



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

FEBRUARY 2012 | VOL:5 | NO:2



WEEK 1 :: FEBRUARY 5
THE GREATEST :: MARK 12:28-34

In response to the Pharisees question about the greatest commandment, Jesus gives two commandments that he brilliantly intertwined.

The first, he says, is what Israelites termed the “Shema.” Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6, where God commands of Israel the following:

‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.’ (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The first sentence, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” was the Shema. It was a prayer central to Judaism declaring witness to who God was, that he was their God and king, and they were words that every devout Jew would pray each morning and each night before going to bed (given the command to “talk about them... when you lie down and when you get up”). The verses after that, starting with “love the Lord your God,” were referred to as the “V’ahavta,” and were part of the liturgy of the Shema. Loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength was what one should think of upon waking, a natural next step after declaring the Lord as God.

When Jesus starts with this as an answer to what the greatest commandment is, the audience isn’t surprised. This could have very well been the same answer any rabbi would give to such a question, for it was at the core of Jewish belief. But Jesus does not stop there. He marries the Shema with another commandment from Leviticus 19:18, actually half of the original commandment, which states, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”

This was not part of the Shema liturgy (which had several other verses concerning obedience to commandments) but it was something that may have been overlooked in terms of importance. By marrying the two together Jesus made a bold statement about the importance of loving your neighbor. Jesus was saying that you cannot love the Lord without loving your neighbor; loving your neighbor is a natural outgrowth of loving God. The rabbi completely agreed, yet Jesus’ emphasis on this old truth may have surprised the rest of his audience with its obviousness. He even went as far as saying, “There is no commandment greater than these.” This was something new: a new emphasis on love instead of obedience.



CONNECTED TEXTS

John 13:31-35
I Corinthians 13:1-13

DISCUSSION STARTER

Describe a moment in your life when you felt truly loved, either by God or by loved ones.

QUESTIONS

Based on Jesus' response in Mark 12, is the *entire* business of Christianity to love God and love your neighbor? Or are there other things?

Read John 13:31-35. Why does Jesus term it a new commandment?

What are the practical and tangible ways we love each other?

Jesus never gives practical steps to love your neighbor. He never says, "Ok, you should try hugging others more," or "You know, it would be great if you would sit down with people and affirm them with your words." Instead he gives the vague commandment to love without specifics. Why doesn't Jesus do this?

Do you have a circle of friends where love is shown back and forth? Why is this difficult to attain?

ACTION STEP

Decide on one small act of love that you will perform for a loved one or friend this week.



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FEBRUARY 2012 | VOL:5 | NO:2

WEEK ONE NOTES



WEEK TWO :: FEBRUARY 12
DAVID'S BOY :: MARK 35-37

I remember the headline well: "Elway's son tired of football."

Talk about newsworthy, right?

The story went like this: John Elway, the famous former quarterback of the Denver Broncos, had a son, Jack, who played football at Cherry Creek High School in the Denver area and eventually committed to play at Arizona State University. After sitting on the bench his freshman year, he decided to quit the team. He wasn't upset about his lack of playing time, and he wasn't considering transferring to another school. He simply decided to give up the sport.

The media was nonplussed. Here was a young man genetically predisposed for success in the arena of major collegiate sports, hallowed ground in our society. He was given every advantage and opportunity to achieve the level of stardom and adoration that many of us (yours truly included) only dreamed about. And yet, he decided to walk away.

His reason? He wanted to do something else. He was tired of the sport. While it was and is his father's passion, it wasn't his.

I think all of us can relate to that on some level. This kind of theme is the basis for multitude stories where the climax usually results in lines like, "Why can't you just let me be myself?", followed by a character running out of the room and slamming doors.

Sometimes we put these expectations on ourselves. My father was a highly-successful physician, and I felt that my family expected me to follow in his footsteps. I don't know that I ever acknowledged the pressure of those expectations until I was filling out college applications. I remember a conversation with my mother where I tearfully confessed that I was not interested in going to medical school, that I had no passion for it, only to have her relay to me that she never expected me to be a doctor, that she'd known for some time that it wouldn't suit me.

Jesus was, as prophesied, the Messiah in the line of David. He followed in the footsteps of his ancestors as he built his following. Surely he knew that many of those around him had specific expectations for him. A great deal of those expectations involved him leading an uprising that would throw off hated Roman rule. These are explicitly spelled out in Mark 11, where the crowds hailed Jesus as their conquering king as he entered David's city, much to the consternation of the politicians and power brokers of the time. He seemed poised to make his move and take control, to step into his destiny as leader of his people, just like David.

Jesus, however, always seemed to know that his way would look much different than his forefather David, who, though being a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), was a man of political intrigue and warfare: a man of blood (2 Samuel 16:7). David operated in his culture's corridors of power, something that Jesus seemed unwilling to do. He reminded his disciples



again and again that he came not to gain political power or status, but to give himself away for the benefit of others (see Mark 10:45).

In Mark 12:35-37, Jesus seems to drop another clue that things won't go as everyone thought they would. How is it that the Messiah, David's son, is also his Lord, he asked? Could it be that this Messiah would not follow the path of his father David? Could it be that there was another way that God was working in the midst of his people?

Could there be a higher way?

CONNECTED TEXTS

Romans 1:1-7

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

DISCUSSION STARTERS

When have you felt the weight of someone else's expectations for you?

QUESTIONS

Put yourself in the place of one of Jesus's followers in the gospels. Would you have had expectations of Jesus? What would they have been?

Even after Christ's death, resurrection and ascension it was important to the early church that Jesus was accounted as a "Son of David" (see Rom 1). Why do you think that is?

In 1 Cor 15:20-28, Paul writes about Jesus as the "second Adam," the redeeming figure of all human history. How does Jesus exhibit the Lord's redemption as a "second David?"

What expectations do we put on Jesus now? Is it possible we still misunderstand him?

ACTION STEP

How do we submit our expectations of ourselves and those around us to Christ? Every day, ask Jesus to help us to conform our expectations to his, showing us the higher way of his gospel.



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WEEK TWO NOTES



WEEK 3 :: FEBRUARY 19

WHEN SMALL IS BIG :: MARK 12:38-44

Consumption defined: The process in which the substance of a thing is completely destroyed, used up, or incorporated or transformed into something else. Verb: to consume, synonym: to devour. E.g. *I just **consumed** an entire bag of caramel popcorn while working on this writing assignment.*

American Consumerism. What does that phrase bring to mind? A market-driven economy? An insatiable appetite for resources, both natural and human, on a global scale? I think of a flesh-eating bacteria, Necrotizing Fasciitis, an infection that starts in the tissues just below the surface of the skin and spreads quickly destroying layers of tissue.

“Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir” is a docu-comedy addressing Americans’ over-consumption-shopping-frenzy at Christmas time. With a disarming mixture of humor, they deliver a troubling message about the price we *don’t* pay for inexpensive goods, but that *is paid* in human rights violations by laborers in developing countries.

“Take the example of buying cheap clothes from a department store. Regardless of what I say, if I don’t ask some basic questions about where the clothes come from, I believe in sweatshops.” (From Peter Rollins’ online article “I Believe in Child Labour, Sweatshops and Torture” posted 26/5/11.

Have you ever heard someone say, “Hey, you wouldn’t believe the screamin’ deal I got on this foreclosure!” At a very basic human level, wouldn’t a natural response be to ask where the displaced previous owner is now? What is his part of the story? But that is the downer, the unimportant part of the story, because we are Americans and we love to acquire **stuff** and we **really** love a good deal. That is the important thing, right? Bigger = better.

In Mark 12, Jesus is teaching about what to “watch out” for. Don’t be fooled by appearances, what we are naturally charmed by, and who the culture has determined are the important people. He is watching as the parade of people goes by, making their offerings, including many rich people who threw in large amounts. Can you hear the MC at the telethon exclaiming that Henry in Topeka just pledged \$500? Jesus’ next words are, “They devour widows’ houses ... and for that will be punished.”

In that statement He offers a new perspective by which to judge what is impressive: 1) Where did the money come from? Meaning, who got hurt or exploited in the process? 2) Giving all versus giving from the excess.



Back to the word “consumption.” Have you ever had the experience of walking through the kitchen alone and you spot that one last piece of pie you love so much? And you stop, and hold back from helping yourself? **Because** there is a different kind of pleasure in sharing that last piece with someone else. The Kingdom of God is in the hidden things, the small things, generous acts that are without fanfare, that are unselfconscious, and from a heart alive with conscience.

CONNECTED TEXTS

Isaiah 55:2

James 4:13

Acts 2:44-45

Isaiah 29:13

DISCUSSION STARTER

Have you ever clicked on Yahoo fashion just out of curiosity because you had to see how “xyz” movie star was looking on the red carpet in Armani? Discuss what it is about appearance that catches our attention. Are those first impressions reliable? Why and why not? What lasting impressions do you value?

QUESTIONS

Have you ever thought about going on a shopping diet? Similar to a weight loss diet, you have to think about overall reducing, and then changing unhealthy choices for healthier ones. Discuss what this would look like.

What do you know about the production of the items at your favorite places to shop? What would it take to find out?

Read Is 29:13 It is where the term “lip service” originates. Are human rights violations on the other side of the world somehow a violation of the Two Greatest Commandments for me, here in Denver? How?

ACTION STEP

Give the money you would have spent on something for yourself this week--whether it is an article of clothing, a coffee or chocolate--to a homeless person. Walk somewhere you would have driven; and while you're walking, ask God about your own level of consumption. Praise Him for this beautiful planet.



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FEBRUARY 2012 | VOL:5 | NO:2

WEEK THREE NOTES



WEEK FOUR :: FEBRUARY 26
SHAME AND GUILT ::

When I was 12-years-old, I finally confessed a terrible secret to my mother.

I remember it so vividly, sitting on the edge of her bathtub, watching her curl her hair, opening my mouth to speak several times, and then losing my nerve.

“Mom?” I finally asked her, “Do I have to tell you everything?”

She turned to me and paused a second before replying, “No. You don’t. You’re entitled to keep things to yourself. But I hope you know that you can tell me anything.”

I bit my nails for a good five minutes before finally baring my soul to my mother. The floodgates opened and words and tears spilled out as I confessed to her what I thought had been such a terrible awful thing.

What I’d done and what I said doesn’t really matter. For over a year, I’d carried the shame of what my 11-year-old self had done, feeling miserable, wanting the feeling to be somehow washed away.

But as I told my mom, even the details that probably weren’t pertinent and especially the ones that were so embarrassing to reveal, I felt lighter and lighter and lighter. I watched my mother’s loving expression remain unchanged and felt so grateful for her hand on my cheek wiping away my tears.

I wish that every time I confessed something to my Heavenly Father that I remembered this instance with my mother. I wish my human mind could always perceive him as Abba, that I could always yield to his ever-available grace and mercy, that I could understand the power and relief that is confession.

And beyond my relationship with the Lord, how desperately I wish the body of Christ did this for one another! How I yearn to see a Christian community that does not judge or rate sins but proclaims, “We are all sinners shown grace!” welcoming others with open arms.

Grace is the best gift we’ve ever been given, and yet the one we seem most reluctant to take. We so greedily gobble up other blessing sent our way, trivial things so easily granted, and yet turn our faces from the most precious thing that cost our Savior everything, even his life.

And how do we accept grace? We confess. We confess. We confess. We put a name to our shame, we call it what it is, relying on the fact (THE FACT, not the notion) that as we sit on the edge of God’s bathtub, watching him, deciding whether or not to tell, that in the end, after we’ve spoken our peace, his love will be the same. His hand will be on our cheek. His expression will be unchanged. And we will have been set free.



CONNECTED TEXTS

1 John 1:9
James 5:16
Romans 3:23
2 Peter 3:9

DISCUSSION STARTERS

What was your greatest childhood sin? Did you tell your parents or a sibling or a trusted adult? Or did you keep it bottled up inside?

QUESTIONS

Why do we not always think of God as a gracious and forgiving father? Our upbringing? The current Evangelical message? Because it goes against our natural human tendencies?

The Bible is actually full of Scripture about how lovingly and willingly the Lord will forgive us. Discuss different verses and stories that portray this. What are your favorites? What is easiest for you to relate to?

We're to forgive others as Christ forgave us. When you think about the wrongs done to you, can you imagine acting in unconditional love toward someone who's not your family? It's easy for us to want to protect ourselves? Talk about the risk of loving and forgiving constantly. What does it mean for us as Christians out there in a harsh world?

And not just the world! What about the Christian community. Sometimes it seems like we're harshest on each other. How can we be more accepting of our brothers and sisters even in their shortcomings? What would it mean to you to feel protected, accepted, loved, forgiven by the church? Would you be more willing to confess?

ACTION STEP

It is Lent. And this Lenten season, we're discussing confession.

The action is simple. Confess a sin.



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WEEK FOUR NOTES