

# RECOGNIZING OUR DEBT TO OTHERS

## 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)

1. Dan Heath and Chip Heath, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (New York: Random House, 2007), 11–18.

## Daily Bible Readings

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

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

In recent years, numerous fake stories have made the rounds. These stories are spread by word of mouth or over the internet, and they make claims such as “Coca-Cola rots your bones!” “You only use ten percent of your brain.” “The Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from space.” False, false, false. Each of these statements are urban legends, fake news. But since they are very “sticky” stories, they tend to get stuck in people’s brains.

Dan Heath and Chip Heath have written a book called *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*.<sup>1</sup> They are interested in why urban legends are so compelling, why virtually every society circulates a set of proverbs, and why some political ideas sweep across the country. They have found numerous similarities among things that are designed to stick. These ideas tend to be *simple*. They have *credibility*. They are grounded in *compelling stories*. And best of all, they do not have to be urban legends—they can be totally *true*.

Jesus knew this, which is why his love commandment is so very, very sticky. When asked by a scribe to name the first of all the commandments, Jesus said, “[You] shall love the Lord

your God . . . ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:30–31). The love commandment is *simple*, it has *credibility*, it is grounded in *compelling parables*, and, best of all, it is *true*.

*Lord God, thank you for sending Jesus to challenge us to love you and to love our neighbors as ourselves. May we stick to these words, in Jesus’ name. Amen.*



## 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?” <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>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.’ <sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup>and ‘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.” <sup>34</sup>When 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? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food <sup>16</sup>and 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? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

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

## THE LOVE COMMANDMENT

“Which commandment is the first of all?” asks a scribe in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus replies, “The first is . . . you shall love the Lord your God” (Mark 12:28–30). Jesus knows Deuteronomy, which says that we should love the Lord with full heart, soul, and

might (Deut. 6:5). No doubt the scribe nods in agreement. Then Jesus says, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:31). Jesus surprises the scribe by saying that there is a second part to the first commandment, one that comes from what Leviticus says about loving our neighbors (Lev. 19:18). “There is no other commandment greater than these,” says Jesus, meaning that the two should always be combined (Mark 12:31). Love of God and love of neighbor—you cannot have one without the other.

The Christian faith is challenging, but it does not have to be complicated. There is nothing simpler and more profound than the love commandment. In Mark, the scribe agrees with Jesus, saying that love of God and neighbor “is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:33). This is unexpected, because in many accounts the scribes stand in opposition to Jesus. But not here. When Jesus sees that the scribe answers wisely, he says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).

Ideas that are sticky are not only simple. They also have credibility. The commandment to love God and neighbor is credible because it connects to many other commandments. For example, God says, “You shall keep my Sabbaths” (Lev. 19:30). Keeping the Sabbath is part of what it means to love the Lord our God. We know we should do it, but we often fall short. The love commandment also connects to the law which says, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien” (Lev. 19:33). This verse gives us specific guidance about how we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This love, which is more of an action than an emotion, is at the heart of all the social teachings of the church, past and present.



**How do you connect the love commandment to other laws in the Bible?**

## LOVE OF STRANGERS

Throughout history, an important way to show love of God and neighbor has been to practice hospitality. The New Testament word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which combines a word for love (*phileo*) with the word for stranger (*xenos*). Through the practice of hospitality, people find a way to welcome strangers and discover the holiness of God in them. Think of Abraham in the Book of Genesis, who showed hospitality to

three strangers and discovered that they were God in disguise (Gen. 18:1–15). In the Gospels, Jesus was criticized for eating meals with tax collectors and sinners, groups outside the religious mainstream. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Saint Benedict developed a rule for monastic life that stressed hospitality, grounding it in the promise of Jesus that he will come to us in the form of a stranger (Matt. 25:35).

In 2013, Pope Francis surprised many people by saying that he would not focus on abortion, gay marriage, and contraception because the church had become “obsessed” with these issues. Instead, he wanted to pursue an inclusive church, one that is “the home of all, not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people.” Many liberal Catholics were heartened by his remarks. Chris Pett, president of a Catholic organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons in Chicago, called it a shift in tone and message regarding the church’s position on homosexuality.

But the pope’s focus on Christian hospitality was actually deeply conservative. “Francis clearly wants a bigger church that puts less emphasis on rules as it reaches out to sinners,” said Monsignor Bill Parent, a pastor in Maryland. He added, “In our era that tends to reduce religion to rules, the pope is reclaiming a traditional Christian emphasis on personal encounter.” Unfortunately, many Christians find it much easier to show *xenophobia* (fear of strangers) than to practice *philoxenia* (love of strangers)—the Greek word for hospitality found in Hebrews 13:2. They are not comfortable with the “traditional Christian emphasis on personal encounter.” But when church members welcome strangers, sitting down for shared meals and conversations, they discover that strangers are not so strange.<sup>2</sup>

 **When have you made a surprising connection with a stranger in a table conversation?**

2. Henry G. Brinton, “Pope Serves Up Christian Hospitality: Column,” *USA Today*, September 24, 2013, [bit.ly/TPWPopeHospitality](http://bit.ly/TPWPopeHospitality).

## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Sticky ideas are usually tied to compelling stories. Instead of being separated from real life, they are connected to the struggles of actual people. Dan and Chip Heath report that first-responders do not simply read books to hone their skills. They share tips and stories after every emergency call. These give them a deeper understanding of best practices for responding to various situations. The same is true for the commandment of Jesus

to love God and neighbor, along with the sticky idea of Christian hospitality.

When James wrote to a community of Christ-followers in the first century, he warned them against favoring the rich over the poor. He reminded them that the “royal law” of Jesus was found in “the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin” (Jas. 2:8–9). Then James told a story about the real struggles of actual people, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and 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?” (Jas. 2:15–16). James recognized the debt we have to others, especially the poor. He urged the followers of Christ to welcome people in need and “supply their bodily needs.”

This practice of Christian hospitality helps us to see each other as children of God and to follow the commandment of Jesus, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). When we make the decision to provide for people who need food, clothing, and affordable housing, we are showing *philoxenia* (love of strangers) and honoring the God who has “chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom” (Jas. 2:5). The challenge for each of us is to see that our debt to others is connected to the commandment of Jesus to love the Lord our God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we respond in this way, we demonstrate that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas. 2:17). These words are made to stick, because they are simple, credible, true, and connected to the stories of real people.



**Where do you see opportunities to satisfy your debt to a neighbor in need by supplying for their bodily needs?**

## 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 rich and privileged 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’s 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) one’s 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*.