



Fatal Excuses-Part 2

I Can't Lord, I Have to Put Family First

Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, on this Valentine's Day weekend, I assume it is appropriate for me to declare that I love my wife. I love my wife. Yes, I've loved my wife now for over 33 years. We met in high school, as some of you know—immediately smitten and drawn in by the cords of love—and fell in love. Yeah, we've been married now for coming up on 29 years. I love my wife.

As long as we're throwing the love around this Valentine's Day, I guess it'd be appropriate for me to declare that I love my kids. I love my kids. Yeah. Even when the first one was tardy by several years—we waited 10 years to have our first—but Matthew finally showed up. He's 18 years old now. And even through his teen years, I've got to say I love my son. And then his brother came along 18 months after Matthew, and John, of course—life wouldn't be the same without him—and, God so you, I love John. And you know, as John and Matthew will tell you, there's no confusion at all that I love my 12-year-old daughter. She's hard not to love—very charming, affable, wonderful addition to our family. I love my three kids.

Now, I suppose those declarations would be deemed appropriate in your mind. I'm about to expect my pastor to say those kinds of things. I mean, after all, he's a father, he's a husband. And, you know, I would expect that's what he would feel, and that's what he would think, and that would be the reality for his life. But I wonder if it would raise any eyebrows if I said, "Hey, I love my kids, I love my wife, I'd do anything for them. You know, I love my kids, love my wife—they're the most important thing to me, most important thing in my life."

Now, being that I'm preaching this sermon in Orange County in the 21st century, I assume that wouldn't raise very many eyebrows. I'm assuming most people just yawn their way through that and say, "Yeah, just like you said: you love your wife, you love your kids." But saying that I love my wife and my kids more than anything—I would do anything for them—I just wonder if that should raise any eyebrows. I wonder if Jesus would have some commentary on that kind of superlative statement. And you know what? Seeing that we're studying Luke chapter 9, I'm confident he does have some things to say about that statement. And I'd like you to look at what Jesus has to say about that kind of sentiment, assuming it's not just Valentine hyperbole, but if this is truly the sentiment of my heart, what would Christ have to say about that?



Now, this is going to be a hard text for us to study. We're only going to be able to digest two verses this morning—if we can digest it at all. Why? Because it's a bitter pill for us to swallow to start thinking about our family not being the supreme love of our lives. And the reason is, unfortunately, we've grown up in a Christian culture here—depending on when you joined the party, for at least 40–50 years now—we've equated godly Christianity with being the quintessential family man. And when it comes to Christianity, I mean, that's what it is. We call our Christian bookstores “family bookstores.” We call our Christian radio stations “family radio.” I mean, the whole focus, it seems, of Christianity has been on the family for many years now. And those two things seem to be pretty much, you know, equal comments: “You godly Christian person—great, then I mean family's the most important thing to you.”

We're in a very short series here—we call it “Fatal Excuses”—because all three of the people that we meet in verses 57 through 62 are all what I like to call would-be disciples, because in every case Jesus is pointing out issues that, really, you could look at as excuses of these folks that are either stepping up to say, “I'll follow you, Christ,” or have been asked by Christ to follow him. And the responses are not good, but they're very instructive. A lot of things could have been recorded here at the end of chapter 9 in Luke, but these things were chosen to be recorded in God's Holy Word because they speak to issues that Jesus knew, the Holy Spirit knew, and of course God the Father knew would be perennial contentions throughout the church age. These are going to be problems. And I would say in 21st-century Western culture, they may be at the pinnacle of what they've ever been in terms of issues for us.

So when it comes to the second one—the issue of our families—I think we need to take particular note of what Christ has to say here. Let's read our two verses for this morning—verses 59 through 60. Follow along as I read it for you.

“He said,” it says here, verse 59, “to another”—he, that is, Christ—said, “Follow me.”

Now, we've heard that phrase a lot: “Come, follow me.” This, of course, was the call of Christ to all of his disciples: “Follow me.” But middle of verse 59—now you hate to see a contrasting conjunction in the middle of this dialogue because you know whatever's coming next isn't the right response, right? You're supposed to say, “you know,” and “he said,” but instead, it's giving us a sense that whatever's coming next didn't quite—what we had hoped. It's not a, “Yeah! And he said, I'd love to. Let's go.” No. “But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’”



I'm thinking to myself, "What are you doing here listening to Christ if your father has died?" Because if you know anything about ancient burial rites in the ancient Near East, I mean, you've got a lot to do from the time your loved one expires and the time you go through the mourning, grieving process, the embalming process, and the interment—you've got to go through all these steps. And it seems like you'd be busy; you wouldn't have time to be sitting around listening to Christ teach. And that's why some people would say this is not a literal death, but he has to bury his father, which may take a few years for him to see his dad through the ending period and chapter of his life. And so, you know, "I'm a grown son, my dad is dependent on me, he's elderly, he needs some time."

Perhaps that's the case. I mean, the text leaves it open. I'm not sure—maybe he had died and he snuck away to encounter Christ, and Christ said, "Hey, follow me." Maybe he was in the middle of this whole process of mourning—I don't know. But he is clearly saying, whatever the issue is—either it's my dad that needs me in the final years of his life, or my mom needs me, my brothers and siblings need me—they need me because I have to go pay respects to my father. Either way, family is the issue. And seemingly reasonable expectations about my engagement with my family is the issue.

So Jesus says, verse 60, "I understand—take all the time you need." Highlight that if you can. Those words aren't there. Matter of fact, here come some of the harshest words—and in our day, blasphemous words, it seems, in modern theology—as Jesus looks at a man who's either grieving the loss of his father, having a ministry to his family, or having an elderly dad that needs him for a few years here in the final chapter of his life, Jesus looks at this man and says, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead."

Another verse you won't see on stitchwork or Christian greeting cards. This is not one that's bandied about on the internet on Facebook with a nice colorful design behind the words. No. "What are you talking about—leave the dead to bury... I just told you my dad needs me. I told you either that or, you know, I've got a deceased father, we've got a process of mourning to go through, I've got to minister to my family; I can't." And he says, "Let the dead"—now you know the word "dead," just like the word "alive" or "life," is used in two different ways in the New Testament. "The dead" describes those who are, as Ephesians 2 says, dead to God. In other words, they're not interested in following God; they don't give God any glory; they don't look to the Lordship or the leadership of God—they're dead to his leadership. And he says, "Listen—those that aren't going to respond to my call, those that aren't going to be my disciples, those that don't have an urgent matter that he's about to explain in the very next phrase—I just want to tell you, let them take care of either your dying father or the burial for your deceased father. But you," verse 60, "go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Now, if you think about this for any time at all, you think, "You know, Jesus didn't have to say that." Jesus could have said—which I think you would expect from a godly, sensitive, accommodating



person—“Listen, you’ve got a matter that’s pressing with your family—and family is a priority—deal with that, and when you’re done dealing with that, now go proclaim the kingdom of God.” Some would look at chapter 10—if you look at the next chapter we’re about to get to—say, “Well, maybe it’s because this preaching crew of 72 was about to go out, and so this was an urgent matter.” And I don’t care—send him in the second wave of missionaries. Or maybe this isn’t even related to that. Like I said, maybe this is the summary of the ways that people respond to the Christ in his Galilean ministry—not even in his Judean ministry or in the transfer to Judea—I don’t know.

But tell me if you don’t think that’s harsh. It sounds pretty harsh. Now, why would this seemingly unreasonable request have been given to this man in that situation? And then why would it be recorded for us? Well, I said because it’s a perennial problem in the church—particularly a heightened problem in our day—that there will be some conflicts between the interest and loves and loyalties toward your family and the interest, love, and loyalty toward Christ. Those are on a crash course at some point in the regular daily lives of the people of God. So we need to know that when push comes to shove, Jesus wants to make crystal clear for all time, in the recorded words of Scripture: Christ better win those battles, as harsh as that sounds.

Now, with this clarification, I want to spend a little bit of time this morning taking this a piece at a time. Verse 59—I want to begin by just making the simple observation: here’s a man who’s part of a family that needs him. Christ has come on the scene, verse 59, and says to him—with a finger in his chest—“Follow me.” And he, now because he has a family that needs him—a family that he loves—there is an issue. Now, if you didn’t have a family, then it wouldn’t be an issue.

So that leads me to my first observation this morning. Let’s jot it down, if you’re taking notes—and I wish that you would.

Number one: we need to see the blessing and the challenge of family life—the blessing and the challenge.

Now, I know we toss the word “blessing” around, but let’s think about it biblically. A blessing is something that God gives us that is for our good—it is his favor. It is a gift for us, as we saw about even things in life from 1 Timothy chapter 6 last time we were together. They’re given to us to enjoy—it’s a blessing from God. Family is a blessing from God. I mean, we don’t get out of the second chapter of the Bible without learning that here was a gift that God had given to the man that he had made: “Here, I’m going to give you a family, and it’s going to augment your life; it’s going to be a positive



for you. Not good for you to be alone—let’s give you a wife. We’re going to give you kids.” This is going to be this context in which you’re going to have a lot of great human experiences. And so, “Let me give you the gift of a family.”

Let me be more specific. Hopefully you don’t have to jot these down, because you know this already. Perhaps you’re in a rocky period in your family—I don’t know—jot these down if you would. Proverbs chapter 18, verse 22, makes it very clear. And I just want to make this clear from a biblical perspective: if you have a wife or a husband, here’s what the Bible says: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.” Maybe you do need that verse this morning. Your spouse is a gift from God. I know some people want to exchange their gifts from God, but it is a gift from God. You need to understand that, and it is something that God grants to you. And the Bible says it’s as though God is giving you a present—a favor from the Lord. So it’s a good thing. There are challenges—two sinful people in a sinful world—I get all of that. But when you stand back, if you’re wearing a ring on your finger, and you say, “I am married,” that is a gift from the Lord. You’ve obtained favor from God. Obviously, there are challenges that go with it, but it is a blessing from the Lord.

Now, maybe you’re in the stage of parenting where you need this verse. Psalm 127, verse 3—it says this: “Children are a heritage from the LORD.” It’s like granting you some kind of inheritance—a heritage from the Lord. “The fruit of the womb”—these little babies—“are a reward from him.” Now, parenting can be a challenge. Kids can be a headache from time to time—I get that. But the Bible says if you have around your table these little bodies that you have to feed every night, the Bible says that’s a blessing from God. Blessing and a gift—I get that.

Here’s the problem, though. I want to add this word: challenge. They’re also a challenge—a challenge when it comes to your Christianity. Not in terms of your fatigue, or your effort, or whatever it might demand from you—I’m talking about your relationship with the living God. See, the reason for it not to be scandalous for me to say, “I’d do anything for my wife and kids”—the reason that should be somewhat of an eyebrow raiser for you to hear from me, “I love my family more than anything,” ought to be because you know I’m claiming the moniker “Christian.” I’m claiming this title in my life: child of God, servant of the Most High. And because of that, my family becomes a challenge.

God gives good gifts to his children. The problem is much like when you give some gifts to your kids—the gift becomes an obsession. Have you ever regretted the thing you gave your kid for Christmas? “Oh man, I didn’t know I’d never see him again.” You give your daughter that cell phone—“That’ll be great; I’ll get to communicate with my daughter.” You can never get through because she’s busy texting everyone else. And now you have to put restrictions on it. And you realize, “Listen, I meant this to be a help to our relationship. I gave you this to be a blessing in your life. I



didn't give it to you so that I would never see you again." This is supposed to be a blessing, not an obsession.

Now, last time we talked about how we need to find that great balance in the Christian life. And in the discussion questions I forced you to give this some extra thought: how can I receive things that God has intended for me to enjoy and not allow them in my life to become an idol? That was the difficulty. And I'm telling you, it's hard enough when we dealt with that from 1 Timothy chapter 6 and we thought about things in our lives. But when the things are people—people in our family—this is even a greater challenge.

Turn to one passage with me if you would, as we try to bring this into sharp focus: 1 Corinthians chapter 7. 1 Corinthians chapter 7—Paul is writing about marriage. He says, "You know what—marriage is a blessing from God." He talks about it this way: one person has this gift, and another person has that gift. And the two gifts that are on the table are being married and having kids—or being single. And he says both of them are gifts from God.

Part of that long discussion in 1 Corinthians 7—if you look down to verse number 35—is him saying, "You know what—if you do opt for the family option, you get married, you have kids—you just need to know that's going to complicate things and create a particular challenge for your devotion to God." His whole point in this chapter, if you look at verse 35, 1 Corinthians chapter 7, he says, "I say this for your own benefit"—this whole chapter of instruction—"not to lay any restraint upon you," because he's really amped up what it is to be single and what an advantage that is. He says, "I'm just trying to promote good order"—and highlight it—"to secure your" (and we could translate it) "undivided devotion to the Lord."

Now, that is the goal for every Christian. You can put in the margin if you want a "cf."—contrast this with—you need to see that's contrasted to idolatry. Anytime I have in my heart some other rival god—that's the problem that 1 John 5:21 says I'm supposed to flee from idols, keep myself from idols. Now here's the problem: as a Christian trying to be with an undivided devotion to the Lord, I'm going to say, "Well, I've got a family." Great. Well, that creates a few practical problems. Verse 32—let's jump back up a few verses. He said, "I'd like you to be free from anxieties." The kind of anxieties he's talking about—keep reading. "Well, the unmarried man, he's anxious"—if you will; this is not in a moral or a bad, sinful sense—"but his concern, his focus is about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. How can I be a good Christian at work? How can I be a good Christian here? How can I be a good Christian in that aspect of my life?" That's great. "But the married man—he's got some distractions here. He's anxious or concerned about worldly things." He's got to pay rent and take care of a group of people, and he's got mouths to feed around his table. He's got to please his wife—his



wife's got a lot of interests that are legitimate and righteous, and he needs to meet those needs. "His interests are divided." The practical interests of his life are divided.

Now, the goal for every Christian is an undivided devotion to the Lord. But there is a practical division of interests for the married man. Do you follow this? "The unmarried or betrothed woman—she's anxious about the things of the Lord—how she can be holy in her life, in her body, and in her spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things—how to please her husband." Now, I know that makes it seem like, "Well, singleness is the only way to go." And he says, "Well, I'm saying it for your benefit—not to lay some restraint on you that you can't get married. But I'm trying to promote good order. I want this to be an unencumbered Christian life for you in order to secure the thing we really need—and that's the kind of devotion that is undivided—an undivided devotion to the Lord—one God in your life, and it's the God of the Bible."

"Now, if anyone thinks he's not behaving properly toward his betrothed"—this can be seen in one of two ways: either this is the man with the daughter, or the man who's got this friend that is perhaps a romantic interest—"I could see myself partnering with this woman, and this being my wife." And so if he's thinking he's not behaving properly toward his betrothed—she really wants to marry and his passions are strong; he wants to marry this gal—and it has to be that, as he started this chapter, that desire for family life is consuming—it's something they really want—"Well then, let him do as he wishes; let them marry; it is no sin." Of course it's not a sin. I've already started this with some great verses from Proverbs 18 and Psalm 127. These are blessings from God. You're right—they are. It's not a sin.

"But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity"—in other words, no one's saying you have to do this—"but having his desire under control"—he's not sitting there wishing every day he were married—"and he's determined this in his heart to keep her—maybe this gal, his friend—as his betrothed." In other words, "We're not going to be romantically involved; we're not going to get married." "Well, then he does well. So he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better." And that certainly harkens back to the words of Christ in Matthew 19, verse 12, which says there are some people who, for the sake of the kingdom, are able to—they have the endowment to—forsake marriage. And when they do, he says, "Man—talk about an unencumbered life. You're able to focus on pleasing the Lord." And that's your sole focus. You don't need a three- or four-bedroom house, you don't need life insurance, you don't need all these things—just go and serve the Lord.

Now, that is not talking about full-time ministers—I'm not just talking about missionaries or Bible translators or church planters. We're just talking about Christians who keep first things first. God is my



God. I'm a Christian—I'm a servant of the Most High God. I serve the Lord in this world. And it's unencumbered. That didn't feel so good on Valentine's Day weekend—your wife's a distraction to your Christian life. I'm just being very practical with the truth of the Scripture: when it comes down to it, first things should be kept first things, and family life will make that more difficult.

Go back up even further in this chapter—I think this is helpful. Look at how it's put here in verse number 28. 1 Corinthians 7:28: "If you do marry, you haven't sinned; if the betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned." Great—got that clear. Marriage is not sin. "Yet those who marry are going to have worldly troubles, and I'd like to spare you that." Now, you can do it—you can spin the plates—you can have divided interests without a divided devotion. It can happen. But it's something—"I'd like you not to have that particular challenge if you're gifted to do without it."

"This is what I mean," verse 29: "Brothers, the appointed time has grown very short." And let's understand that for a second. Everything between the first coming of Christ and the second coming of Christ—this church age—was something that God designed for us to feel very urgent. I know you're thinking, "Well, a short time? This has been a real long, short time—last 2,000 years." I understand that. But Jesus kept saying this: "I'm going to go away, and I'm not going to tell you when I'm coming back. It's going to be a secret. No prophecy conference can tell you when I'm coming back. No one can tell you when I'm coming back. I'm going to go away, and you need to be ready for me at any given moment." He tells all these parables about us feeling the urgency of serving Christ, because at any time—as James says—the Judge is at the door. He can knock, the door open—you ought to be ready for the return of Christ. The church should be crying out "Maranatha" for the entire duration of the church age. Time is growing very short—the urgency of that—the imminence of Christ's return.

"So from now on"—now, notice this—"let those who have wives live as though they had none." Talk about bad timing for a Valentine's sermon. Oh great—tell all the guys to live like they weren't married. Context: the idea here is there's something about a married life in a Christian's world that is different than a married life in a non-Christian world. There's something about what it means to be a Christian husband that's different than what it is to be a non-Christian husband. And he's going to explain it as he gives a few more examples. Verse 30: "and those who mourn as though they were not mourning." Okay—Christians are going to mourn, but they're going to mourn differently. And the Bible points that out. There's something about the temporary nature of the present world that should lead us to see all these things—including family life and marriage and parenting and even the loss of a loved one—very different than the non-Christian does. Oh, and let's turn it on its head: verse 30, middle of the verse—"and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing." Oh, it's a kind of rejoicing—it's a little different—because we know that the things we rejoice in in this world, as it relates to the worldly troubles of this world—hey, they're all short-lived. "Those who buy as though they had no goods." Oh, you got some great thing—you bought a new house, you bought a new car—great. You know what? It's good, and there's something to that and some kind of rejoicing in that. But it's different—



qualitatively different—because for us, it’s not about this life. “And those who deal with the world,” verse 31, “as though they had no dealings with it.” You got some big business deal going at work—great. You want it to work out—be good for the company, good for stocks—I get all that. Fantastic. But in the long run, 100 years from now, it won’t matter. Because we know—as Colossians 3 says—our minds are to be set on things above; we’re storing up treasure in heaven. There are so many things about the next life that bring the kind of intensity to all the earthly dealings—and backs it off.

“For the present form”—now here’s the explanation, bottom of verse 31—“the present form of this world is passing away,” including your family life, including your marriage, including your relationship to those people you love so dearly called your children. It’s all going to be changed. Now, is it important to take every job I have seriously as a Christian? Absolutely. “Seriously” is very different than the obsession the world has about all these institutions on earth that really won’t be here when Christ establishes his kingdom.

Wow. Okay—this is a challenge. How do I see my family as a blessing from God and not be obsessed with it; to hold it loosely as though I know that this is not real life—as it says in 1 Timothy 6, I’m going to take hold of real life in the next world? So in this world, do I want to be a good husband? Absolutely. Want to be a good father? Sure I do. But this is not the measure of reality—not down here on earth. And so I’ve got to have this very different perspective. If it sounds dispassionate, I’m not trying to say it’s a dad who’s checked out or a wife that doesn’t care about a good marriage—I’m not saying that. Caring about it is one thing. But the kind of obsession that’s described with the word “devotion” in this text is different. You have one devotion; you have one passion, and it supersedes every temporal thing here on the planet.

Now, this is the problem for the man that Jesus says “Follow me” to in Luke 9, because he has a family—and that family he loves, and those family members that he loves have obligations that need to be fulfilled. And there’s a lot going on there in his heart regarding his connection to his family. It’s a challenge.

Now, when Jesus puts his finger in your chest and says, “Follow me,” what do I do? I have a concern in that I have a command from God that conflicts with something in my life that seems good and righteous—but it’s more than good and righteous. When Jesus says this in verse 60—“Leave the dead to bury their own dead”—as printed there on your worksheet, Luke chapter 9, “Let those that don’t respond to my Lordship deal with your issue right here”—now, he could have said it any other way. He could have said, “We’ll give you time.” He’s the Lord—he can set up the rules regarding this guy’s life any way he wants. But he says, “Put it into that collision course right now at this particular moment,” much like he does with the rich man in Luke 19—“Sell everything you have, rich man, and follow me.”



He puts everything right there under the microscope and says, “This is critically important for you to make a decision right now.” Why? To clarify the loyalty. Because while this is a good thing, it’s not the good thing. It is a command of God for you to honor your father—I’m now going to give you another command that’s going to put that in conflict with the command that you know is a good command. This is a good command—these two commands will be in conflict.

Put it that way. Number two: in your own life, you need to be ready for that. Be ready for commands in conflict. They’re always going to be there in the Christian life. If not today, if not this month, if not this year—you will encounter a biblical command that you say, “Wait a minute—it’s in conflict with this biblical command in this particular situation.” It’s going to happen, because the Bible is very clear about honoring your father. As a matter of fact, if he is actually dead—you want to talk about burial—the Bible says a lot about a proper and respectful burial. And for me to say, “I’m not going to bury my father; I’m not going to have a respectful burial for him,” or “He’s elderly, he needs me—I’m not going to meet those needs”—the Bible has a lot to say about that. Those are biblical commandments that go back to the first commands God ever gave. Rule number five—Exodus 20: honor your father and your mother. But there was another rule that kicked off those rules on tablet number one. Rule number one was: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Now, that creates a pecking order in the commands. That starts to put things in a prioritized list that gets us this structure that gets very clear in my thinking when I realize, “Well, wait a minute—one goes and supersedes the other. Follow me now.”

Back in our Romans series, in Romans chapter 13, I taught for four weeks on the government. We looked at that series, and we said, “Well, listen, the Bible’s very clear about the government. Not only am I supposed to submit to the government, because those governing authorities are there by God—even the imperfect ones—I’m supposed to even pay my taxes—my exorbitant taxes—I’m supposed to pay. And I’m going to do all that as an obedient, good citizen of the country that I’m a part of, and that’s the biblical command.” But then you might remember—if you were here when I preached through Romans—I had to add a fifth sermon. A sermon that didn’t come from those verses in Romans 13, because I wanted to say, “Well, wait a minute—as your pastor, we’ve got to take a timeout. While all those things I just said were true, there is a time when you cannot obey the commands of Romans 13.” And the Bible is full of examples there. If the government—like in Daniel—tells you to bow down to an idol, you’re supposed to tell the government, “Listen, I’ve got a higher priority and a bigger command than that command.”

Acts chapter 4—when the apostles were told, “No longer share this name Jesus and start making proselytes and convert—stop it. You can’t make disciples of all the nations.” Do you remember the apostles’ response to the Roman magistrates? They asked a rhetorical question: “See if it seems reasonable to you that we would obey you”—which is a command of the Bible, the governing authorities—“or God,” because in this case those commands are in conflict. The God of the universe—the Triune God—told us to make disciples, and you’re telling us not to. Those commands are in



conflict. I've got to know the priority. And they asked a rhetorical question—not that they cared what the Romans actually said about it—but they knew the answer, because the question went back to the original issue, which was: “Of course we obey God rather than men.” Of course—one is a bigger priority than the other.

Now, in Mark 12, a scribe came up to Jesus—a scribe—this is the trained theological professional; he's the professor, the seminary guy—comes to Jesus and says, “You know what—knowing the law as I do” (I'm implying here, reading between the lines), “we've got to sometimes, in real life, know which command is priority over which command, because in some cases you can't obey them both.” And in this case Jesus just created that artificially: “Honor your father”—that's the command of the Bible—“oh, now I'm going to give you another command that will not allow you to do that, and I'm going to tell you which one is to be prioritized.” Well, the scribe came up and said, “I want to know—would you give us—let's start with the top. What's the top command? Give us that.” And Jesus, without hesitation, the Bible says, responded: “Oh, I'll tell you the greatest and foremost command.” Remember what it was? Sunday school grads: “Love your wife.” Remember that? No, that's not it. “Love your children.” No. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind.” These superlative statements about the supremacy of my ultimate loyalty and love should be for God. And then he says, “The second is like it”—it's like it in what way? It's about love. It's not that it's equal, or he would have said, “Let me give you another equal one.” No, no—it's not an equal command. It's a secondary command. And he makes that clear with the word—it's the second greatest command. The second greatest command: to love your neighbor as yourself.

So loving God and loving people—those things are not here on the table as equal commands. They're prioritized by Christ very clearly. So anything that relates to the commands regarding loyalty and love, devotion, service, obedience to God always supersedes any kind of love, loyalty, commitment, devotion, or obedience to people—always comes second. And once you do that, you start to create the pecking order that allows me to recognize, when it comes to commands and they're in conflict, I've got to start asking the question: what's the biblical priority?

If you want to think it through from God's perspective—because you're right now feeling it; I hope you're feeling it—“You know what—you're telling me that my supreme love should not be for my wife or my children?” Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Not that it's unbiblical to love your kid. Is it biblical to love your kid? Let's just talk kids here. Oh, absolutely—it's totally biblical. But when there is a supreme command that relates to God's ultimate plan, and that supersedes that love for my kid—well, if I know it's a priority, then of course I've got to disappoint my child out of love for God.



Did God ever have to do that? Absolutely. God creates a relationship between God the Father and God the Son, giving us words that relate to an analogy we can all connect with—we love our kids. He even said it for us in a voice that came out of the cloud: “This is my beloved Son in whom I’m well pleased.” “I love him.” And it wasn’t too many years after that statement that Jesus, his beloved Son, was hanging on a cross, reciting in Aramaic the words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Doesn’t look very loving to me.

Now, I understand that God had a greater command. And again, it’s not a perfect analogy because his decrees are not external to him. He’s not subscribing submissively to some set of rules—these are his own rules. But his own decree that is supreme in that situation is to redeem mankind. So he’s going to redeem us, and the greater command is to love us in the redemptive work of his Son. So as Isaiah 53 said from centuries past, he was “pleased to crush him”—the one he loved—putting him to death, that he might render him a guilt offering. So Christ is going to become like an animal on an altar in a Levitical worship service. Yeah—he is slaughtered there on a cross. Yes. Who did that—the Romans, the Jews? No—the Father was pleased to crush him. How is that not very loving?

So, you’re telling me you’re willing to disappoint your Son, who cried out to you in a garden before this all happened and said, “Let this cup pass from me”? Yeah—he’s willing to disappoint his own Son—whom he loved—so that he could accomplish a greater command. And all I’m saying—and for him, it was a decree internal within his nature; for us, it’s an external command given by our ultimate authority—and he says, “When push comes to shove, those loves are both commanded, but one is greater than the other.”

And now we can’t even turn to this verse because it’s too hard for Orange County people to read—so let me just quote it for you and have you jot it down: Matthew chapter 10, verse 37. Of course we’re to love our kids, of course we’re to love our wife—but he said this: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” If your love for anyone on this lateral picture of “loving your neighbor as yourself,” whether it’s your wife or your children, is greater than your devotion to me—in other words, you don’t see these as prioritized commands—then you don’t get it. Which is exactly the focus he put on this would-be disciple in Luke chapter 9. “Hey, I’m going to make this really clear for you—when it comes to your devotions, are you going to be devoted to your family, or are you going to be devoted to me?” Why did he put him on the hot seat? For us. For us. I mean, ultimately, for us—this is—Jesus had so many encounters with so many people. This is inscribed in our Bible so that when it comes in our lives to a conflict in the commands to love my kids and love my wife or love God, I know which one is prioritized.



Let's get more specific—number three—because for him it was clear: “Go proclaim the kingdom of God.” What are the things God is asking us to do that may come in conflict with our family? All I'm saying is this: we need to sit in times like this in church (number three) and clarify biblical priorities ahead of time. When it comes to the things that God asks us to do, what are those priorities that may come in conflict with the pleasure or the happiness or the convenience of my family members that I am commanded to love? But I know when commands are in conflict, I've got to choose the supreme command over the lesser command. So what are those? Let's think those through a little bit.

I was on a website this week that talked about emergency preparedness. And of course, as a pastor in the church, we often think about that—big thing happens here; we've got to be ready as a church to deal with all that. And so it caught my attention, and I clicked on a few things to try and see what they had to offer. And one of the things was a “household emergency evacuation checklist.” And I thought, “Well, this is interesting—let's look at what I'm supposed to take out of my house.” Because there's lots of things. If you tell me, “Emergency—house is on fire—leave,” I want to know what these experts tell me I should take. Because there's a lot of things I want to take. Just like when they tell you in the airplane—when you get the briefing before you take off—“Leave your carry-on.” I don't leave my carry-on. I want to take my carry-on.

So I'm thinking about my house burning down and looking through the list, and one of the things near the top was “medications.” I thought, “Okay—I can understand that.” Now, if I'm taking my time to sort through my medicine cabinet to grab medications, I don't then maybe have time to stop at the candy bowl (which sits on the island of our house) to grab my M&M's on the way out—which, for me, are a type of medication. So it says: medication over M&M's. You ought to make that decision ahead of time. Because when the crisis ensues, you better know—it would be better for you to take medication over M&M's.

It talked about all these important things like birth certificates, a pink slip on your car. So there is a place where I keep those things in my house. So if the house is burning down, I've got a lot of little things there in my study I might go, “Oh, that's really cool—I like that little name thing,” or, “I like that deal,” “I like that—whatever it is—remote control I really like, and it took me a while to find one that has the buttons.” Leave the remote control and take your kids' birth certificates—that would be more important. I've just got to prioritize. And while it may be hard in the moment, I've got to think about it ahead of time—figure it out.

“Take your laptop,” it says—would be a good idea. House is burning down; I've got a few minutes—take my laptop. Something—I've got to evacuate—I'd like my laptop; there's a lot of things on it. But



there's a lot of other things where my laptop is that I might be tempted to take. But don't take those—think it through ahead of time.

It reminded me of when I went to college and you have these philosophy classes where you do the lifeboat game. That gets a lot harder. Because I understand—I can get a new remote. I can figure out my M&M's another time. There are things that are easily prioritized. But when you start talking about people—that gets a lot harder.

The other thing I saw near the top of the list was “pets.” And I didn't find “family members” on the list, and I was concerned for just a moment—especially reading these things vicariously for Orange County people. I just want to make it clear: your kids should be out of the house before you pick up Fluffy—before you lead Fido out of the house. Depending on how you're doing with your teenagers right now, you may struggle with this in the moment. But take the kids before you take the pets.

All I'm telling you: those things you think about—some of them are easy, some of them are hard. Some of them take a list to say, “Oh yeah, that makes sense—I hadn't thought about that.” And all I'm telling you—when it comes to categories in your life—the categories we've been talking about are family and God—you ought to know ahead of time what the priorities are. My family has priorities—they have interests in my life, they have expectations in my life. God has expectations; God has interests in my life. I've just got to know—I've got to think through all the details of those and say, “What comes first, and what comes second?”

Whether it's my kid and his little league game or not forsaking the assembling of myself together in my local church—I've got to think those things through. What does that look like? How does that get sorted out? And dads, let me talk to you, because you should be in your home thinking these things out and laying down a few laws for your family. And you've got to be clear about the priorities for your home. And those are things that I guarantee you are going to come in conflict, and you will have to, at some point, disappoint people in your family.

If you come from a non-Christian home—and some of you do; many of you do—I could give you the microphone right now. And if I said, “How has becoming a Christian—how has it disrupted your family life, in the fact that your family now is saying, ‘You don't meet our expectations the way I want you to. You're not the kind of person you were before. I don't like the way Christianity has affected your life’?”—we could open up the mic and have lots of discussion and start to sound pretty similar in



all the repetition of people saying, “Yeah, as a Christian in a non-Christian family, there are a lot of times when, for my devotion to Christ, the ‘Jesus freak’ has to disappoint the family.”

What about Christians? We’re surrounded by people who claim Christ. “Well, that’s why I want to marry a Christian gal, and I hopefully train my kids up to love God, and then we can all love God together—no conflicts.” Turn with me to Mark chapter 3.

When you clarify biblical priorities as a Christian in a “Christian home,” you still better be ready for the conflict when your mapped-out priorities—to serve the Lord, to be devoted to the Lord, to be loyal to the Lord—come in conflict with your family’s expectations. And some of them—particularly in Christian contexts—are given to you in these very caring packages: “You know, we don’t want you to do any more of that for the Lord—for your own good—and we see that you’re going too far, and you’re over the top. Not because you’re a Jesus freak and a zealot—we’re glad you’re a Jesus freak and, blah blah—but it’s something that’s really detrimental, maybe now, to your life, or your future, or your retirement plan, or whatever it might be. So we’re just doing this for your own good.”

Jesus was used to that. Mary, I think you would assume—his mother—pretty godly gal. She’s introduced to us as a pretty godly gal in the beginning of Luke—Luke chapter 1. It says here in verse 20, Mark chapter 3, verse 20, that when he—that is, Christ—went home, and the crowd gathered again—now here’s what you’ve got to know: he’s out, away from his home, doing ministry. The crowds around him—they demand his attention, they demand his teaching, they want him to heal them—all these things that he’s doing for the Lord, fulfilling biblical prophecy. When he comes home—your home should be a respite; your home should be peace and quiet; your home—you should get refreshed. When he comes home, there’s a crowd there. It was so demanding of him—note this now—that they could not even eat. The disciples and Christ couldn’t even get a meal. We see that in the parallel passage. They’re so busy here—to their own stomach pains—they’re doing ministry.

Verse 21: and when his family—Christ’s family; Mary and his half-brothers—heard it, they went out to seize him—to get Jesus out of that. “Too much. It’s going too far. He’s out another night. I can’t believe it. This is not good.” They were saying—look at this—“He’s out of his mind.” Now, I doubt they thought that he was certifiably crazy, but that’s something we’ve all heard and we toss around: “It’s really not good. I mean, he’s kind of over the top—he’s taking it too far. And if you do that ministry, and get involved in that thing, or you stay the extra hour, spend the extra dollar, or go the extra mile—your family is going to suffer; your health is going to suffer. What about—don’t you need some hobbies? Shouldn’t you be...” We hear it. And all I’m telling you is your zeal and devotion and loyalty to the Lord Jesus is going to cause—even from the mouth of godly people like Mary, if that’s your mother—saying, “Oh, you should slow down.” You’ve got to be ready for that.



Drop down, if you would, in the same passage to verse 31. Jesus brings it into very sharp focus here. “And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.” And the crowd, verse 32, was sitting around him—they were there as students listening to Christ—and they said to him, “Hey, we got the message; it’s been passed from the back of the room to the front of the room—your mother and your brothers, they want to talk to you. They’re outside; they’re seeking you. Wouldn’t you want to take a 10-minute break, Christ, and talk to your mother and your brothers?”

Verse 33: he answered them, “Absolutely—my mom’s outside; I love my mom. Give me a break—take 30.” No—here’s another stinging, very difficult, Orange County blasphemous statement. Here it comes: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God—he is my brother and sister and mother.”

Now, again—never going to find this on a Christian Mother’s Day card. “Who’s really my mother?” Not you, Mom—not if you don’t want to do the will of the Lord. Wow, Christ—you said that to Mary? Yeah. What’s the point he’s making? When it comes down to it, I’m ready to disappoint my mom and my dad and my sisters and my brothers—if you, out of loyalty and commitment and love for you, are in some way going to be in some irresolvable conflict with the will of God—which for Christ right then was to do the will of God and teach those people in that house. “I’m not taking a break; I can skip a few meals for Christ.”

Christian families—this happens. Here’s another one I might jot down—don’t need to turn there; you know the story—1 Samuel 17. 1 Samuel 17—David is a young, very zealous follower of Yahweh. He had a heightened sensitivity—which is always praised in the Bible—for the honor of God. Whether it’s Phinehas or David or John the Baptist—people that are out there who cannot stand it when the name of God is blasphemed. Well, David was like that. He was sent by his father to bring some cheese and supplies and some bread to his brothers who were all in the Israeli army. And he goes, and he finds them, and they’re in a standoff in the valley there. And the standoff is because the big hairy giant named Goliath was in the valley, taunting the armies of the living God. And they were afraid to send anybody out to fight him. And so David shows up carrying this big sack of stuff, and he’s bringing it to his brothers, and he’s looking at what’s going on. He’s listening to the hairy Philistine mock God and mock the armies of God. And David gets—as Psalm 119 says—indignant over those. He’s frustrated, angry. He’s asking people, “Well, who’s going to take this guy on? Come on—who’s going? Where’s our best guy? Get him out there—kill this guy—silence him.” Everybody’s afraid. Then they start telling him, “You know, the king said—be exempt from taxes; you can do all kinds of things—anybody who kills him.” But, you know, no one’s stepping up.



You remember—this is just before he says, “Listen, I’ll go—if no one else will go, I’ll go. I fought the bear; I fought the lion when I was watching my sheep. I’ll go out there; I’ll kill this guy like I killed those animals. I’ll do it—if no one else will. Who’s going to let this guy mock the armies of the living God?”

His brothers heard all this discussion. Eliab was his oldest brother. There in 1 Samuel 17 it says, “What in the world are you doing here?” (Mike Fabarez paraphrase.) “What are you doing here?” He says, “I know your evil and perverse heart; you just came out to see the battle. You want to see blood and gore; you’re hoping you’ll see some, you know, dead body in the field.” And he—David—retorts, “What are you talking about—what did I do now? Why are you mad at me?” And he goes right back to the discussion: “Who’s going to kill this guy?”

Here is someone on the same team. Emblazoned on his Israeli uniform is the name of the Lord. We’re all on the same team. And conventional wisdom was, “No—no one’s going to do that. That would be too dangerous; that would be too costly; that’s not wise.” And here’s someone out of love and loyalty for God saying, “I’ll do it.” And the family members are going, “Shut up—go home—get on your donkey and go back to Dad—watch the sheep. Who left all those sheep out in the field?”

Conflict in families that all bear the name of Christ because of your loyalty to Christ? Absolutely. Get ready for it.

Here’s one that’s almost unthinkable—Genesis 22. Genesis chapter 22—remember what happened in that red-letter chapter? Here it foretells the coming of Christ and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It’s Abraham with Isaac, when God says to Abraham, “Take your son—your only son—the son that you love—and go and sacrifice him on a mountain that I’m going to show you.” Now, what’s not recorded in Genesis 22 is how breakfast went with Mom before he was trucked out the door with your son to go kill him on a mountain. “Hey, Sarah—I’m going with JR today because we’re going to go sacrifice on an altar on the top of a mountain.” The reason that’s not there is I’m assuming that didn’t take place. I would want to avoid breakfast that day with my wife if I’m going to kill my son. I mean, I can’t imagine the conflict that would cause—not to mention the kind of weird mental gymnastics that go on when you’re walking with your son up the mountain, and you finally tell him, “Well, you know what—get up on these rocks; it’s you, son.”



I hear people say, “Well, I would do that ministry—but if I got involved in that ministry, I’m afraid my kids will suffer.” Yeah, they probably will. “Yeah, but if I got involved in that, I wouldn’t have enough to do this—my kids are really looking forward to that, and my wife expects this.” I get that. Am I asking you today to be a bad husband? No. Be a neglectful father? No—I’m not saying that at all. But I am saying this: that if, for you, the unbreakable rule is to make every soccer game he ever plays in, can’t miss a baseball game, got to be at every dance recital—“I can’t do anything that is going to impinge on my family life because I understand that godly Christianity is equated to being a quintessential family man”—it’s just not the case. And I could quote passage after passage from Matthew 10, Luke 14—I could go all over the Bible to show you: sometimes when the conflict in commands and loyalties is going to come into your life, your family members may say, “What is it—do you hate me?” Priorities. No one likes being a second priority.

There’s a lot of things you need to map out—whether it’s giving, church attendance, evangelism, ministry caring—that you need to recognize: they will at times disappoint your family.

I love my wife. I love my children. Even in saying that, I know that’s been a singular category over and against the category of being a lover of God. But when I think about even saying, “I love my wife, and I love my kids”—those are two distinct categories, sub-categories within the category of my family, are they not? Is there any pecking order there? What does God say? Oh, absolutely. God says this: you’re going to leave your father and mother—strongest word in the Hebrew language for “sever”—and you’re going to “cling”—strongest word for “cleave”—to your wife. And the two become one flesh. And Jesus put it even stronger in the New Testament—Matthew 19—he says, “What God joins together, let no one separate.” This is the permanent earthly bond.

This is important. When it comes to your kids—oh, your kids—you just read the passage. If you read Genesis chapter 2, they’re going to leave that relationship and go on and cleave to their own spouse, and they’re going to create a family. And so this is a temporary thing. As Psalm 127 says poetically, they’re like arrows in the hands of a warrior; you’re going to shoot them into another household. And this is a temporary relationship. And so the primacy of marriage over kids—you know what—even that’s going to cause some problems with your children.

I remember that when we first had kids. Like I said, we went 10 years without kids, and then here come our kids. And all of a sudden we realize, “Hey, we’ve been in this pattern of keeping this relationship primary, and it’s so important.” We have a date night every week, and we think this is critical to our relationship. Now we have JR—you know, it doesn’t seem like as much time for that anymore. Except the fact that, as a dad who’s going to say, “Here’s the priorities—we’re going to have to make this work,” you make all the weird, crazy arrangements to get time out of the house. And when they’re little



blobs like a football—you hand it off to anybody who loves them, and off they go—the kid doesn’t know any different. Till they grow up to be about this tall. Then they go through what people call “separation anxiety.” Talk about an understatement. Anxiety? Man, it’s terror. You’re going out the door for—“See you—see you tomorrow morning, JR—enjoy time with Grandma”—and they come up to you and dig their fingernails into your leg and hold on to you, looking up at you like you’re about to throw them off a cliff, saying, “No!”

Now, I remember that—saying, when it comes to children and spouse, I know this: there’s a priority here. And I have to look into the terrified, weepy eyes of my child and say, “You know what—I’m leaving. I’ll be back tonight after you’re asleep; I’ll see you in the morning. But I’m taking your mom out tonight, because this relationship is the priority.” I disappoint my children for the sake of a greater love.

Now let’s combine those two together. And I look at my family that I love—I deeply love. I’ve got to make it very clear sometimes that it’s off to do something for the will of God here. There’s something that’s going to cost me here that is going to, in some way, impact your comfort or convenience. And it’s going to seem almost like—I mean, God forbid, Luke chapter 14—that you think, “Oh, you hate us.” No, I don’t hate you. I mean, that’s what you’ll hear—“You hate—what—do you hate—?” No, I don’t hate you. I’ve just got my priorities straight here.

Now, Junior grows up to the place where they can’t wait for you to go on date night. “Are you leaving? I thought you left already.” They want the house to themselves. They don’t care that you’re gone for the night. They prefer you stay out all night. But I’ll tell you—there has to be, at some point, whether they’ve said it yet to me or not, that when they recognize there’s something about growing up in that home where Mom and Dad were the priority relationship—where it wasn’t a child-centered house—that created the kind of security and the secure, fundamental platform for my life to mature because of the security of Mom and Dad’s relationship. And while they may not say it—at least not in their teen years—I hope at one point they recognize, “You know what—there’s such an advantage that my mom and dad were willing to disappoint me to invest in a priority relationship.”

I’ve got to say that for now. And it will feel pretty alone—because you’re not walking out the door with someone with flesh on. But as you go out to serve God, or you disappoint your family about your summer plans, or this particular thing, or that night or another night happened, and your family is disappointed—your wife is disappointed, your kids are disappointed—I just tell you: in time, this priority relationship will be vindicated. Trust me—you’re going to high-five the person that you used to be married to in the kingdom. Think about this. And if you were willing to put the Lord Christ first—which the Bible says you must, with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind—if there’s a conflict, God



wins—you think they're not going to be extra happy, contented, and satisfied that they were married to or were raised by someone who put the King that's down the street on a throne in a regal palace—called Jesus Christ—that you put him first in the decisions you faced in this life? Absolutely. When the supreme love of your life—the Lord Jesus—is number one, that will be vindicated. Everyone will appreciate it, just like I hope your grown children appreciate that you invested supremely in that earthly relationship within the home—your spouse over your kids.

Now, you can go through several weeks, I suppose, spinning all the plates successfully. The more plates you've got—I get it—there's a lot of distraction. You can keep God's priorities going while you're keeping your kids happy and your wife satisfied and everything—it can happen. But when there's a conflict, the Bible just says: you better be clear in your own mind ahead of time. We love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If he says it's time to go proclaim the kingdom—you do it. That's what biblical Christianity is all about.

Let's pray.

God, help us. Living biblical principles out in real time—it's not easy. Very hard, very difficult. All of us, God, for whatever reason—sometimes it's immaturity—but we want everybody to like us. We want to please our kids, we want to please our spouse, we'd like to make everybody happy. But when it comes down to it, sometimes for the sake of doing what is right, and making Christ the priority of our lives, we'll disappoint a few people—even in our family—and that'll be painful.

But help us—much like I remember my wife and I marching out the door for date night when our kids were tiny and they're screaming—help us to know in our hearts that while it never feels good, we know it's the right thing. And God, I know for most people that think that their kids are suffering, or their family's suffering, or their free time is suffering, or their summer vacations are suffering because of their devotion to you—God, I know that in time, all those investments in the supreme love that you've called us to have will all be celebrated. Everyone will celebrate that on the day when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, and any decision to express that and demonstrate that Lordship here on this earth will be hailed as a victory.

God, of course I pray—and I know this is a sensitive subject in the 21st century in South Orange County—but I pray no one would misquote this message. No one would go out of here because they got their feathers ruffled and say things that were said that weren't said. God, we know, when it comes down to it, we want to be good husbands, good mothers, good wives—we want to be good family



people. But the ultimate pinnacle of godliness is not being the Father of the Year. It's not having every cultural "i" dotted and every "t" crossed—that we're touching every base and all the expectations of what modern parenting or modern marriage is supposed to be all about.

God, it's great when our family can serve side by side—we can all be sold out to the cause. But help us to realize—whether it's Jesus and his mom, or David and his brothers—there are going to be times, even in good Christian families, where not everybody is going to agree on what it means to live sold out for Christ. So help us navigate all those things. Create stronger marriages and families that are in our church that make our homes a place where ministry can take place with a lot less of that conflict.

For those that sit here among us as the only Christian in their immediate family, I just pray for strength for them. As Matthew 10 says, it's a tough thing when the devotion that we have for Christ divides families. Let us never celebrate that, or exacerbate that, or enjoy that. But let us, as a church, see things change as people come in contact with the truth of the gospel and we see more unsaved husbands or unsaved wives get saved—we want that. And ultimately, may we see, 100 years from now, as we look back at this earthly life, that the priorities that we held, even in the trenches and difficulties of this life, ultimately reflected that our hearts really were set where our treasure was—and it wasn't here on earth. So give us that heavenly perspective, I pray, as we seek to apply your word this week. In Jesus' name, Amen.