

New Beginning: Love

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Preacher: Eric Scott

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, Watermark. Is everyone awake? It was like a funeral, like, Good morning.

Good morning, everyone. There we go. That's better. Sometimes silence is better than the, Good morning. I don't know.

It's good to hear wide awake everyone. Today is a big day. It's the last day of 2017. Graham talked about how, Graham talked about how at the end of the year, sometimes we look backwards and reflect on the year that's just come.

But something else that happens at the end of the year is a lot of people look forward to the upcoming year and make resolutions about the new year. Does anyone make resolutions? Yeah? A few people do.

There's a lot of popular resolutions. Things such as, I want to eat healthier. I want to exercise more. I don't know what your resolutions are. But a lot of people have resolutions of things that next year, I want to be different than this year.

[1 : 1 2] And when we look down at it, ultimately, resolutions are about priorities. We're saying, when we make a resolution, I want to prioritize this thing in my life this year more than I have in the past.

And if we don't make an official set of resolutions, what we're saying is, I don't really feel the need to reprioritize my life too much at this point. I don't typically write down a list of resolutions, but I sort of have some goals in my mind of things that I want to do this year, like I want to run a full marathon for the first time ever.

To do that, I need to prioritize running and training in my life to be ready for that, right? So resolutions are about priorities. And all of us prioritize things in our lives.

Some of us, it may be family or school or work or whatever it is, we all prioritize things in our lives. And as we get ready to start the new year, I want to ask you, are the things that you're planning to prioritize in your life this year the same things that God wants you to prioritize in your life this year?

Are the things that you're planning to prioritize in your life this year the same things that God wants you to prioritize in your life this year? Today we're going to hear from Jesus about what God says our priorities should be.

[2 : 3 9] and what God says our priorities should be are loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Basically everything we have and everything we are loving God and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. And to get there, we're going to talk about understanding God's priorities, aligning ourselves with God's priorities, and responding to God's priorities.

So let's pray, and then we'll jump in and start looking at the passage. Father, we thank you for this chance today to come together to look at your word, to hear from you. We pray that as we come together that you would speak to us, that you would shape our lives, that you would reshape our priorities to be your priorities, and that your Holy Spirit would transform us today to be people who love you and love one another. In Jesus' name, amen. So first off, we have understanding God's priorities.

If we look at today's passage in Mark chapter 12, basically a guy comes with a question for Jesus about priorities. To give a little background and context, Jesus, there's a group of religious leaders who are not very happy with him. They want to get him into trouble, and so they've come up with this series of questions that they want to ask him to try and trap him. Basically these questions, they're expecting either he's going to say something that's going to make the Jewish community upset, or make the Roman community upset. Either the people in the area where he lives, or the government that's ruling over that area is going to be upset from the answers to these questions. And so they give him one question, and he answers it in a way that is faithful to the Bible, but doesn't make the Romans upset. And then they ask another. And every question they ask him, he has the exact right answer for it.

And there's this one guy who's sort of sitting back watching, and he realizes Jesus has some pretty incredible answers to all of these questions. I have a question I want to ask him. And he comes up, and he says, which commandment is the most important of all? This is a question about priorities.

God has given hundreds and hundreds of commandments to the Israelites. And this guy is saying, look, like, there's so many of these things. How can we keep them straight? Is there a simpler way that we can prioritize so we know, like, this is number one, and if we're doing this, we're doing pretty good? And Jesus says, yes, there is. He says the one thing is love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love for God, number one. Love for neighbor, number two. And despite Jesus' clarity, I think a lot of us probably still have a little bit of confusion about what he's really getting at here. And I think a lot of this is because of our understanding of what love is. We live in a culture that surrounds us with a definition of love that's not exactly in line with the Bible's definition of love. And I found a definition slash explanation of love this week from a psychologist.

[5 : 58] She wrote a book in, I think it was 2005. Her name is Dr. Deborah Anapol. I probably pronounced that wrong. Her book is The Seven Natural Laws of Love. And this is what she says. She says, love is a force of nature. However much we may want to, we cannot command, demand, or take away love any more than we can command the moon and the stars and the wind and the rain to come and go according to our whims. And if you think about it, like this is the message about love that we are fed day in, day out. Have any of you ever seen the movie Hitch? A few of you. One, one, one, two of you.

Okay. It's a movie. It was popular like maybe when I was in high school. But in this movie, it's a rom-com, so you know what's going to happen. They're going to end up together. Spoiler alert.

But Will Smith plays the main character, Hitch, and he falls in love with a character played by Ava Mendez. And there's this scene at the end of the movie where she's upset at him and he's come to her apartment to try and like get back together with her. And he's standing outside her door and she's sort of inside the door like looking through the peephole. So he's at this weird fish eye angle in the camera. And he gets there and he's trying to find the words to say to express how he feels about her. But he can't. He can't find words. And so he just starts making faces like...

Because love is this force of nature in his life that's overwhelmed him so much that he can't even find words. And when he finally does find words, he starts explaining to her how when he's with her, he's miserable. But he wants to be miserable if that's what it takes to be with her.

Nobody wants to be miserable. But this idea of love as a force of nature, it's so strong. It overwhelms us. It takes over our rationality. It's just this wave of emotions that crashes over us and we have no control over when or who or how. That's the message of our culture. That's the message of Hollywood. And I think that's probably a message that a lot of us, without even realizing it or thinking about it, sort of sink into believing. And if we look further into her quote, she says, we cannot command, demand, or take away love. And again, I think this is something a lot of people in the world would agree with. But that creates a big problem with what's happening in this passage today. Because what's Jesus doing? It's commanding love, right? He is saying, you have a command to love. The exact opposite of what this quote is saying. And I think if we're honest with ourselves, in the course of day-to-day life, a lot of us functionally probably tend to agree with this quote in the way that we live our lives. Like, how often do we hear or say things like, you know, I've fallen out of love with this person and there's nothing that can change it. You know, I could never love someone who treats me the way that my boss or father or spouse or fill in the blank treats me. You know, no matter how hard I try, there's nothing I can do to feel love for this person. Each of these comments shows this deep-seated belief in our hearts that love just has to occur naturally. It can't be commanded.

[9 : 31] Or if it can be commanded, there's no one who has commanded it that actually has the authority to command it in my life. And even if we don't make these statements ourselves, people make them to us. And how do we respond when they do? Do we say, yeah, you're right.

You can't love someone who's done these things to you. Or do we say, you know what? Like, God does command us to love. God has given us a different picture in a different way when it comes to love. And here's why this is a big deal. Because if we say that we believe about Jesus, what the Bible says about him, if what the Bible says is true, then this cultural definition of love is false. And chasing it is going to lead to pain and destruction.

And so if this isn't love, or at least isn't a full picture of what true love is, what is love?

I think the best definition of love that I've found is probably this. Love is a commitment to pursue the ultimate good of someone or something else, even if it comes at great cost or sacrifice to yourself.

love. Now again, this needs a little bit of nuance, because ideally this commitment is accompanied by those feelings of love most of the time. But there are going to be days, if you're married, you know this, there are going to be days where you wake up and you're just not feeling it. Anyone ever been there? You don't need to put your hands up. There are going to be days where you wake up and you're just not feeling it. And in those days, feelings versus commitment, which is more important? The commitment, obviously. Just because you don't feel like being married to your spouse that day doesn't give you free reign to go do whatever you want. You still have this commitment that you need to stick it out. And so love, yes, hopefully should be include the feelings. And if you don't have those feelings, we should be praying for God to give us the feelings. But ultimately, the commitment side is way more important than the feeling side. And again, I know that just reading this definition, it can seem like love is really cold and impersonal.

[11 : 54] And biblically, that's not the goal. The goal is that God is transforming our hearts to give us these feelings of love so that the commitment and the feelings go together. But the commitment side is huge. It's so important.

I would say it's more important than the feeling because feelings come and go. And feelings can't really be commanded. But commitments can be commanded. As a spouse, even if you wake up not feeling love, that commitment that you made to your spouse to stay faithful still carries this moral weight in your life. Love as a commitment can be commanded. Love as a feeling cannot. And if you look at the teachings that Jesus did and the way that he lived his life, this lines up so much better with the way that Jesus lived and the way that Jesus taught. Because I mean, think about it. He commanded love.

If you can't command love, as this psychologist said, then Jesus is out of line right off. But also in the way that he lived his life, he went out and he found this group of men to follow him, his disciples.

And he taught them lots of things over the course of three years. He said things like, if anyone's ashamed of me, then I will be ashamed of you when I come to judge the world. And he taught them and he showed them who he was. And he had this dinner with them the night before he died. And at this dinner, he turned to one of them, Peter. And he said, Peter, tonight, before the sun comes up, before the rooster crows, you're going to deny me three times.

And Peter says, no way. Peter says, that's not going to happen. I would die for you before I did that. And sure enough, a couple hours later, Jesus is arrested. And Peter, three times, says, I've never even met him. I don't know who he is. Leave me alone. Jesus gets killed. He rises from the dead and he comes back. And what does he do? He has a conversation with Peter where he confronts Peter, acknowledges that what Peter did was wrong, but forgives Peter and restores Peter to a relationship with himself. Now, how does this show love as a commitment rather than just a feeling?

[14 : 09] Well, first off, if Jesus was going for love as a feeling, not just a commitment, seeing the way that Peter hurt and betrayed him probably would have just destroyed any feelings he had in the first place. But beyond that, love as a feeling doesn't want to hurt feelings.

Because love as a feeling is seeking the short-term good of someone, even if that comes at the expense of the long-term good. We don't want to offend someone because if someone is offended or upset, that means that we've done something wrong. We've failed them. We haven't loved them properly when love is a feeling. But Jesus is willing to confront Peter. He's willing to have this difficult conversation that it says Peter was grieved from this conversation. But he caused this short-term hurt for the sake of Peter's long-term good because he saw love as a commitment and he was willing to pursue Peter despite the difficulties and the pain that that could include.

And if love is a commitment, not just a feeling, that means each one of us is demonstrating love every single day in some way, shape, or form. Because each of us spends our time prioritizing things.

Maybe it's work, maybe it's school, maybe it's kids, maybe it's money, maybe it's power. In Matthew chapter 6 verse 21, Jesus says that our hearts will be where our treasure is.

Basically, the things that we invest our lives in are the things that we love. Where we put our time, where we put our money, where we put our energy, that's where we put our love.

[15 : 50] Since all of us put time, money, and energy into things every single day, all of us are investing love into something or someone or somewhere every single day. So when Jesus says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, love your neighbor as yourself. He's not saying you have to go out and generate some love in your heart magically that wasn't there before. What he's saying is all of us love. The problem is we love the wrong things in the wrong ways. We invest our time and our money and our energy into things that are not going to ultimately fulfill us. And it's not an issue of creating a love that doesn't exist. It's an issue of reprioritizing our love. It's not magically generate love in your heart. It's, hey, you know that love that you have for Game of Thrones all the time and money and energy that you invest into watching it and following it and having all of the merchandise? You're created to operate best when that money and energy and time and focus is put into your relationship with God.

He's saying it's an issue of reprioritizing, of making a commitment to love God rather than the other things that call out for our attention every single day. So for us to properly obey God's command to love him and love others, we first need to understand that love is a commitment that can be commanded by God, not just a feeling, and that it's about reprioritizing love, not just creating new love in our hearts. But next up, we have aligning ourselves with God's priorities. See, if we go back to the passage, Jesus is asked a simple question, what's the greatest commandment? And he actually doesn't give one answer, he gives two. Do you ever notice that? He says, the most important is, hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. And the second is, I'm going to give you a bonus answer, love your neighbor as yourself.

There's no other commandment greater than these. And I think if you look at it, not just in the church, but sort of in society at large, a lot of people really like the second part of what he says, right? This idea of loving our neighbors. That's something we feel good about. Even if we don't do it ourselves, we sort of like the idea of it. And some people might think, like, that as yourself part might be a little extreme, but generally in society, I think most people would be like, yeah, you should care about others, love your neighbor. The part where a lot more people have problems is the first part of what he says. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. Now, for non-Christians, it sort of makes sense why this would be a problem for them. If you don't believe that God exists, why would you care about loving him? But the shocking thing is that for many Christians, this has become a problem as well. If you look across the world, many churches, many denominations over the past hundred years have just stopped teaching certain parts of God's word. They've said, you know, this is uncomfortable. We're not going to say it. And the logic that they use is basically, you know, God says to love our neighbors. When we teach on these specific topics, it makes our neighbors uncomfortable or upset. And going back to this definition of love as a feeling, if we're making them upset or uncomfortable, we're not really loving them. So in order to love them, we need to cut out certain parts of God's word so that we don't make people upset or uncomfortable.

And on the surface, the motive seems to be good, doing it to love others better. But in reality, that's not what's happening. Because in reality, love is about pursuing someone's greatest good. And our greatest good is to know God as he is and have a relationship with him. And if we're distorting the picture of who God is in the name of loving other people, what we're doing is we're cutting them off from the opportunity to know God as he is. We're cutting them off from their greatest good, cutting them off from the one thing that they need more than anything else. It's a deadly mistake when a church does this. To truly love our neighbors, we actually need to start by loving God. There's a reason that Jesus lists these things in this order. First, loving God. Second, loving others.

Because our ability to love others flows out of our love for God. C.S. Lewis has this essay that he wrote. It's called, very creative title, First Things and Second Things. And in it, he talks about first things and second things. And when he talks about first things and second things, it's in terms of the order of priority, like first priorities and second priorities.

[21 : 05] And he has this really insightful quote from this book. And he says, you can't get second things by putting them first. You can get second things only by putting first things first. Very deep. And we're probably all like, what's he talking about? Basically, what he's saying is there are certain things in life where we have a priority. And when we pursue that priority, secondary benefits happen. If you're a company and you focus on your primary quality, primary priority of creating good products for your customers, you're going to get the secondary result of making a profit. However, if you get your priorities switched around and you focus on your secondary priorities as if they were primary, you focus on making the profit more than anything else, you're going to make terrible products, cut down on quality to cut costs so that you can maximize profits. And you end up making a worse product that no one buys and you don't make the profit and you don't make quality products. Because you put the secondary thing first, you miss out on the first thing and the second thing. Does that make sense? Yeah? One more example. In marriage. In marriage, I want my wife to be happy.

Is that a primary or a secondary priority? No, not primary. It is secondary. Because primary is loving her. I'm supposed to love her and if I'm loving her well, hopefully she will be happy. Happiness is a secondary result of me loving her well.

And see, here's what happens when I switch that up. Because it's so easy to focus on trying to make your spouse happy instead of trying to love your spouse well. What happens is you put all this effort into trying to make them happy and inevitably someday they're not happy. And there's nothing that you can do to fix it. You don't need to put your hand up, but I'm guessing a lot of us have been there before. If my focus as a husband is simply on Justine being happy and she is not happy no matter what I do, I'm going to take that really personally, right? Because she is not responding the way that she's supposed to be responding. And so I'm going to do one of two things. Either I'm going to get really frustrated and try harder to make her happy, or I'm just going to give up and be like, you know what? Nothing I do is going to work anyway, so why even bother? Now, you don't have to be married to know this. Frustration and giving up are those good ways to make your spouse happy. No, they're not.

But let's rewind here. Instead of just focusing on trying to make her happy, if I focus on loving her, no matter what, she gets really upset. How do I respond? I can respond with kindness and patience.

Now, if you compare frustration and giving up with kindness and patience, which response is more likely to make someone get happier faster? Kindness and patience, exactly. So by seeking the secondary thing, her happiness, as if it was primary, I actually miss out on loving her, and we both get upset at each other. But when, it's only when I seek to keep the first thing first and love her, that I'm able to love her, and to have her be happy. Got it? So when Jesus tells us the first thing is to love God, the second thing is to love others, when we try to take the second thing, loving others, and put it first, what happens is we miss out on our opportunity to love God and our opportunity to love others. It's only when we put love for God first, like Jesus says it's supposed to be, that we get love for God and love for others. And as long as we try to prioritize love for neighbors over love for

[25 : 09] God, we're going to miss this, and we're not actually going to love anyone well. So for us to love God properly, step one is keeping that as the main thing. Keep the first thing first.

Now yeah, loving others by society's definition is probably easier. It requires less sacrifice. It doesn't put them in as much danger as of getting upset with us.

But again, when we do that, we're actually cutting them off from the thing that they need more than anything else. And I don't know about you, but when I read this command, love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength, that seems huge, right? Like, I just look at that and I'm like, that's too much. I can't.

But actually, this transition to loving God to the extent that we're called to, in terms of how we live today, our day-to-day lives, may not, it may, but it may not actually look too different from what we're doing now for some of us. And here's what I mean.

When I'm trying to love Justine, I'm going to do a lot of the same exact things that I would do if I was trying to make her happy. In either case, if she's like, hey, I have a grocery list for dinner, I'll be like, hey, do you want me to run out and pick up the groceries? Whether I'm trying to love her or whether I'm trying to make her happy. The difference isn't what I'm doing, the difference is why I'm doing it. In one case, I'm trying to manipulate a response out of her. In the other case, I'm just trying to love her and pursue and invest in a relationship. And with God, a lot of times, the actions may look the same of prioritizing ourself versus prioritizing God.

[27 : 10] But the difference is the motives behind it. The questions that we're asking that inspire our actions are different. The what stays the same, but the why changes. So I think there can be a tendency for us to think that with God, we do these things so that God will respond a certain way.

I go to church, and if I go to church, then my next week will be good. If I read my Bible today, then my business meetings go well, and I just had a bad meeting. It was probably because I forgot to pray before I went into it. That type of thinking, right? That is trying to manipulate God.

Now, reading our Bible and praying and going to church are good things. We should be doing them. But the difference between manipulating God and loving God with these things isn't the things we're doing. It's the way that we approach them. Instead of asking questions like, how can I make God do what I want? We ask questions, how can I stir up love for God in my heart? What are the things that are going to help deepen this relationship? Instead of, what can keep me out of trouble with God today?

We ask things like, how can I pursue God? What's he calling me to do today? When we're seeking this relationship, instead of seeking things through our lens and trying to get God on the same page as us, we're seeking first. You know, who does God want me to date? How does God want me to do my work?

How does he want me to approach these things? And again, working for God in a way to try to love him versus working for ourselves in a way to try to promote ourselves or in a way to try to manipulate God. Either way, we should be going to work. We should be working hard. We should be doing our job well. We should be honoring God in the way that we do our job and interact with others. The difference isn't what we're doing. It's why we're doing it. Am I doing it for myself? Am I doing it for my advancement?

[29 : 08] Or am I doing it for this relationship with God? And the more we see God's commands as being given for our good, the more we see the way that God loves us and that he's actually seeking what's best for us in what he tells us, the more we're going to start having this transition where we're asking the right questions, focusing on the right things, pursuing the right things for the sake of the relationship.

So we need to understand God's priorities. We need to align ourselves with God's priorities, but then we need to respond to God's priorities. If you look back at this passage, the guy comes in, he says, what's the greatest command? Jesus gives him an answer. And then the guy responds and he says, you're right. And he repeats what Jesus said back to Jesus and says, you nailed it, you got it.

And Jesus gives a response that I think is maybe a little bit offensive for our 21st century years. He says to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. He's like, you're close, which is another way of saying you're not there yet, right? I think for a lot of us, we see Jesus' response. We hear the guy respond to him. We're like, he's got it. Yeah. You know, if he was here in church, we would be like, all right, pray this prayer with me, and then let's find out when the next baptism is, right? Like, you're in. And Jesus doesn't say that. He says, you're close. You're not far away. And why is that? It's because understanding God's priorities intellectually and agreeing with them intellectually is not enough. We need to be transformed by them. It's not an issue of intellectually saying, yes, I agree that this is right. It's an issue of having our hearts gripped and transformed by these things. And we can't work this transformation on our own. We need God to change us. No matter how strongly we try on our own to prioritize something, we fail. There was a

Business Insider article I read this week. They said, 80% of New Year's resolutions fail by the second week of February. That means if you, if you like find four other people sitting around you, if all of you made New Year's resolutions, one of you would still be going in six weeks. And by the end of the year, only 8% are successful. It's very easy to commit to something. It's very hard to stick it out and follow it through. And here's the even bigger problem. Let's say that you and I are part of that 8%. We're the ones who can make a commitment and just stick with it and we're going to get it, if for no other reason than that we said we were going to get it.

We fight on our own effort to prioritize God, to love him, to love others. And we get to the end of the year and we look around and we say, I did it. And we look around and realize that like nine out of 10 people around us didn't do it. What are we going to think about them? How are we going to feel towards them? They're weak, soft-willed people. Should have had the discipline that I had.

[32 : 37] What are we doing? We're not loving them. We've put all this time and effort and energy into trying to love people. But because we're doing it on our own time and effort and energy, we're cutting off our ability to love them. Our love doesn't come from us just mustering up the strength. Our love comes from somewhere else. So what? Is this command to love God and love others just something that we're never going to be able to accomplish? Well, in one sense, yeah, kind of. But that's the whole point of the cross. The whole point of the cross is that we couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. You couldn't do it. We failed. And we're destined to fail again and again and again as long as we're relying on ourselves. And God knew that. And he stepped down to rescue us and redefine us and give us a new chance. Not a new chance to fix ourselves, but a new chance to have a new identity in him. The cross is God's way of saying, you messed up. You can't do it yourself, but I'm here to rescue you. That's why

Jesus died for us, because we can't obey like we're supposed to. And the message of the cross is not just that we're forgiven for our failure, but that we have a new identity moving forward. You know, earlier we were talking about Peter and the story of him failing. Now you look at Peter. He had all the strength and resolve that you could have, right? He's sitting there at dinner with Jesus, and he's like, I will die for you. He's the guy who's at the New Year's Eve party running around bragging to everyone about how excited he is about his New Year's resolution. And he fails within hours, right?

He's the guy, he's running around bragging to everyone about how I'm going to give up social media in the new year. It's going to be so great. I'm going to be a new man. It's going to be so different. And then the next morning he wakes up and he rolls over and he grabs his phone and takes a selfie and posts it to Instagram before he even gets out of bed, right? He's that guy. He's so confident, so full of himself, and he fails flat on his face immediately.

But that's not the end of the story for Peter. Why? Because of the power of the cross. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit living inside him. See, what happens after Peter fails? Jesus has this conversation with him. He forgives him. He restores him. Peter experiences the transformation that comes from Jesus dying for him. Peter is filled with God's Holy Spirit and empowered. And he goes out and he preaches sermons that lead thousands of people to come to Christ. He becomes one of the leaders in the early church, and he does end up actually giving his life for Jesus like he said he would. Not because he learned the seven steps to becoming a better you, but because he experienced a transforming power in his life beyond what he was able to do for himself. So how do we have a similar type of transformation? Well, it's not about trying to pull ourselves up and do better.

It's about letting God reshape us, reshape our priorities so we'd love God first and love others second. I'm not going to give you a long list of to-dos right here because good actions in this area can often hide wrong motives. And what God's after is not actions to put on a show, but he's after our hearts. But I have some reflection questions I want us to think through as we wrap up our time together today. You know, Jesus says that our treasure will be where our heart is.

[36 : 48] And that our hearts will be where our treasure is. So as you think about the upcoming year, 2018, do you want God to be your treasure and your passion this year? If you're sitting here and your answer is like, no, or, you know, maybe, but I think there are other things that are higher on my priority list. I think that's a great way to start just having a talk with God and saying, God, I know you should be top of my priority list, but you're not. Change me, transform me, reprioritize my life. Do you want your priorities to line up with God's priorities this year?

And this is something that each of us is going to have to think through individually, but what are the steps that we can take to pursue this type of love for God and love for others this year? That might look different for each of us. It's not about putting on a show, but what are the steps that will really help us develop and grow in this love for God and for others?

If we do want to prioritize God more this year, it's going to mean prioritizing other things less. We have limited capacity. If you want more focus and energy and effort and time on one thing, it's going to cost something else. So if you do want God to be a higher priority this year in your life, what are the things in your life that you would look at and you'd say, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. It might be a good thing, but I know that God is better.

And so I need to cut back on this good thing for the sake of pursuing something better. What are those things in your life that need to get cut back this year so that God can be a higher priority in your life?

It may take sacrifices, but if Jesus is who the Bible says he is, it's always worth it to make these sacrifices. You know, I started off our sermon today with this quote from this psychologist, and I disagree with her definition of love, but she says something here that I think is really, really, really, really insightful. She says, love is a force of nature. However much we may want to, we cannot command, demand, or take away love any more than we can command the moon and the stars and the wind and the rain to come and go according to our whims. You know what? On one sense, she's right.

[39 : 27] You and I, we don't have the power or authority to command or demand love. We also don't have the authority to command the wind, the rain, the moon, the stars. Do you know who does have the authority to command the moon and the stars and the wind and the rain and does it every single day?

Same one who commands us to love. He can command us to love because he has the authority. He has all authority. As we go into this year, are we going to listen to him? Are we going to prioritize our lives the way that he calls us to? Or are we going to pursue something else as our top priority?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your love for us. We thank you that we can love because you have first loved us, that it's not about us trying harder. It's not about us doing better, but it's about you coming to us to rescue us when we were hopeless. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you for his life and his death to rescue us. And we pray that as we start this new year, that our priorities would be your priorities. That the things that you want for us would be the things that we are seeking in our lives. That we would pursue loving you first and loving others second. And that anything else would be would be used for the sake of these two things, to show love for you and love for others.

God, we love you, but we want to love you more. I pray that you would transform our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.