

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, October 30, 2022

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### Mark 12: 28-34

One of the legal experts heard their dispute and saw how well Jesus answered them. He came over and he asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus replied, “The most important one is, ‘Israel, listen! Our God is one Lord; and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You will love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment greater than these.” Then the legal expert said to him, “Well said, Teacher; you have truthfully said that ‘God is one, and there is no other besides God.’ And ‘to love God with all of the heart, and a full understanding, and all of one’s strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You aren’t far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So recently I learned a new phrase. Maybe some of you are familiar with it, but I stumbled upon it over Labor Day weekend. I was heading off on just a week-long vacation, first down to the beach and then up to Louisville, Kentucky, for the long weekend. And we loaded the plane in Atlanta heading down to Florida, and the flight attendant came over the loudspeaker and very calmly and thoughtfully said, “Friends, this is a payload optimized flight, which means that we need you to only put one of your carry-on bags into the overhead bin. If you have two with you, we need you to hold it either in your lap or under the seat in front of you. And if you can, if your bag is smaller and could go under the seat in front of you, we'd rather you do that than put it in the bin.” It was more purposeful than that, but that was pretty much the gist of what the flight attendant was sharing with us. Payload optimized—a phrase I'd never heard before or at least not in that context. It's really simply a refined way of the flight attendant letting us know that they have filled the plane with a bunch of bags, even more bags than uh than we have passengers, and so there is no gate check that's going to happen if we run out of overhead bin space. So we need to carry with us what we can, maybe cramp our leg space a little bit, but it's a really nice way to put it. The airlines have optimized the payload that they are carrying from one place to another. It's a nice way to present it to people who have paid for a ticket. It's better than saying, “We don't actually have space for your luggage. We would prefer for you to bring less baggage. We actually can make a little extra money if we carry things from one place to another for someone else, not just you. We appreciate that you paid for the upgrade. It doesn't get you any more space in the overhead bin. Payload optimized. I was contemplating that phrase this week as I reflected on this passage from the gospel of Mark when this legal expert or in other translations a scribe

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comes forward. He's listening to Jesus. You can just imagine him just off screen listening and hearing this young Rabbi teach, and there's this argument, this debate, that's going on, we'll call it. And this legal expert is impressed with the way that Jesus speaks and the way in which he outlines his argument. And hearing that he had answered well some questions that were asked of him, this one comes out from off screen into the center. And says, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" And Jesus replies with words from Moses, words from the Torah, words from Deuteronomy, words that Moses speaks just after he is given the Ten Commandments. So in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, those are presented to God's people, but when he completes that presentation, Moses says, "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord Is Our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children, and talk about them when you are at home, and when you are away, when you lie down, and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand. Fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates."

When Jesus is approached by the legal expert and asked which of the commandments is most important, he doesn't outline those that have been brought down from a mountain; but he outlines this passage from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy.

It's as if the people of God need to know, they need to begin actually from a place of God at the center of their lives. It's as if the people of God need to know that there will be many competing energies, many different things in their lives that will vie for different space, other things that will compete for their attention, fill their ancient calendars, ask their investment, and take their energy.

And so God through Moses and then in the gospel through the words of Jesus says the most important one is "Israel, listen. Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Every bit of it you must bring to this love of God. There will be other things competing for your energy and your attention, for your investment, for your time.

But keep God at the center of what you do and who you are, and when you do that, when you hold that as most important, you will without even knowing it sometimes love your neighbor. It will become second nature to you to care for them, to help clothe them and feed them, to listen to them and tend to their wounds, to maybe even let them tend to yours.

The legal expert upon hearing this explanation, this ancient one from Jesus, says, "You've answered correctly. Well said, Teacher. You have told us what we need to hear in this busy time in the world when many things compete for our attention and our time, our investment and our energy. You've told us what we were told a thousand years ago and what we need to be told once again today. Thank you for putting the Lord at the center of who we are."

Jesus, upon hearing the legal expert, realizes that he has answered well, and he tells him, "You aren't far from the kingdom of God."

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It turns out that Henry Nouwien is able to reflect this perhaps better than I. He says this, “To set our hearts in the kingdom of God, therefore, means to make the life of the spirit within us and among us the center of all we think and say and do. 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.”

And when I put that through the lens of optimizing our payload, it seems to me that we have a challenge inherent in the text today. If we truly want to optimize that which we carry with us, we don't just want to use it as...as a phrase, but understand it as a way of being, then we have to ask ourselves what's taking up too much space in our lives?

What's taking up God's space in our life?

More pointedly, what are you carrying on your journey that needs to be left behind so that you might take the journey that you need to take? What is stopping you from going to the place where you need to go? If instead of a...a fleeting phrase, payload optimization would mean for us then to rid ourselves of that that which would weigh us down and instead make space for the Divine first and foremost in our lives, if it would challenge us to not give the easy answer of I, I don't have that attention to give, my calendar is too full, my bank account has been too exhausted, my energy is gone, if it would challenge us to imagine what it would look like to move through the world a little bit lighter and a little more centered and a little more focused on what God is doing in our lives and in the world. I wonder what it is that is taking up too much space for you this day.

I imagine that when you think about it or you hear that question, a few things immediately pop to your mind.

I wonder what it would look like for us on this commitment Sunday not just to write down financial figures on a card and turn them into an offering plate a little bit later on, but for us to leave this place imagining what it is that has taken center stage in our lives that no longer needs to be there. It needs to be displaced in order for us to be able to move more freely and lightly through the world.

And not just what needs to be taken away, but what needs to be added, centering the Lord our God in our hearts, centering the Lord our God and our souls in our minds, actually giving every bit of our strength to following the one Lord.

That's what I think true commitment might look like today.

It might look like us making our financial commitments for 2023. It might also look like saying, “I'm making a commitment now to set aside the thing that is too heavy to carry, too real to hide, too deep to undo. I'm giving it to God and I'm allowing God to take up that space within me.”

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I actually kind of like the phrase now. I don't see it so much as a...as a slick way for a big old company to tell me there's no room for me. I see it more as a challenge. What does it look like for me in the year ahead or even this week to set aside the things that might try to take center stage and listen once again? When Jesus is asked what is the most critical thing, what is the most important teaching that we have, and he goes back to the same lesson that was given to the Hebrew people several hundred years before; and he says, "Listen, our Lord is one and you are invited to love this Lord with every bit of yourself, with your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

When you do that, you're going to draw even closer to the kingdom of God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.