

I. Set Up

A. Today we wrap up the Fall portion of our Renewal series, with the fourth talk from Mark 12. Mike will be directing us to think about what it means to love God with all of our strength.

II. Intro

A. An article in a UK paper¹ a while back reported about a convent in Italy that was forced to close after a vicious fight broke out between several nuns, leaving the Mother Superior in need of medical care.

1. There was some acknowledgement that relationships had been deteriorating, but not a lot of explanation as to why. What was reported is that “following a particularly acrimonious mass, Sister Annamaria and Gianbattista attacked 82-year-old Sister Liliana, the Mother Superior, throwing her to the floor and scratching her face so badly she was taken to the hospital.”

2. The sisters were reportedly fed up with Sister Liliana’s authoritarian rule. The local Archbishop attempted to reconcile the sisters, but they were having none of it.

B. “Nun of it?” Sorry, the nun puns are hard to avoid.

C. It was a bleak article, but instructive. Among other things, it revealed the limitations of religious environments.

1. The sisters of the Santa Clara convent had spent decades pursuing their religious vocation. More than most, they had disassociated from the world to reside in a sacred community.

2. One of them had reportedly lived in the convent since 1963. And yet, that wasn’t enough to rid them of anger, hatred, or even violence. Their circumstances may have been holy, but clearly, their hearts were not.

D. Many believe that inner change requires a change in outward circumstances. This was certainly the assumption held by some of the earliest Christians in the Greek city of Corinth.

1. They wrote to the Apostle Paul asking him which external conditions were the most sacred? Which changes should they make to their visible lives in order to affect their spiritual communion with God?

a) Was it better to be married or single?

b) Could one follow Jesus as a slave, or was it necessary to be free?

c) Should men be circumcised or uncircumcised?

2. These may sound like odd questions today, but in the first century, they made perfect sense. When we strip away the cultural and historical particularities, the Corinthians were simply asking: what set of circumstances produced the holiest life.

3. We ask related questions. When I was a college pastor, I would be asked about “which church to attend” or “which Bible version to read.” Students would wrestle over their major or career choice and there were always questions about singleness and marriage, and who to marry. These questions never go away.

4. There's nothing wrong with these questions, just as there was nothing wrong with the Corinthians' questions 2,000 years ago. The problem, as Paul pointed out in his response, comes when:

- a) we attach spiritual significance to our circumstances;
- b) or when we believe changing our situation in the world will automatically lead to changes in our situation with God.

5. Too many assume that our faith would be positively transformed if only we:

- a) worked in a non-profit, or were on staff at this church;
- b) or if we were able to go on this mission trip.

6. Or we think God will bless us if:

- a) we fill our homes with trinkets from the Christian bookstore or put a Christian bumper sticker on our car.
- b) Or we think we'll really experience God's presence when we find a spouse—or leave our current one.

E. But Paul understood that's not how transformation happens, and one set of external circumstances isn't more holy than another.

1. Even leaving the world behind to live in a religious convent for 50 years won't automatically make someone more godly. If anything, our fixation on external circumstances and symbols distracts us from focusing on where the real work is to be done.

2. As the Nuns remind us, transforming our hearts requires more than changing our circumstances. If we want to be renewed we are going to need a different approach.

III. And that is what we have been looking at. We have been unpacking Mark 12, looking at Jesus' response to the question: How do I get better? What matters most? How do I prioritize the 600 plus Old Testament laws? What are the most important things I can do?

IV. A religious leader asked Jesus for the Cliff Notes on the Old Testament. And in reply, Jesus has said:

A. “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 mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

V. Over the last few weeks, we have taken these one at a time.

A. Having acknowledged that there is a sense in which the statement is: go all in; make God number one; prioritize the Lord in all you do.

B. Having noted that we need to be aware that in Hebrew poetry they rhyme ideas not words, so we may have a simple statement of making the same point in four slightly different ways.

C. Being alert to all of that, we have been teasing apart the four areas Jesus highlighted.

1. We started with the heart – which is command central (think the elephant)

2. A few weeks back Anson looked at the soul, noting how quiet it is and talking about the ways we need to give it space to emerge (that is why we have been talking about a rule of life).
3. Last week I spoke about loving God with our mind.
4. Today it is our strength.

VI. And I have a confession.

A. The plan for today was for me to talk to you about resilience, about grit, about emotional commitment. About stamina, will power and resolve. I intended to talk “not about the size of the dog in the fight, but about the size of the fight in the dog.” That was the plan.

B. The Greek word used here is: *ischus*, and it is translated strength or might. If you do a word study you see it defined using terms like: power, force, ability.

VII. Now, before I go on let me note, this passage is understood in slightly different ways by different people.

A. Some think the call to love God with our strength (our *ischus*) involves our physical body. The idea is that we need to love God in some physical way.

1. I like this in one sense. I like the way this pushes back on any gnostic thinking.

2. Remember, the gnostics were the one of the very first cultish groups the Christians had to fight against. The Greek word gnosis means knowledge, and this group claimed:

- a) that we are saved by some secret knowledge.
- b) And that the physical world is bad.

3. This was very Greek of them – not Christian. The Greeks – and the Gnostics (and others) were down on the world, Christians were not. God created a physical world and called it good. Yes, it’s damaged. But the physical is not inherently evil.

4. Unfortunately, this idea that God is more interested in the spiritual – this compartmentalization of the body and spirit – is very common. Many think their spirit is held back by their body. No.

5. So, I like the idea of loving God with our body. And can appreciate how this might lead some people to think more about physical health and good diet and getting enough sleep.

6. These are all good things. Our body is a good thing. In I Cor. 6:19 we are told that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and that we should therefore honor God with our bodies.

7. That is clearly true.

8. However, that said, I do not think Jesus was thinking about this when he said, Love God with all your strength.

B. Some have interpreted this passage in a different way. They have understood *ischus* – strength – to refer to our assets. To be directed at our unique skills or abilities or resources. Those in this camp say that we need to find ways to leverage our “strengths.”

1. Think our musical ability, or our money or our network – our connections. For someone else it's something else. It's our resources. Our assets. What we bring to the table.

2. I like this way of thinking also. I think we should love God with all our assets. But, honestly, I'm not persuaded that this is what is meant by the word *ischus*.

3. I do think we need to be good stewards of all we have been temporarily entrusted with. That loving God assumes we find ways to use what we have been given to His glory.

C. I find myself with those who think that loving God with all our strength suggests that there is a place for trying harder – that we develop a resilience and resolve to keep doing the right thing, even when it's difficult. I find myself drawn to words like grit and persistence.

VIII. All of that to say, the plan for today was for me to talk to you about loving God with our strength.

A. I intended to talk to you. I intended to tell you what you needed to do.

B. Unfortunately, I find that this is one of those days when I need to talk to myself.

IX. By God's grace, I'm pretty resilient. Pretty naturally optimistic. And I like challenges. Since most think this is a good thing, let me be clear, I'm not taking credit for this.

A. We are all wired differently. Anyone whose had kids knows this. There is a lot that parents do to shape their children, but there is a personality there from the word go.

B. My point here is, I came out of the box with a bit of the "never give up" attitude. That line works on me.

C. I'm thinking of Churchill's famous speech at the Harrow School. You have likely heard about it. He was asked to go back to the school from which he had almost flunked out. And his whole speech was:

1. 'Young men, never give up. Never give up! Never give up!! Never, never, never-never-never-never!'"

2. Now, according to Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, the speech was delivered in 1941 and he said, "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never—in nothing, ...

D. Whatever he said, those kind of speeches make me want to try harder.

E. The theme music to Rocky makes me want to go for a run – in particular, to race up the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum.

F. Now:

1. I do not lean this direction as much as some. I'm not as gun ho as some. In fact, I see the downside of things more than I want to.

a) Everyone else thought Goliath was too big to fight, David thought he was too big to miss. I would have been with everyone else. I am pretty sure I would have been sitting back with the rest of the Israelite army saying, "I'm not going out there."

b) In his letter to the Philippians – which he wrote from a Roman prison – the Apostle Paul described himself as an “ambassador” in chains, not a “prisoner” in chains. I would have gone with the prisoner line.

2. I am not as “gun ho” as some.

3. And by the way, please understand, I am not talking here about positive thinking. About attitude.

a) I think a positive attitude helps. If I’m taking a trip, I’d prefer the car be full of can-dos not can-nots. Give me Tigger over Eeyore any day.

b) I think one of the reasons there are so many self-help books that talk about our attitude is because changing our mindset, adopting a positive outlook does help. Generally speaking, those who think they can and those who think they cannot are both right.

4. But I am not thinking about positive thinking here – about optimism - as much as I am thinking about hope. Remember, they are different.

a) Optimism is thinking that things are trending in your favor. Hope is faith that God will do what He has promised, even when it looks like that’s a crazy idea.

G. I share all of this to say, I am naturally wired to embrace resilience. And all of that half time pep talk stuff that some find trite – or worse - gets me up and moving.

H. So, I don’t think of myself as needing to hear a sermon on, “love God with all your strength” – i.e., with all your resolve, resilience, stamina, grit.

I. However – perhaps because of my pride in that area - about ten days ago, as I went through the day, I started to come undone. I got worn down by a series of disappointments.

1. Nothing big, really. But everything was harder than I thought it should be and was not going as well as I expected it to. And over the course of the day the disappointments started to pile up. And as I moved through the afternoon, I felt myself thinking, “I am 0 for 4 today. I could use a bit of good news.”

2. And then there was some more bad news, and I could feel myself getting angry. Feeling sorry for myself. Losing resolve. Sinking.

3. And at some point, I thought, I don’t need this. Give these headaches to someone else. You’ve done this job for over twenty years. This is a young man’s game. Time to go write books.

a) In full contact MMA when you are beat, you tap out.

b) In the Navy Seal training, if you can’t keep going you ring the bell.

4. I found myself ready to tap out or ring the bell.

5. The image that I had was that I was boxing, I was on the ropes and I was taking too many body blows, and so my hands were dropping and that meant I was vulnerable to getting hit in the face.

6. I needed the bell to ring so I could go sit in the corner, otherwise, I was going to get hit hard again and I might go down.

J. It was all very surprising. And it led me to think again about the idea of loving God with all our strength.

K. Let me go on to say, what I needed was a good run and a good night sleep. And I was ready to go again in the morning.

L. BTW, if my talk about ringing the bell – about retiring – causes you alarm or brings you hope, let me say, that is not the plan. I think I have another ten years in me.

1. Many of my college friends are starting to retire and all four of my younger siblings are preparing to retire, and I am saying to them: I can't imagine that at this point. I want to keep working for another ten years.

M. My point is, I think loving God with our strength implies our resolve – and that kicks in when we don't want it to.

X. Let me highlight four points here:

A. The first thing I want you to see is, you don't really have any other option. Toughing it out seems to me to be the only viable option.

1. I am reminded of the passage in the Gospels – we were looking at this in our small group this week – where Peter says to Jesus, “where else are we going to go? You alone have the words of eternal life.” There is no Plan B, best keep working on plan A.

2. This kind of choice became very clear to me seven years ago when I was downtown at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago in the early days after my stroke.

a) It was the lowest point in the whole episode. I was probably a month into my recovery. And I was in a wheel chair and I got pushed into a circle with three other people in wheel chairs. And it was immediately obvious that they had all been in wheel chairs for a long time and were not getting out.

b) Aerobics – lift our hands over our head

3.

B. Second: understand that our faith is like a muscle, and we can grow stronger. And that disciplined thinking gets easier.

1. There have been a number of new insights about how our brain works since MRI became common.

a) What we know is that our will power is very limited. We cannot gut it out forever. We need to use it to develop good habits. Because once we get the habits down, they do not require will power.

2. As I said a few weeks ago – whatever we do once is easier to do twice.

3. Whatever we do today will be easier to do tomorrow. This is true of helpful things – all of the spiritual practices we need to lean into.

a) Both the things we will start doing (practices of engagement) – Bible study and prayer.

b) And habits of abstinence – the things we will give up.

4. It is also true of bad things.

5. Jesus' earthly life was awash with a rhythm of spiritual disciplines.

C. Third: What I have done is give a very American sermon on the idea of loving God with our strength. In most other parts of the world they would be a bit surprised at how much I fell into the rugged individualist approach.

1. We are in this together.

D. Finally, Those of you who have been here for some time can guess at the first, because often when the text majors on what we are to do – passages that call on us to “work out our salvation” or “discipline ourselves for godliness,” when there is some call to action, I feel compelled to say: yes, but. Do not confuse what we are doing with the Gospel.

1. Christianity is not this I do, it is this He did.

2. What we celebrate - what we need to rehearse - is that we have a Savior, not a fitness coach. We have a Rescuer not a Marine drill sergeant. Not someone who gets us to do what we could not do on our own so we actually qualify ourselves.

3. The Good News is that God reached down.

4. The Good News is while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

5. The Good News is not that if you are disciplined enough – and your good works weigh more than your bad – then you earn God’s favor.

6. No.

7. Am I suggesting that you should bring your resolve to best to God? Yes. Am I suggesting that you need to bring some of the same kind of passion you bring to growing your business or lowering your golf score or passing honors Chemistry to your walk with Christ? Yes. Am I suggesting that you should do hard things – and be disciplined in your walk with Christ – yes, yes, yes.

8. I am simply moving that effort from the left to the right side of the equal sign.

a) It is not Faith & Works = Salvation, but Faith = Salvation + Works.

9.

¹ Thanks to Skye Jethani for this illustration.