

BELPRES CHURCH

Above All

Mark 12:28-31, 2 Tim 3:14-17, 1 Thes 2:13

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Well, good morning. It's great to be here. Warm welcome to all of you here, and those of you online. Great to be together.

As Anthony said, I'm Scott Mann. I serve as the Associate Pastor of Discipleship here. I get to teach classes like the Sunday Morning Bible Study, and I love equipping our elders and other leaders in our church to grow as disciples of Jesus. And yes, part of my job is to deal with conflict.

Our sermon series this spring explores what the Bible has to say about conflict within the Christian community. It turns out that where you have humans, you get conflict, and the church is no exception. So to help us with that, we are preaching our way through a document on our website called *Reflecting Jesus in Our Life Together*. Listen to how it starts.

Bellevue Pres is a community of people seeking to follow Jesus Christ. This central identity forms our priorities and directs our actions according to the Word of God. Bellevue Pres strives to reflect the unity of the many-faceted family of God. But Christians and churches do not always agree, nor do we perfectly reflect Jesus. We fail to love God and others as God intends. When our differences lead to conflict, we turn to God through prayer and scripture and focus on calling one another to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus. In this, we recognize we are forgiven by the grace of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God's message of reconciliation wherever God calls us.

Well, there's a lot here for us, so let's pray again. Holy Spirit, teach us this morning from your word and help us grow as the body of Christ. Amen.

One of my pastor mentors would often say, always begin with God's love. And that's good advice. God loves us and created us to be in loving relationship with him. We were

created in love and for love. Jesus kept teaching and modeling this, including one day when he was experiencing intense conflict.

Mark 12:28 says, "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'" The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

Now, when people read the Bible, it's easy to get lost in all the stuff God wants us to know and do. It's a big book written thousands of years ago, and people fixate on this thing or that thing. And we disagree about what's most important. But Jesus says, loving God with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength is the greatest commandment, the most important thing above all. And in the same breath, he quotes a close second: love your neighbor as yourself. He doesn't say you can ignore all the other commands, but he does say these are the greatest. And I find that very interesting and helpful.

The Bible is not flat. Even though it's all God's word, there are levels of importance, priorities, which makes things more complicated, but also Jesus simplifies it for us here. That's one of my most favorite things to do as a Bible teacher. I love to try to make complicated things easier to understand. And Jesus was a master at this. The most important thing to remember above all else, especially when we're in conflict, is to act with love for God and others. Jesus points us to God's highest priority of love.

But just because something is simpler to understand doesn't mean it's easier to do. Case in point, how do we understand what Jesus means by love? Pastor Dudley began this sermon series a few weeks back by explaining that biblical love is a commitment to seek God's best for the other, even at our own cost. That's the self-sacrificing love Jesus is talking about. And that's the love that makes Christian community flourish.

We forget that God made the church diverse on purpose. There should be differences. We're not all the same. We are a family of adopted children. I didn't choose you. You didn't choose me. But God shows us, and we're stuck with each other. That's how we grow and mature, bumping up against one another's differences and learning as we go. We receive God's grace and love and forgiveness, and then we extend it to one another.

As you know, BelPres has diverse ages and ethnicities and languages and worship styles and politics. You name it, we've got it. Some know God's word a lot, some a little. For some, prayer is a life-giving, two-way conversation, a relationship with God. For others, they struggle to even hear God's voice. We're all formed and deformed in many ways by our experiences, our habits, and the cultures around us. But disciples seek to be shaped by Jesus, by God's word, by the Holy Spirit within. And Jesus clearly says what is most important: loving God and neighbor.

But when we're in conflict, my issue seems most important. Or everything is equally important. In that moment, let Jesus' words stop you and remind you to put love first above all. No issue is more important than our duty as disciples of Jesus to act in love, especially when we disagree.

And all of that brings us to today's statement from *Reflecting Jesus in Our Life Together*: We submit to the authority of Scripture, which teaches us above all to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Now, we've talked about loving God and others a bit above all, and we'll come back to that. But what about the first part of this statement? We submit.

Maybe that's not a word you like. Last week was sin. This week is submit. Are we on a roll or what? Just wait. Next week. It'll be great.

Submit just means putting what I want second to what God wants. "Not my will, but yours be done," said Jesus, as he submitted to the Father and endured the cross out of love for us. And a disciple of Jesus follows his example of obeying God and his word. Learning to submit to God and his word isn't only individual. We practice it together as a community. We submit.

That's one reason why so many of us love BelPres. When this church clearly understands what the Bible tells us to do, we do our best to do it even if it costs us. That's obedience. That's submission to God.

But why do we submit to God? Because God is love. He knows what's best for us. He created us in his own image. He's carefully revealed his loving character and his purposes to us in the Bible. He wants us to have life to the fullest, and he has shown us how to do that in the Bible.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul says what we pastors feel about BelPres. He says, "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe." The Bible is not merely human words. It is God's word to us, and it is powerful. There's no telling what God can do with a church that submits to God's word. Amen?

So God wants us to know him and his purposes, so he gave us the written word—the Bible—and the living word incarnate—Jesus Christ—and the Holy Spirit who helps us understand them. The scriptures are the unique and authoritative word revelation of God to us. *Authoritative* means we can trust and rely on them. The scriptures bring life, the deep life God always intended us to have, and that's why we study them, memorize them, and yes, even submit to their authority. We allow the scriptures to shape us.

The apostle Paul says to his protege Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you

wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The scriptures equip us with everything we need for life and faith. They give us truth and light, direction to our steps as we follow Jesus. So we joyfully submit to the authority of scripture, even as we also submit to our loving Lord Jesus.

Now many of us here believe that disciples of Jesus should obey God's word as best we understand it. God said it, I believe it, that settles it. Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple. It's that last part that gets complicated. Disciples obey God's word as best we understand it. What if we don't know what it says, much less understand it? Or what about when we all don't agree on what the scriptures mean?

Even if we agree on the authority of scripture, that disciples should obey God's word, we do not always agree on the interpretation of scripture, what it means for us today. And that's why we're in this sermon series. How do we Christ followers conduct ourselves in community when we don't know or agree on the Bible?

One way, today's way, we conduct ourselves is we submit to the authority of scripture, which teaches us above all to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

So today, we've had two big ideas and one big problem. First, disciples love God and others above all. Second, we submit to the authority of scripture, which basically means we obey God's word as best we understand it. But the problem, what to do when we understand the Bible differently?

Fortunately, Christians before us have learned how to approach this. The main action step and the third big idea to remember today is this: Love, humility, learn more.

First, we act in love, seeking God's best for the other, even at our own cost. We act like Jesus. Second, we imitate the humility of Jesus, as Pastor Dudley preached two weeks ago. Another mentor of mine often said, remember, we never know the whole story. We only see partially, and humans make mistakes. Only God sees perfectly, and even Jesus modeled humility for us. Remembering that we never know the whole story helps cultivate humility. And then third, we keep listening and learning more. This is discipleship.

Love, humility, and learn more. This is a great model for a lot of different situations. And it's way better than our natural responses of fight, flight, or freeze. Jesus gives us a better way, more authentic, courageous, and life-giving.

And this is exactly what we saw our church doing during COVID quarantine, when we had to switch everything online. People flocked to online small groups, and loved one another authentically despite differences. We had no idea how vulnerable people would

be in their little Zoom boxes. But you built deep trust remarkably fast, and we learned to love one another despite differences.

So let's apply this action step, this model, to some scenarios.

What if you're not so sure the Bible is trustworthy? What's your action step? Act with love as best you know how. When in doubt, act like Jesus. Be humble. Be honest about your questions. And learn more. Listen to why others have decided that the Bible is God's word and a reliable authority for them. We have great resources in our library about this, or you can watch thebibleproject.com. Come talk to a pastor or a friend you trust. A great first step is to simply start reading through the New Testament.

Now many of us already believe that the Bible is trustworthy, but we still have disagreements about what it means. What's our action step? Act with love, as best you know how. Regardless of the disagreement, act like Jesus. Be humble. Assume you have something to learn here. Bring your curiosity and your open questions, and be honest. And then learn more from the Bible, from the other person, or other trusted Christians.

Listening to understand is one way to show love and be humble. You don't have to agree or give up your perspective, or be wishy-washy. But we always have the option of building relationships through listening, curiosity, and open conversation. And we can always go and learn more. Maybe they have a good point I need to consider. Maybe my view isn't as biblically bulletproof as I think it is. Maybe I haven't asked the Holy Spirit for God's perspective in this situation, and then taken the time to listen and learn more.

Developing the habit of measuring ourselves against scripture is essential for every disciple and every church. But what if the other person isn't ready for an open conversation? They just want to argue. Maybe the most loving thing in that moment is to politely invite conversation later. Or maybe you just simply listen and reflect back what you hear them saying without sharing your view in that moment.

We know it takes two to argue, but we can always choose to love, be humble, and listen. Or maybe I realize I'm the one not able in the moment to love, be humble, and learn.

In Mountaineering, they teach you, before you ever get on the mountain, they teach you to do what is called self-arrest. When your foot slips, you shift your grip and your weight onto your ax so that it stops you from sliding too far. Church, we need a whole lot more Christians who can self-arrest. When a conversation starts slipping, we need to self-arrest, shift our focus back to love and resume conversation when we are in a better place, more centered, more aligned with the Holy Spirit.

The same Apostle Paul, who said, "Speak the truth in love," also said, "Not everything is beneficial." He understood the importance of timing, and had the humility to not demand to speak his mind anytime he felt like it. He trained himself to ask the question, What will edify most in this situation? To me, that sounds like love, seeking God's best for the other.

Paul loved and demonstrated humility. He listened and learned to Jesus, the scriptures, and other people.

Paul relied on the deep relationships he had within that early church, which was very diverse and filled with strong opinions. Mature disciples of Jesus learn self-control of our mouth. But even when Paul knew God's truth in a particular situation, he still checked in with himself and the Holy Spirit to see if this is the right time and the right way to speak the truth in love.

So what's our takeaway today? How do we reflect Jesus in our life together? Above all, we demonstrate love for God, prioritizing God's interests first, like Jesus did. And we love our neighbors even when it costs us.

Second, we obey Scripture as best we understand it. Disciples seek to understand the Scriptures better over the course of our lives. Maybe for you, that's reading a chapter a day or the Bible in a year. A woman who was baptized just last week shared that the Bible app, the Alpha Bible app, has been super helpful to her. And then as soon as we learn something, we try to obey it as best we can.

And we do this in community. Whether you've been following Jesus for a week or a lifetime, we can each grow as we see others obeying Jesus and becoming like him. One of our church elders says, "When things get hard, it's time to grow." I love that perspective.

Finally, our third way to reflect Jesus when we disagree about how to obey God's word. What is it? We love, we're humble, and we keep learning more. Jesus said, "The world will know you are Christians by your opinions." No, no, no. They'll know we are Christians, what? By our love, by our love. Right. Let's do that.

Amen? Amen. Jesus, thank you for your word. Help us above all to love you and others.

Help us obey you as best we understand. And keep us humble and learning as you grow us as your disciples, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What helps you prioritize loving and obeying God when you'd rather do something else?
- How can you prioritize loving your neighbor when you disagree with them? What could that look like practically?
- What is your next step to allow the scriptures to train and equip you as a disciple of Jesus?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.