

The Most Important Commandment

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 12. I'll begin reading at verse 28. 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.

Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

[1 : 47] And from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions. Next week's memory verse is 1 Corinthians 13.13.

And now there remains three. Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is? Love. The Jewish rabbis counted 613 commands in the Old Testament.

And this morning we're going to hear the Son of God say that the greatest of these is love. And what I want us to see this morning is that love is clearly the main thing in all true biblical religion.

Yet the church of Christ struggles to keep the main thing as the main thing. Often in pursuit of other things, this love falls by the wayside.

Yet when God, who is love, came to earth, he clearly taught us that the greatest commandment is love. Love toward God and love toward our neighbor.

[3 : 03] And without this love, nothing else matters. Indeed, all that we do is useless. So may we hear the Good Shepherd's voice this morning as he speaks to us in his word.

And respond by keeping love front and center in all that we do. And may he rekindle our love for him even as we think upon his love for us.

Here we are in Mark chapter 12. It's Tuesday of Passion Week. Just a few days and our Lord will be on the cross. And each evening Jesus leaves Jerusalem, goes out of the city, and then comes back into Jerusalem to teach in the temple.

And while he's there, these various parties, religious and political, come testing him with their questions. Hoping to catch him in something that he would say that would throw him out of favor with the crowd.

Or get him into trouble with the Roman authorities as they're seeking to kill him. So, the first into the ring with Jesus were the Herodians and Pharisees as they together came and brought their question about, Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?

[4 : 23] Well, the second into the ring were the Sadducees. And their question was about the resurrection that they denied and whether there's life after death. Both were silenced by the infinite wisdom of our Lord Jesus and walked away defeated.

Well, now this morning we see the Pharisees want another go at him. And so they get their expert in the law to go after him with another question. I have four points this morning and then some applications.

The first point is the questioner and his question. Verse 28 of Mark 12. One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating.

Noticing that Jesus had given them, the Sadducees, a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important? Now, as you know, the different synoptic gospels add their own perspective to each incident that is recorded.

And Matthew gives us more information about this questioner in Matthew 22, 34 to 36. Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

[5 : 39] One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law? So, when the Pharisees saw the Sadducees getting their lunch from Jesus, and as he silenced them, they rejoiced because they often debated with the Sadducees about the resurrection.

They were glad to see their adversaries put down. Well, this expert among them noticed that Jesus had given them a good answer, and so he comes with his question, their question.

But Matthew makes it clear that the motive behind it was no better than the others. He asked this to test Jesus, just as the others had done so unsuccessfully.

So, that's the questioner, now the question. Of all the commandments, which is the most important? Now, this was something that was hotly debated among them, and this expert's hoping to trip up Jesus to say something negative about the law.

You know, they accused him of abolishing the law. He has to say in Matthew 5, 17, don't think that I've come to abolish the law. Why did he say that? Because some of the things he said, they thought, well, he's abolishing the law.

[7 : 08] No, he was abolishing the perversion of the law that the Pharisees and teachers of the law had handed down. So, this question, what is the most important?

Literally, it's what is the first of all? The first in importance. The first in rank. The greatest, as Matthew records it. The greatest commandment of all.

And our Lord will give an answer saying, the most important one is. Now, I want us to see, first of all, then, that our Lord is willing to do what some have called is theological triage.

I think we've talked about this recently, that when there's something of a catastrophe in an area that overwhelms the hospitals, a triage center is set up where the injured arrive, and immediately their injuries are assessed to see who have the most critical injuries and need to be seen first.

All injuries will be treated, but not all are of equal seriousness. And so, this triage is needed to determine which are most important to be attended to first.

[8 : 22] In a similar way, all the commandments of God are important. Why? Because they're God's word to man, and therefore all are to be obeyed.

But not all commandments of God are of equal importance. Some are more important than others. The commands on parenting are important.

The commands to repent and trust in Christ for salvation is more important. You can get to heaven without knowing how to be a good parent, but you can't get to heaven without repenting and trusting in the Lord.

It's of higher importance. And so, these legalistic Pharisees, when they thought about this question, which is the most important, they tended to think about the, or at least emphasize the external commands.

The things that they could do, and still claim to be right with God. And you see this operating throughout the Gospels. And so, fasting and tithing were two of their favorites.

[9 : 34] You find that in Jesus' parable of the two men that went into the temple to pray. Oh, they were so fastidious, weren't they, about their tithing. So, Jesus says in Matthew 23, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!

You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cumin, but you have neglected what? The more important matters of the law. The more weightier, the weightier matters of the law.

Like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides, you strain out, you swallow a camel and strain out a gnat.

So, Jesus is doing theological triage. He's pointing out the more important matters of the law in that context. And here, he's being asked the very most important command of all of them.

And he doesn't say, well, they're all equally important, you know. No. Let's look at what Jesus' answer is. There's two parts to it, verses 29 to 31.

[10 : 42] 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. So, the one greatest of all commandments is love.

And in one sense, we could say it's love with two parts, Godward and manward. Godward first. Number two, manward. So, let's look at the first. The greatest commandment of all is wholehearted love for God.

Jesus is quoting here one of the most well-known passages to the Jews. They call it the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6, 4, and 5.

And it contains both a confession, a statement of faith, and a command. And so, these devout Jews would recite this every morning and evening.

[11 : 49] Jesus is not presenting anything new in that sense. And in it, they confess in a polytheistic world of many gods that Yahweh, the Lord, our God, is the only God that exists.

And then the command of this God, since he alone is God, he alone is to have our wholehearted love that excludes all rivals. So, we're to love him with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, all of our strength.

Those are not different parts of man. That's not what Jesus is here doing, trying to give us an understanding of the psychology of man. Rather, he's just piling up words to show us the kind of love we owe to God.

It's to include all that we are. Not just a part of me, but the whole of me is to be loving God.

God. Your entire being supremely devoted in love to God. The only God. Be assured of this.

[12 : 58] God is the one being we can never love too much. We can love a lot of other things too much. Never God. According to Jesus himself, this is the most important command of all.

But then it's interesting that Jesus gives this expert more than he asked for. Didn't he? He asked for the most important one. And Jesus gives him two.

Because they're very closely connected, as we'll see. The second is this, he says. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment.

No commandment greater than these. So the second part of Jesus' answer is love your neighbor as you love yourself. Here Jesus is quoting from a different text.

Leviticus 19, 18. Love your neighbor as yourself. James, chapter 2, verse 8. James calls this the royal law.

[13 : 57] The royal law found in scripture. Royal speaks of kingliness. It's the royal law because it's the law of the king and the law of his kingdom.

Love permeates this kingdom. And therefore, the royal law of this kingdom is to love your neighbor like yourself. Now, contrary to Christian pop psychology, this is not a command to love yourself.

Every one of you are already very good at that. You don't need a command to love yourself. When you're hungry, what do you do?

You go get some food and you put it in your mouth. When you're thirsty, you go get something to drink. When you're cold, you put on more clothes. When you're tired, you go to bed. You're very good at loving yourself.

We have no trouble with this. We do it instinctively. And due to the fall, we're very bent in upon ourselves. What do I want? What do I need? And we're very careful to take care of me, aren't we?

[15 : 04] And Jesus is here just stating the obvious about what we're like. Our selfish orientation to life. That everything we consider somewhere says, well, what's in it for me?

And so, he's telling us that this inborn self-centeredness must be overcome if we're to love others like we love ourselves.

We can't just be looking on ourselves. We're to look out for others' good and concerns like we do for our own. Oh, but who is my neighbor? The self-righteous questioner in Luke chapter 10 asks, he's wanting to justify himself, to say, I can stand before that command and get an A plus, 100%.

So, the only way he can do that is to say, but who is my neighbor? Well, for the Jews, the neighbor was their fellow Jew.

Oh, all we're required to do is to love our fellow Jew, and Jesus shoots that right through in the Sermon on the Mount. You have heard it said, love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.

[16 : 20] And that's what they did. And they thought, they're good to go with God. And Jesus says, no. No, to love your neighbor as yourself is to love even your enemies like God does his.

loving your neighbor as yourself, as Jesus taught in that parable of the Good Samaritan, is to love the one in need, whoever it may be, whatever the creed, ethnicity, social status.

Now, these two, loving God and loving neighbor, they really go together. Not only are they both commands to love, they depend on one another.

They're inseparable. They're different, but they're inseparable. They're always found together. You cannot love God without loving man. 1 John 5, 3. This is love for God to obey his commands.

And commandment number two is to love your neighbor as yourself. You can't love God without loving your neighbor. It's impossible. You may claim to love God without loving your brother, but God says, calls you out as a liar, doesn't he?

[17 : 37] In 1 John 4, 20 and 21, if anyone says, I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

And he has given us this command, whoever loves God must love his brother. These two cannot be separated. And that's why Jesus tags the second right after the first.

Just in case you might be thinking, me and God are good, and what I've got with this guy doesn't matter. Oh no. If you don't love this guy, you don't love God.

So that's the answer of Jesus, the two-part answer. We come thirdly to the expert's agreement with Christ's answer. Verse 32 and 33.

Well said, teacher. The man replied, you're right in saying that God is one and that there is no other but him. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

[18 : 52] So the expert thinks that he's sitting in the judgment seat upon Jesus, listening to his answer. And once again, he's found commending Jesus.

You've passed my test, Jesus. Good for you. As if Jesus needed his approval. But the expert not only agrees with what Jesus said, as he quotes back to him the commandment with approval, but then he makes an additional statement that is a further advancement in understanding.

He says that these two commands to love God and neighbor are more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Now that was the stumbling block of Israel. They thought as long as we keep up the sacrificial system, we're good to go with God.

And this man sees more clearly that that is not the case. That loving God and neighbor is more important than this outward ritual that God has commanded.

Remember, Samuel said to King Saul when he did not carry out the Lord's command to kill all the Amalekites and to wipe out all that they had and he spared some of the best sheep and so on, but we're going to sacrifice them.

[20 : 18] So it's okay to disobey God's commands. You remember Samuel said, does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

To obey is better. And obeying is what love does. So, we find this man seeing more clearly into the requirement of love than many of his fellow Pharisees and Israelites.

But it's not just the outward ritual. Remember how Jesus complained of the people of his day like Isaiah did the people in his day that these people they draw near to me with their mouth and they honor me with their lips but what?

Their hearts are far from me. Their love is nowhere near me. And Jesus can say so many good things about that church in Ephesus. Your good works.

You don't tolerate error. You don't tolerate wickedness among you. You work hard. You persevere. But I have one thing against you. And if you don't get this one right I will remove your candlestick from among you.

[21 : 35] You have forsaken your first love. You used to follow after me like a bride for her bridegroom. And now there's this distance.

This cooling of your heart to where it's just outward performance. You do it all, yes but you've lost the love. So remember the height from which you've fallen.

Repent and do the first things. It's not mere outward form and ritual. God comes to us saying give me your heart. Give me your heart.

He wants our love. And if instead we throw in the crust of our sacrifices and outward law keeping and ritual how offensive it is to him the son of God notices and complains of it.

Well David was right. When he confessed his sin in Psalm 51, 16 and 17 you do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

[22 : 38] The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit a broken and a contrite heart. Oh God you will not despise. It's the heart that he's after. And so this expert in the law sees clearer than the average self-righteous Pharisee.

And that brings us to the last point. Jesus' assessment of the expert's condition. Verse 34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely he said to him you are not far from the kingdom of God.

And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. So this expert in the law thought all along that he was in the judge's seat judging Jesus.

and now he learns that all along Jesus has been judging him and now gives his assessment assessment of him. You're not far from the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God to establish the rule and reign of God in the hearts of people here on earth. That's the reason Jesus came from heaven. The summary of Jesus' earthly ministry was this.

[23 : 48] This is the message he preached. Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. And those who did repent and put their trust in God's Savior were entering the kingdom as with violence with force.

And now he pronounces to this man you're not far from the kingdom. It seems Robertson the commentator says it seems very likely that this teacher of the law had been somewhat humbled by Jesus' answer and indeed he enthusiastically agreed with Jesus and saw as we saw that this loving is more important than sacrifice.

sacrifice. And that's probably the reason our Lord says you're not far from the kingdom of God. But this is no position to rest in folks.

Not far. Let me remind you to not be far from the kingdom of God is to still be outside the kingdom of God. Whether you are one step from the kingdom or a million miles away you're both outside the kingdom.

and should you breathe your last or if the Savior should return you would forever be outside of this kingdom and suffering eternal torments in hell.

[25 : 15] No this is not a state in which to say oh I'm not far I think this is good I'll just sit here a while. No no.

To be almost persuaded to be a Christian is still to be unpersuaded to be a Christian and here J.C. Ryle says we see how far a man may go in religion and yet not be a real disciple of Jesus.

Yes he knows a lot of doctrine he knows a lot of the Bible he can quote it he approves of it but he is not in the kingdom he has not shed his trust in his own goodness and come and thrown himself upon the mercy of God in Christ and until he does he's still outside the kingdom.

what's more we never read of this expert entering the kingdom of God now that's it's just the Bible silent on it it just leaves us hanging with that doesn't it not far from the kingdom those are the last words on this man perhaps left that way so that we might not be satisfied to be not far from the kingdom what a sad sad thing that someone could be so near to the door of the kingdom Jesus is the door to be so near to him and yet not enter to have been raised in a Christian home to have gone to church with many others who here know Christ and to have learned many of the same truths in the Bible stories that others have and yet for all of that to have remained and died not far from the kingdom of Christ and that is to die without Christ is to go at once to hell where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth forever no there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus you got to get into the kingdom by getting into Christ by repentance and faith you trust in the Savior you turn your back on all your sins and all your goodness and you trust in Christ that's how you get into Christ and then there is no condemnation but you must get in so don't let another day go by rejecting Jesus enter today by faith now

I wonder if we've let the weight of Jesus statement on love sink in and grip us we've seen that our greatest duty is to love God with all our being and our neighbor as ourselves and if this is our greatest duty then to leave it undone is our greatest sin right it would be a sin of omission we're commanded to do something that we failed to do and it's no small thing it's the biggest thing that we've not loved God with all of our heart how differently God evaluates us from the way we evaluate us we might think that we're doing pretty well after all we can say with the Pharisee there in the temple I'm thank you God that I'm not like other men robbers evil doers adulterers I've never been an alcoholic never been a drug addict and God says okay good for you step aside from these easy commandments and come to the greatest commandment of all how are you doing with loving me with all your heart with everything you are and possess how are you with loving your neighbor the way you love yourself those people that you live with your wife your husband your children your parents those people you work with people that are very different from you your enemies how are you doing loving them like yourself who of us can stand before this high standard of holiness that Jesus is setting before us and think that we measure up who's ready to claim innocence at the bar of judgment just before these two commandments on what 24 hour day have

[29 : 47] I ever loved God with all my heart on what day of the week have I ever loved my neighbor the way I love myself oh I come short of God's standard of righteousness no wonder his assessment of the whole human race is there is none righteous no not one nobody on earth loves me with all their heart nobody on earth loves their neighbor like they love themselves and so these two commandments should expose our absolute need for a savior and I think this is the reason people yawn at the gospel why they have no interest in the savior oh we've heard of the old rugged cross till we're sick and tired of it because they don't know they need it they don't need a substitute to be damned in their place why because they don't think they're damned they think they're doing okay they haven't got to first base loving God with all they are they haven't got to second base loving their neighbor as themselves but when

God opens our eyes to that brothers and sisters we run for refuge to Jesus Christ don't we and we have good news that we can lay hold of that God so loved us that he sent his son into the world to live that perfect life for us he loved God with all of his heart he loved his neighbor as he loved himself and so he came to obey for us and then to die for us the penalty for our breaking of these two commands and so on well that's the passage and I trust you see just how important then this love for God and love for man is there are several important applications I'd like to draw and the first is to correct a bad misunderstanding of Jesus words the command to love does not replace all the other commands of God the command to love does not replace all the other commands of God some have twisted

Jesus words here to say you know as New Testament believers we only have two commands that we need to obey love God love neighbor notice what Jesus says at the end of verse 31 there is no commandment greater than these he does not say there is no commandment other than these that would have got him into big trouble with his hearers because they were already leaning into the fact that he had abolished the law no that's not what he says Matthew's account of our text Jesus says all the law and the prophets hang on these two commands he's not replacing the law he's he's just giving us two commandments that all the others are defined by that this is the way to love God and neighbor so let's just try it for a while we got two big hooks kids and all the commands of God those 613 Old Testament laws and however many in the

New Testament you can hang them on these two hooks there's loving God with all your heart and there's loving your neighbors yourself so let's take the ten commandments you tell me which hook to put them on loving God loving man you shall have no other gods besides me point to which which hook we put it on this one that's right you shall not make an idol in the form of anything in your worship of me which one this one you should not misuse my name you should not misuse my day keep it holy you see the first four commandments you hook them on this is what it means to love God with all your heart all right kids honor your father and you shall not murder you shall not commit adultery you shall not steal you shall not lie covet what your neighbor has you see you can hang all the commandments on these two hooks that's what

Jesus says all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments all these other laws simply define for us what it means to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbors ourselves and we need that further definition it's not enough just to have the two commands of love and then to leave it up to us to determine how to love God how to love man that's how we got situational ethics what's right or wrong well it all depends on the situation and what I think is the loving thing to do in that situation so if your wife is terminally ill then the loving thing to do might be to give her a drug that will kill her and we'll call it mercy killing we'll call it euthanasia good death all in the name of love no we need the sixth commandment to define for us what it means to love our neighbor it means you shall not murder your neighbor the governor of

[35 : 04] California spent a hundred thousand dollars to run pro-abortion billboards! in seven anti-freedom states of which Indiana was one of those seven anti-freedom states and this is what one of those billboards said need an abortion California is ready to help and then the words of our text Matthew 12 31 love your neighbor as yourself there is no greater commandment so now we encourage murder of infants in the womb all in the name of love because that's what I think love would do in that situation or the loving thing to do may be to help your confused teenager transition to a different gender or maybe to have a divorce to have a same sex marriage all sorts of sins are being justified in the name of love as long as man gets to choose what it means to love your neighbor as yourself

God doesn't give us that place no all of his laws are still hanging and they're hanging on those two base commands if you will but they're ways to love God ways to love your neighbor and that's what Paul understands in Romans 13 8 and 10 let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law the commands do not commit adultery do not murder do not steal do not covet and whatever other commands there may be are summed up in this one rule love your neighbor as yourself love does no harm to its neighbor therefore love is the fulfillment of the law love is not the replacement of the law love is the summary of the law love is the fulfillment of the law but it does not replace the law well in that sense the love chapter of the

Old Testament is Exodus chapter 20 I don't know if you ever thought of the Ten Commandments that way but that's what it means to love God and neighbor that's the love chapter you want to love God with all your heart there's another summary of the commands there's a summary of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself so love and law are not enemies they're inseparable and yet they're different and the difference is between a train's engine and the train tracks on which the engine runs so an engine is a powerful thing but it needs tracks on which to run or it will get nowhere so tracks are a wonderful thing to guide the engine but they give you no power to go anywhere on the tracks oh but together engine on tracks we have tons and tons of product that goes coast to coast every day with the engine on the tracks so in the

Christian life love is the engine love is the dynamism the power the motivation but law is the tracks on which that power and impulse goes and we need both love the impulse the power law to direct and define how that love is to act so love is not self defining love is not self interpretive we need the law of God love love you know that love is the mark the evidence of

Jesus disciples John 14 35 by this all men will know that you are my disciples how if you love one another Francis Schaeffer says that Jesus here gives the world the right to judge whether you're a Christian or not based on whether you love each other third love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us Galatians 5 22 the fruit of the Spirit is love we could even say that is the first fruit of the Spirit wherever the Spirit comes into the heart bears this fruit of love first John is all about that isn't it but now that you've memorized what love does and doesn't do what love is and isn't from 1 Corinthians 13 have you noticed the parallel between 1 Corinthians 13 and Galatians 5 22 what love is and what the fruit of the

[40 : 57] Spirit is so 1 Corinthians 13 love is patient love is kind Galatians 5 22 the fruit of the Spirit is love joy peace patience kindness goodness gentleness you see God knew that we would need help with 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love and so he puts God the Spirit in our hearts to work in us that which we can never do ourselves what a kind father to not only send his son to die for our lack of love but to send his spirit to enable us to start loving each other as we ought love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us so therefore we surely ought to ask that spirit that Holy Spirit to come and produce this in me and we ought to be very careful not to grieve the spirit because a grieved spirit is a horrible thing in the church we will never love each other if we grieve the spirit!

I'm looking for my place here we are for the way to grow in love is to bask in God's love for you in Christ John the apostle of love tells us how to grow in love he says in 1 John 4 in verse 19 we love because he first loved us so all of my love for God all of my love for my neighbor it's just the reflex action it's the response of what of having experienced the love of God in Jesus Christ so if you want to grow in love get to know him who is love and whom to know is to love him to know him is to love him and then is to overflow with that love to others and lastly is there not something wonderfully appealing about a

God whose highest duty for us is to reciprocate his love to us the thing he wants more than anything else the greatest commandment he has for us is for us to love him who loved us first and to then wash that love on out to others around us that he is a God who loves us so intensely that he's jealous to have us to himself with no rivals don't you love being in a love relationship like wives don't you love having a husband who's jealous of your love doesn't want any third wheel bumping into you too you're secure in that love it's a wonderful thing to be loved like that and jealous is one of God's he wants all of you not just a part of you and the greatest that's what he's after not because he needs our love he needs nothing outside of himself but because he wants our love just because he wants our love as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so shall your

God rejoice over you William William Gurnall the English Puritan said Christian you serve a prince or a king who knows your heart he's got his eye on your heart nothing pleases him more than for you to love him completely how he longs to know that if you were free to choose your own king and to make your own laws you would choose none other than himself nor any laws except those he has already decreed isn't that good that's and this commandment shows it so in this command to love the very heart and bosom of our God is opened up to us and what can we say but behold what manner of love the father has lavished on us that we we what were we we were unlovely you know sin is what makes you ugly children sin is an ugly!

thing and it makes you ugly and the unlovely this is the greatest demonstration of love ever that while we were yet sinners ugly unlovable sinners Christ died for us to purchase us to make us his own well may we seek the Lord then and pray that we would know more of that love and then overflow with it let's pray thank you father in heaven for having so loved us as to give your own son please captivate our hearts with that love overwhelm us with it and pour your spirit by the spirit to pour your love into our hearts so that we will overflow to all those who are around us we ask in Jesus name amen