaching this material about the Jesus Creed in one of my Jesus of Nazareth classes at North Park University in Chicago when I was still teaching there. In the back row I had a student named Tim King, who was the first student I ever had who had a computer in class, and I thought that was cool. Now I *don't* think it is cool. Tim was becoming obsessed with the Jesus Creed, seeing how often it appeared in the Gospels and where he was seeing it. He would come up to me after class and we would have good conversations. He came to me in April and said that he'd been coming to North Park University and walking from his apartment to the campus for two years and that he had been walking by homeless people but had never recognized them. He said, "Now I know them by name. I invited all the homeless people to one of North Park's parties in my apartment the other day." He said, "They have become my friends." He said, "I recognized that they were my neighbors because I was reciting the Jesus Creed on my way to class."

The next year Tim King was invited to go to England to talk about university students ministering to the homeless in the United States. He had gotten college students throughout the United States to spend a night outside with no blankets and no pillows and no extra coats in solidarity with the homeless. Depending on the weather, you suffered. Just before Tim graduated, he came to me and said, "I want your advice," which is not always the truth when a college student comes to you for advice. What they want is your support. But Tim said to me, "I've been offered an opportunity to do a doctorate with Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University" and I said, "That's a good opportunity." Then he said, "I've also been offered a job to work with the homeless in Chicago. What should I do?" I said, and I was quoting Jesus, "The poor you will always have with you. Go to Duke."

At graduation after he came through and shook my hand and gave me a hug, he said, "I've chosen to work with the homeless." I said, "Go to Duke." Every year Tim would come by my office and tell me about the homeless in Chicago and the ministry he was having with them. He would say, "It's all because of you, because I said the Jesus Creed in the morning." Then after a few years, Jim Wallis gobbled him up and now Tim King is working in Washington, D.C. with the homeless with Jim Wallis, and he is a major thinker in the Christian movement, all because he said the Jesus Creed, so be careful what you say in the morning. I promise you this. If you say the Jesus Creed over and over and you let it work into your life, it will revolutionize your life to become the kind of person that Jesus wants us to become in the best vision of the Christian life. We will become people who love God and love others. I'd like you to stand with me if you will. We are going to face east, face Jerusalem, and we are going to say the Jesus Creed together. If you could repeat after me,

Hear oh Israel:

(All:) Hear oh Israel:

The Lord our God,

(All:) The Lord our God,

The Lord is one.

(All:) The Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God

(All:) Love the Lord your God

With all your heart

(All:) With all your heart

And with all your soul

(All:) And with all your soul

And with all your mind

(All:) And with all your mind

And with all your strength.

(All:) And with all your strength.

And the second is this:

(All:) And the second is this:

Love your neighbor as yourself.

(All:) Love your neighbor as yourself.

There is no commandment greater than these.

(All:) There is no commandment greater than these.

Thank you, all.

Thanks to Gary Haugen of International Justice Mission for the concept of “Not praying for Safety but Trouble”, speech at Fellowship Conference January 2013
For more on the Lord’s Prayer as part of the Jesus Creed, see The Jesus Creed, Scot McKnight

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.