

RECOGNIZING OUR DEBT TO OTHERS

Daily Bible Readings

M	Feb. 23	Neh. 4:15–23	Work Together for the Common Good
T	Feb. 24	Rom. 15:1–17	Welcome One Another in Christ
W	Feb. 25	Prov. 3:27–32	Do Good whenever You Can
Th	Feb. 26	Eccl. 5:4–8	Fulfill Your Vows
F	Feb. 27	Phil. 10–21	Bear One Another's Debts
Sa	Feb. 28	Jas. 2:14–26	Provide for Others and Demonstrate Faith

MAIN IDEA

Mark's Gospel points to Jesus's commands, which stress the love of God and neighbor, while James stresses how works are essential to healthy relationships.

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 4:15–23; Mark 12:28–34;
Romans 15:1–7; Philippians 2:1–8;
Colossians 3:12; 4:1; James 2:14–17

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[The scribe said to Jesus,] “. . . ‘to love [God] with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:33)

PREPARING TO LEAD

- Pray for participants and for yourself as leader. Reflect on lesson 1, “Recognizing Our Debt to Others” (Participant’s Book, p. 1).
- Familiarize yourself with the context of the Scripture.
- Provide Bibles, Participant’s Books, Worship Leaflets for lesson 1, name tags, paper, and pens. Obtain an internet-connected device and audio recordings of the print Scripture.
- Obtain a white pillar candle, as well as a means to light it.
- Steps 3–6 include a variety of lesson activity options; within each step, select activities that appeal to participants.

LEADING THE LESSON

Opening Worship

1. Gathering

- Greet participants and provide name tags. Encourage participants to discuss how receiving God’s love into their hearts changes how they love others.
- Distribute Bibles, Participant’s Books, and Worship Leaflets for lesson 1.
- Formulate and get consensus on some simple ground rules for the study (for example, welcoming diverse points of view, maintaining confidentiality, and so on).

2. Morning Prayer 1

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Light the white candle, noting that it is a tangible reminder of the presence of the risen Christ.
- Encourage participants to settle into silence.
- Invite volunteers to lead portions of Morning Prayer from the Worship Leaflet, beginning with the Opening Sentences and ending after the Hymn.

Teaching Tip

This “throw-back quarter” begins by building on the foundation of Jesus’ Greatest Commandments. These much repeated commandments to love God, self, and others ground the faithful of every age in the love God has for us and in our responsibility to love one another.

In this lesson, we consider the ways loving others is a *response* to God’s love for us. It may be likened to a “debt” or something owed—to God, to ourselves, and to others—a giving back to the one who loves us by acting in loving, caring, hospitable ways toward others and ourselves.

This is not to make our love for others transactional: you love me so I love you back. No, our love is our response to God’s love. In responding, we can do no less than to love God and to love those whom God loves.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 12:28–34; James 2:14–17

12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘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’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

2:14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

Bible Study

3. Scripture Reading

Participant’s Book, p. 2

- Read Mark 12:28–34. Discuss love as an emotion as well as a practice. Identify how Jesus’ commandment impacts a person’s choices and behaviors.
- Option: Read James 2:14–17. Have participants define *faith* and *works* as used in James 2:14. Form two groups to debate whether “faith” or “works” is more important to a relationship with Jesus.
- Option: Play an audio recording of Mark 12:29–30. Discuss why this commandment is important. Play an audio recording of James 2:14–17. Discuss the meaning of “putting faith into action.” How do these two passages inform the other?

4. The Love Commandment

Participant’s Book, p. 2

- The author asserts that the love commandment meets the criteria for a sticky statement. It is *simple*; it has *credibility*; it is grounded in *Scripture*; it is *true*. Have participants give examples that demonstrate the stickiness of the commandment.
- The author notes that when Jesus said, “There is no other commandment greater than these,” he meant that the two laws

should always be combined (Mark 12:31). Love of God and love of neighbor—you cannot have one without the other. Discuss whether participants agree or disagree with the author’s interpretation.

- Select from among these questions for group discussion.
 1. How does Jesus’ love commandment, Mark 12:30–31, connect to other laws in the Bible?
 2. What was God’s purpose in commanding people of faith to love their neighbors as themselves? Why not just say “love your neighbor”?
 3. What feelings are associated with loving God with the whole heart?
 4. How does meditating on God’s Word or spending time in prayer affect their ability to love as God loves?
 5. How does God’s love make a difference in your relationships with others?
- Encourage participants to reflect on ways that they recognize God’s love in their lives. How do they express their thankfulness for God’s love for them?

5. Love of Strangers

Participant’s Book, p. 3

- Ask participants how this Scripture helps them to deepen their concern for others and spark their willingness to love as Jesus loves. Lead a discussion based on their responses.
- Invite participants to identify situations in which they encounter strangers. Discuss their comfort level in these situations. Discuss the question from the Participant’s Book:
 1. When have you made a surprising connection with a stranger in a table conversation?
 2. How does this experience affect the way you approach meeting strangers?
- Invite participants to reflect together on the difference between “knowing” someone is in need and “showing” love by meeting the person’s needs. Brainstorm examples of how they can show their love for God by loving others.
- Challenge participants to identify one person to whom they will more intentionally respond in love—family member, friend, acquaintance. How will the interactions with this person look different if they approach each interaction with love?

6. Stepping into the World

Participant’s Book, p. 4

- Brainstorm spiritual practices that encourage participants to love the Lord with their entire being. Imagine how this practice will also affect how they love themselves and others.

- The title of this lesson is “Recognizing Our Debt to Others.” Where do participants see opportunities to satisfy their debt to a neighbor in need by supporting their physical needs?
- Brainstorm several situations of people in need. Challenge participants to identify ideas concerning how to lovingly help those in need in each situation.
- Identify local projects participants can plan that would enable them to assist people who may be facing difficult situations (food insecurity, houselessness, medical needs, etc.).
- Provide a copy of your congregation’s annual budget. Have participants review the budget for the inclusion of resources (of time and money) toward meeting community needs. Discuss what the budget reveals about the congregation’s values and commitments. Make suggestions that support Jesus’ commandment to love God and neighbor.
- Encourage the participants to keep a journal in which they can track their faith-led actions of showing love and giving help.

Closing Worship

7. Morning Prayer 2

Worship Leaflet, lesson 1

- Invite the participants to turn to the Worship Leaflet, and enlist volunteers to lead remaining portions of Morning Prayer.
- Begin with the Prayer of the Day, pray the Lord’s Prayer, and end with the Dismissal.
- Bless and challenge participants as they leave, saying, “(Name), Go in peace; love God and love your neighbor and yourself.”
- Extinguish the candle.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. Mark 12:28–34 (parallels Matt. 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28; the golden rule; Matt. 7:12 is another summary of the Law attributed to Jesus): Some early Christians understood this passage as permission to disregard the commandments pertaining to ritual.
2. In the *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 31a, Rabbi Hillel, the great Jewish teacher of Jesus’ time, taught, “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”
3. Compare Mark 12:33 with Hosea 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:22; Micah 6:6–8; and Matthew 9:13. Scholars assume that the “more important than” indicates priorities and not the dissolution of the sacrificial system. Loving God and one’s neighbor is a daily discipline, while “burnt offerings and sacrifices” were occasional and only made in the temple in Jerusalem.

4. James wrote to a church afflicted by classist bigotry. The wealthy church members were shown preference over the poor, whose needs weren't being met by the affluent members of the church.
5. James 2:14, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (See also Gal. 5:13; Matt. 25:31–46; 1 John 3:17), led Martin Luther to label James's letter as an "epistle of straw." He saw James words as the opposite of Paul's theology, to which Luther owed the foundation of his theology. In Paul it is faith, not works, that saves.
6. Compare Paul and James. In Galatians 2:16, "the law" is Mosaic law (e.g., being circumcised and eating clean food), while in James 2:14, "works" include caring for the disadvantaged (see Gal. 5:6). Works-righteousness is not the issue for James; acting on faith to help (love) my neighbor is. In other words, I don't earn salvation by helping others; rather, I celebrate the gift of salvation by helping others. For a twentieth-century treatment of cheap grace and costly grace, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

ENGAGE YOUR LEARNERS DURING THE WEEK

Send an email or a text:

1. Encouraging them to reflect on ways they have grown in their capacity to love others, even when they do not feel especially loving.
2. Inviting them to keep track of the foods they eat over a two-day period this week. They may discuss their food choices in the next lesson.