



T A B L E T A L K

Fall 1995

Volume 10, No. 5

Looking Up In Order To See Ahead

by
John C. Moore

Christian Life Series (Part One of Seven)

Vince Lombardi, legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, would begin every new training camp by gathering his team around him, holding up a football, and saying, "Gentlemen, this is a football!" The challenging thing about life is that it is so daily. And no daily routine is more important for a Christian than remembering to begin at the beginning. Every day.

To the football player, the game begins with football. To the 5-year-old, school begins with meeting your first teacher. To the 15-year-old, driving begins with learning about the family car. To the proud new parent, family begins with meeting your newborn. To the sincere Christian, the beginning, middle and end of your Christian life is God. Not church. Not the Bible. Not Christian relationships. Not marriage and family. God.

The Core: Loving the Lord

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?"

He replied, "How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27a).

Despite the daily demands of life, and the competing Christian churches, organizations, and books, thinking and teaching on Christian living must start with Christ's first and great commandment, which has three basic parts:

1. "Loving the Lord." No biblical phrase is more crucial or basic. Christian living involves looking up to our heavenly Father in order to see ahead. If anything is substituted for this main element, then that house would be without a foundation. Loving God means directing your life affections and will (Gr. *agape*) to God before anyone or anything else. God before spouse, before family, before church, before career, before money, before all. God and His Word. The Christian and his Bible. Shaping our affections and will to Him. Nothing simpler. Nothing greater.

2. "Your God." Jesus had given this answer to his disciples and others in response to two different kinds of questions: What is the greatest commandment? What must I do to inherit eternal life? To the question of summation of theology, to the fullness and end of Christian pilgrimage, the answer was the same. Loving your God.

A relationship with God is not automatic. Though we are made in His image, and carry divine imprints communicated by a sinful nature, we find our divine nature and calling in Jesus, by grace, through faith. Jesus as Savior leads us from knowing about God to making Him our God. The pronoun "you" shows divine-human

relationship. Religious interest, enthusiasm, attendance or devotion has no value without a familial relationship between disciple and Master, between child and heavenly Father.

3. "With all you heart, soul, strength, and..." Jesus, agreeing with the Old Testament and Greek rendering, affirms that love has no meaning without relationship; relationship has no meaning without a personal connection to the living God; and religious devotion deserves nothing less than our whole being. Whether this is the Great Shema of the Old Testament Pentateuch, the Greek translation to Jesus' day, or the translation or vernacular of today, loving God must start with the will, continue by personal relationship, and finish with total involvement and commitment. The Christian master's words ring true: He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Gain for the Christian comes in increasing and growing commitment to God.

The Orbit: The Neighbor Principle

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27b). Seeking to evade the Truth and Master, this expert in the Jewish writings and traditions tried to divide theological niceties by asking for the identity of this "neighbor." Was this neighbor fully Jewish? A half-breed? A non-Jew? Perhaps the Teacher would stumble in his answer.

The command is to love our neighbor. This is the second commandment. This means it follows the first. It does not mean that this is a lesser command. It means that just as a caboose follows a train engine, so Christian living among the world follows Christian devotion to God. If God is the core of our lives, the orbit of this core is this neighbor principle. Jesus' answer becomes the hallmark of Christian ministry and service, the benchmark of discipleship, the litmus test of pure religion. The answer is in the story of the good Samaritan. This half-breed, unlike the full-blooded priest and Levite, who with compassion saw the need, had the resources to meet the need, and ministered to the wounded man sacrificially. To this familiar story, three principles emerge:

1. "Love your neighbor." Who is my neighbor? The answer is not simply looking out a window, across a fence, or through a curtain. It is broader. My neighbor is anyone whose need I see, and whose need I can meet. One of my mentors used to say with fondness, "If we meet every need we see, we will do nothing else." His point, well taken, was that in our day of electronic sound bites and media bits, some need is always apparent.

But Jesus' definition is much more personal. It is the same love, the same selfless devotion to others that we have first directed to God. Further, providentially (the Bible uses "by chance" only twice, and for

literary effect), our neighbor is one to whom we have a personal knowledge or relationship. It is not the flash on our television screen. It is the needs known in our community, in our church, in our neighborhood and in our families. James notes, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress." (James 1:27a.)

2. "As yourself." First, what this does not mean. Some have said that we must love ourselves in order to love others. This passage does not even remotely support this thesis. This scripture is no theological catch phrase justifying self-love. Regardless of the logic or necessity of having a good opinion of oneself (which starts with seeing us as children of the Kingdom), this passage teaches the opposite of self-love. We know this simply by looking back at the model of the good Samaritan.

Rather, what this passage teaches is that the second commandment means that true religious service and ministry is meeting the needs I see, and the needs I can meet, instead of loving myself—or ignoring known needs around me. This Samaritan traveler ministered individually, financially, privately and sacrificially. Generosity is no more measured by the extent of our means than spirituality by the public visibility of our service. True Christian living is quiet, and real, and persistent.

3. "Which of these three was the neighbor? The one who had mercy." Finally, Jesus teaches that our neighbor is not a "who," but a "what." The good Samaritan is defined as the neighbor. While we would think the neighbor is the wounded traveler, the neighbor becomes also the mercy given. "Neighbor" is a way of living. It is not measured by one act, or one person. It is a lifestyle borne out of following the first and great commandment, and matching the moral to the oral.

Spiritual Life in the Kingdom of God

For about 20 years, debate has raged in two areas first, over the proper form of the Christian church; and secondly, over the nature and quality of Christian ministry. This text answers both of these questions:

1. On Church Design. Should my church be primarily evangelistic? Should it focus on feeding the saints? Can the two goals coexist? What is the place of the church in relation to the parish/parish? Are Christian organizations supplementing or supplanting the church? Where is our authority? Are we independent or interdependent? Who should I support? This text instructs that, as a church, our standard of success is always how well our corporate attention and effort is directed to loving the Lord with growing devotion. Remember always that the Church is only flesh and blood and never brick and mortar.

2. On Christian Ministry. The rest of modern Christendom, for my quality of Christian ministry, has always been vocational Christian ministry. Is God more pleased with me if I work for a Christian church or organization? Can I distinguish between sacred and secular work? Am I a second class Christian if I have a secular or business career? This text demands that we define Christian service particularly and primarily according to this neighbor principle. Sacrificial loving of others by meeting their needs rather than sitting in a self-serving manner is the highest, best and greatest kind of work in the Kingdom of God. Against this backdrop, God does not distinguish His approval of His children on the basis of vocation, training, advanced degrees or public ministry.

This passage preempts all questions of Christian devotion and service. "All of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:40)." It holds up no football. It lifts up God, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Word, and says, "Disciple, this is the beginning, the middle and the end of the Christian life. Our religious standard always returns to two questions: Am I loving the Lord my God? And, am I loving my neighbor? In the final judgment of Christians, nothing else will matter.

"Generosity is no more measured by the extent of our means than spirituality by the public visibility of our service.

True Christian living is quiet, and real, and persistent."

TABLETALK
is published as a ministry
of the Law Offices of
John C. Moore and Associates, P.C.