

History is His story: On Jesus' greatest commandment, the January 6 riot, and the importance of history

TRANSCRIPT

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[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Welcome to the 2024 edition of the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum. We welcome you back and thank you for being a part of our conversations. We hope that they're useful to you to help equip you to be salt and light, to be ambassadors to the culture, to be cultural missionaries, if you will, that can use your influence wherever you are for the glory of God and for the good of others. Today I'm joined by our co founder, CEO, and cultural apologist, Dr. Jim Denison. Jim, welcome to the podcast again for this year.

[00:00:39] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Happy to be with you again today, Mark. Thanks for the privilege.

[00:00:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Looking forward to the conversation. We're also joined today by the other Dr. Denison, Dr. Ryan Denison, who is Senior Editor for Theology at Denison Forum, and is a collaborator with Jim and with others in many of the writing projects, and we're going to talk about one of those in a minute. And Ryan holds a PhD in church history and has been a long time member of our team. Ryan, good morning. Welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:08] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** morning. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:10] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And if you are having to watch some clips of this podcast in social media or somewhere, if you see me pick up my Texas Ranger cup, you'll know that at least some of us, we think Jim is in this category. Some of us are rabid Texas Ranger fans, and we're still celebrating the World Series. Because we don't know if we'll have anything else to celebrate, but we're going to hold up that flag. Right, Ryan?

[00:01:33] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Absolutely.

[00:01:34] **Dr. Mark Turman:** All right. We're going to talk this morning about first of all, about the greatest commandments of Jesus, the greatest thing that Jesus ever said and how that has become an opportunity within our ministry for you to grow deeper in your faith and stronger in your witness and testimony for Christ. We're offering on our website at this time a course called the Greatest Commandments course and we're going to explain some of the details About that, but it's built on this statement of Jesus out of Mark 12 .

Jim. Could you give us the context of what this course is all about and what the great commandments of Jesus actually are and then Ryan will help us understand how the course actually works and some of the more detailed aspects of it. But what is this greatest commandments course of Jesus that we're offering?

[00:02:26] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Yeah. Thank you, Mark. So happy to do that. And so grateful that we have this to offer to those that would be part of the experience with us together. So as everyone remembers, there's that event and Jesus last week of his earthly ministry, it's on Tuesday of Holy week, as it were, when there are these various attorneys, as it were legal scholars, that are trying to find ways to trip him up, find ways to to accuse him of various things, to try to stop the momentum of his ministry.

So one of them asks him comes to him and ask which of all the commandments of God is the greatest. Well, there's 613 laws in Judaism as they're recognized coming out of the 10 commandments and the rest of the Mosaic law. And if Jesus names one of them, they can accuse him of rejecting the others is apparently what's going on behind this.

And in response, Jesus makes this statement, which has been from then till now, foundational to the Christian faith and the Christian movement says, love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Love your Lord, love your neighbor. And he says, everything else hangs on, literally in the Greek, hangs on these two commandments.

So our desire, as a ministry that seeks to build culture changing Christians, is to help believers follow those two commandments so fully that God can then use us to help other people follow those commandments. If we can learn to love our Lord and love our neighbor, we can help our neighbor love the Lord and love their neighbor.

Helping their neighbor love the Lord and love their neighbor. And there can be a multiplying kind of a movement that could transform our culture. Imagine a world in which every follower of Christ truly loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and truly loved their neighbor as themselves.

Imagine the impact that would make on our churches, on our communities, on our nation. So our goal here is to create a user friendly, simplified process by which any follower of Christ can learn how to do what Jesus taught us to do in a way that would transform their lives and, through their influence, transform our larger culture.

[00:04:32] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Jim, I know when I was a young believer reading the Bible for the first time in my life. I came across this part of what the Bible talks about in this saying, and Jesus giving us this summation, this really foundational statement these two statements. And I thought to myself, well, why do I need the rest of the Bible?

If Jesus is going to just give it in this such a beautiful, powerful complete, concise expression, I thought, well, why do I need all the rest of it? So as a theologian, as a biblical scholar, how would you answer that? If Jesus says, this is the most important thing. If you can focus on this then you'll get pretty much everything else, right? Why do we need the rest of the Bible?

[00:05:13] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a great question. The simple answer is the rest of the Bible teaches us how to do what the two great commandments call us to do. The rest of Scripture teaches us how to love God with all our heart, how to love God with all our soul, how to love him with all our mind, how to love him with all our strength.

There's a great deal of Scripture that teaches us how to love our neighbor as ourselves. That gives us specific practical guidance and application that shows us what it means to do that, what that looks like and what that doesn't look like, how we live in a way that accomplishes all of that. So a lot of what the course does is brings the rest of Scripture to bear in helping us to follow those two commandments.

So that we know now what it means to do the very things that we're told to do. I guess it's a little like a law that would say, Obey the speed limits. Okay, now I understand that. But what does that mean? Well, you need various signs in various places because speed limits are different depending on where you are.

Or if somebody said, obey the traffic laws. Well, that's very important as a driver. But what does it mean, obey the traffic laws? Well, the rest of what we have there tells us what that means and works that out. If you want as a physician to do no harm. Which would be the basis of the Hippocratic Oath.

Well, the rest of medical education unpacks that and teaches you what that means, what that looks like. So the rest of Scripture teaches us how to obey those two great commandments in ways that enable us and empower us, that equip us to be most fully the people that God made us to be.

[00:06:34] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and really a great explanation, and all under the awareness that we're not doing these things to earn God's love, but because we have God's love. That,

[00:06:42] **Dr. Jim Denison:** So important to

[00:06:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** can't obey the greatest commandments or any other commandments in the right way unless we're doing it out of a response of faith and love and gratitude for the love that's been shown to us, particularly in Christ, and then it is that love and that faith that inspires and motivates us.

That's a great context. Ryan, explain to us the work that you and your dad have done of framing this into a course that's available at denisonforum.org. People can go to the media tab and then find courses and they'll find where they can participate in this course. Kind of frame for us how it's organized and what people can expect when they want to participate.

[00:07:23] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Thanks. Yeah, we set it up to where ideally each lesson would take about 15 to 20 minutes. And so we didn't want to set something up that requires a huge amount of time, but also we include discussion questions and reflection questions throughout that ideally, while going through each lesson 20 minutes, it's something that God can really continue to use to reflect on and think on throughout the rest of the day as well.

And so, we start the course, the first section is actually on what it means to love. When we got into actually writing it, we had everything planned out and then when we started to work with the concept of love just realized that it means such different things to different people that if we're going to understand what Jesus means when he asks us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we need to understand what the Bible means when it asks us to love. And at the root of that is the idea that love is a choice. God never commands us how to feel about anything. Christ commands in the Sermon on the Mount about, do not be angry, are more about the actions associated with anger than the emotion of it.

And in our culture, love is so much tied into this idea of it's something that you just feel, it's an emotion that you don't really have control over and that is not the biblical concept. And so to start off the series, the first five lessons are looking at the life of Christ to see how Jesus loves.

And from that kind of piece together what it means for us to love and then but really that idea that love is a choice is at the heart of a lot of it because that puts it back within our control of something that we actually have the power to love God well. But if we're going to love God well we have to do so on his terms.

And so that's where we start. And then from there, we go through and look at what it means to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength and each lesson ends with an application section of how we love our neighbor and that same fashion.

And so that's how the course is set up. And the goal is that it helps us walk away with a better understanding of not only how we're supposed to love God, but maybe help us identify some misconceptions that can filter in over time , so that we know that we're actually doing this well.

[00:09:29] **Dr. Mark Turman:** thank you for that. Is it right? Sometimes when we hear the word course we start in picturing in our minds our school days and would we want people to think about this from the standpoint of, okay, you have to go with lesson one and then go to lesson 12. And you're going to be asked to follow a timeline and there's going to be a test periodically is when are some of those ideas of course something we should apply here or is that really not the nature of what we mean by framing this as a course.

[00:10:00] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Yeah, there's definitely no test at the end. I wanted to make sure that that was the case, although the questions throughout really are meant to just to guide you deeper into the concepts and each of the individual sections. Well, I would recommend starting with the first section of what it means to love, because I really do think having that understanding down is foundational to being able to understand the rest.

From there, heart, soul, mind, and strength, you can go through them in any order you want. We recommend an order that's just following along with the order that Jesus used, but we tried to make it as flexible as we could, and really the goal is just almost more to guide you through these concepts and guide you through the Scripture.

It's not meant to be academic in nature by any means. It's one of the most powerful experiences I've had was Henry Blackaby's book aNd we really tried to model it somewhat off of that. The idea of just, leading you into an encounter with God based on his word and let that be the foundation for it.

And so with regards to how you go through it, I think it's helpful to start with the first section, but from there I would say just listen to the Spirit's guidance and go where he leads you. The order that we have it set up in is definitely a good way to go through it. But if there's one aspect of this that you feel like God has really been drawing you to, then you can start there and it's not a problem.

[00:11:18] **Dr. Mark Turman:** All right. Well, again, just want to point people to that, especially if you're looking for something to deepen, strengthen your faith as we start a new year. It's called

the greatest commandments course at denisonforum. org. Go to the media tab and then to courses. And you can register and follow and again, self paced.

You don't have to stay on a particular schedule. We would encourage you to do that so that you can move forward through all of these lessons and opportunities. But you can go at your own pace. And as Ryan said, about 15 to 20 minutes a day or a session will enable you to get to that material, and we would love your feedback.

If you have questions or comments that you'd like to share, there are ways for you to do that within the website and within the course. Always, you can reach us at info at denisonforum. org. There are other ways, but that's always a default way to communicate with us as well.

There are videos that Jim has done as summary for different sections of the course and then any other Issues that you might have in registering or participating Please let us know and we will work those out for you.

And that's a great foundation for what we want to talk about in the rest of our time together which here as we come into 2024 Lots of things on people's minds. There are wars, that we're concerned about in israel war in Ukraine that we're continuing to be worried about as well as a number of other things And as we begin this year, we're obviously keenly aware that this will be a presidential election year, and we're just in the recording of this conversation a few days away from the Iowa caucuses that really are something of a starting gun.

And Jim, both you and Ryan are gonna spend some time writing about the third anniversary of the January 6th insurrection which many people use that term. Other people use a lot of other terms, but we're not sure what or how this will be described in three years or five years or 50 years from now.

But I know you've been thinking and preparing to write on this a little bit how are you thinking about January 6th and the third anniversary? How are you thinking about the word insurrection and what we may need to know and understand and learn about that as we start off this presidential campaign year?

[00:13:36] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Well, one of the things that's been very interesting to me trying to think about this from a cultural point of view, what does it say about the larger culture? It's always a way that I try to filter the news. What does this event say about us? Not just, we're not here to report the news as though we were CNN or Fox News.

We're here to think about the news biblically so we can respond redemptively. That's our mission. So from a , missional point of view, what does the January 6th event say to us? Well one, Way to look at it is to look three years later at how the event itself and the descriptions of it had been weaponized relative to partisan positions.

So I saw a poll it's reported in the Washington post, but it was conducted outside of them asking Americans if the storming of the U S Capitol on January 6th was quote an attack on democracy that should never be forgotten. 55 percent of U S adults said it was. However, 89 percent of Biden voters agreed with that statement contrasted with 17 percent of Trump voters. Radically different ways of seeing the same event.

The word itself is significantly part of this debate as well. As you said, some call this an insurrection, others do not. The reason that's so important is because at least at this We're recording two states so far have barred former President Trump from their ballots claiming that Section three of the 14th Amendment disqualifies him as a candidate for the election because that section forbids a person who's previously held office from holding office again if they've participated in a quote insurrection against the country.

And in Colorado and Maine, it's been determined that the January 6th event does constitute an insurrection. They also determined that the now former president, was instrumental in that event. And so they therefore think that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment disqualifies him from running again as president.

President. We're all aware of that. We're following that. We'll see what the courts do with all of that as it comes down the way.

Well, I looked up the word insurrection. In Cambridge Dictionary, it has three pieces to it. First of all, it has to be an organized attempt by a group of people. Second, to defeat their government and take control of their country. And third, usually by violence.

Well, it turns out many of those that are calling this an insurrection are doing so by focusing on the violence related to the event and that was significant, unfortunately, tragically, you could think about the five deaths that occurred as a result of or during the event, you could think about the more than 2. 8 million in damage, you could think about the 1100 people that have been charged in connection with the event, more than 600 that have pled guilty. The federal charges. And so some focus on the violence of it. Some focus on that second clause the statement that it has to be an attempt to defeat the government and take control of the country.

And there are those that think that's what happened on January 6th. There are others who say it wasn't an insurrection, focusing on the first part, that it has to be an organized attempt. And

they're citing reports out of the FBI, finding that the evidence that the January 6th attack on the U. S. Capitol was the result of an organized plot. They're finding that scant evidence that it was the result of an organized plot to overturn the presidential election result. That's according to Reuters. The article adds the FBI at this point believes the violence was not centrally coordinated by far right groups or prominent supporters of then president Donald Trump.

Well, there's a lot more to it than that, but I'm saying that to say that depending on what part of the definition of insurrection you focus on, you can say it's an insurrection or you might say that it's not. And that's what's happening right now. And that's how three years later the event is being understood and the words that are being used to describe it are being weaponized within a larger political agenda.

Some saying it's an insurrection, some saying that it's not, some saying it is and therefore should forbid the former president from running again, others saying that that is itself a partisan move, and it goes from there. So as we're getting ready for that third anniversary, that's a lot of what's in the media around that, and a lot of what's been interesting to me, as it demonstrates a larger partisan divide inside our culture.

[00:17:45] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah it's a very big topic and certainly will be this week as we begin a new year. And as we move further into the politics of this year, again, a lot of people anxious about that. And I assume that there are actual laws that a person can be tried for insurrection in a formal way but I was listening, I heard the professor Robert George from I guess Princeton and he was talking about this and that one of the realities here is that President Trump has never been formally tried for insurrection

[00:18:18] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Even charged with insurrection.

[00:18:20] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And so has not been charged and tried and therefore cannot really be excluded from participating in primary elections, that type of thing, at least by his assessment at this point, that since there has not been an actual indictment and conviction on insurrection that that may not hold water, at least not right now.

But yeah, it's a very complex thing and words matter, you know, we spend a lot of time talking about how they're defined, what they mean and why those definitions are important and certainly the word insurrection and other terms around this topic are important for both a current and for a historical purpose.

Ryan, as you're preparing to write on this as well, what's, what angle are you taking? What are your thoughts about January 6th and three years later, looking at it and even how do you think this might be viewed five or 25 years from now?

[00:19:15] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Thank you. I think for, regards to kind of a follow up to everything that my dad just said, like, I think how you understand this term does speak so much to the idea of how it's going to be remembered for my article, I'm planning on focusing more kind of on the aspect of just the fact that once we act the consequences of those actions so quickly go beyond our control.

And I think that's what we've seen with Trump especially now where so much of the pushback he's received so much of the vitriol against him is focused on his role in January 6th in a way that he never could have anticipated at that event, to whatever extent he had future leaning thoughts on the implications of that event.

And I think it's a good reminder for all of us that while our actions probably don't go to the level of what we see going on with president Trump, that we don't get to choose our consequences, we can sometimes see the consequences coming and then act accordingly. But once we've acted, then we can't take it back.

And I think that's what we see so much is that the conversation, especially in today's day and age with social media and everything else the conversation so quickly goes beyond our control that any illusions of control we might have, we need to just rid ourselves of. And we need to, when we act, that needs to be a big part of why it's so important to act in ways that honor God and ways that are according to his will.

Because if we're going to face consequences for our actions, they need to be consequences for doing what's right and the consequences for acting faithfully. And that needs to be where our focus is cause Satan would love nothing more than to take an offhanded word or an ill thought out action and use that to undermine so much of the other good that God could do through us.

And I think that's what we're seeing in our culture today is that it doesn't take much to ruin a lot of good that you may have done. Regardless of what you think about President Trump, I think it's pretty clear that right now he's kind of running neck and neck in a lot of the polls with President Biden and a potential rematch for November.

If you take January 6th out of the equation, it seems doubtful that it would be as close as it is right now. And I think that's just a good reminder that we don't get to choose those consequences of our actions. They are chosen for us oftentimes. And that needs to be part of the thinking.

And with regards to, yes, but how it's going to be remembered historically, I think so much of that, is yet to be determined and is being determined right now with the word insurrection. If this gets tied to January 6th in 50 years, it will be remembered very differently than if in 50 years time it talks about January 6th as a riot or as a protest.

And a lot of that is because I got, I trust history with regards to what happened more than why it happened in most cases. But the problem is that over time, the why becomes the what. And right now we're debating kind of why January 6th happened with regards to this event in 50 years, it'll be recorded, probably a settled fact, and a lot of ways we just don't know which of the narratives will become the narrative going forward and I think that's kind of what's being determined right now, in some ways.

[00:22:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And it's really a significant environment for all of us to live out the great commandments. what it means to love God well, and to experience his love, to be immersed in his love and then to love well all of the different environments that we move in and out of in our lives, including our politics and our political conversations all of those kinds of things that this is an enormous platform for every individual.

No matter what part of society you participate in, this is an enormous area. I heard one Christian leader that I enjoy reading and following. He said, you know, we just have to commit ourselves to the principles of biblical conviction of compassion for people and civility toward each other.

Civility, in my opinion, being our commitment to live out the fruit of the Spirit in every environment that we operate in and every relationship. And that includes our politics. You sometimes hear people say, well, yeah, that's great. That's wonderful. That's a grand and noble idea, but this is politics.

Or you'll hear people say, well, that's all great, but this is business. No, you, if you're a believer, you take your love for God and your love for people into all of those environments and. along those ideas of conviction, compassion for people as well as civility. And we'll be talking about those kinds of things and those ideas more as we go forward.

And, you know, I have all kinds of thoughts about how this may play out in time. And we know sometimes what happens in history gets, Not only talked about, but then kind of revised, and we can talk about that in a moment. But, you know, things I wonder about. If this had been a riot at a different location and not on the Capitol steps while the Congress was convening, if it had been in a different location geographically, how would we think about it?

But because of where it was, when it was, those kinds of things, those facts of history come into the understanding of the whole event. And it is an event that will probably still have implications, certainly, you know, three years, five years down the road, certainly 10 years down the road. We'll have to see how much of an influence it has further down,

but I want to let that be a pivot to the third part of our conversation today, which is a broader conversation just about the role of understanding history, appreciating history as a part of our

faith and how it can inform our faith. And the living out of the greatest commandments of Jesus more on a broad stroke.

Now i'm one of those people that just loves history. Obviously ryan you have a phd in church history And I know jim you have it as well i'm the guy that my family has to drag me out of a museum because I want to go real slow. I want to look at almost everything. I want to read all the plaques and yes, it is a historical fact that I've been drug out of at least two museums by my family because they're moving much faster through history than I am.

But Jim, talk a little bit about how in our current day, almost every institution in our culture is being questioned and doubted. And that includes if we can think about history as an institution. Can you unpack that idea a little bit?

[00:25:49] **Dr. Jim Denison:** Thank you, Mark. That really is a great question. And in fact, it's a pretty foundational question to understanding how we relate to the world in its larger context. I taught philosophy of religion for a long time at four different seminaries. And one thing philosophers like to do is to look at the question of history itself.

We point out the fact that history is typically written by the winners. If you win the war, then you're going to record how the war was done a little differently than if not. I just happened to be reading today about Martin Niemöller and the Confessing Church in Germany and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and how they stood up against the Third Reich.

Well, we look at them as heroes and as martyrs because we obviously know how the story ends. The Third Reich would have told the story very differently. Had they won the war, had we all been speaking German today, as it were, had the Nazis been able to prevail, the Niemöller and Bonhoeffer would have been seen radically differently.

That's the case with the Middle East war going on right now, whether Hamas are martyrs or whether they're terrorists depends entirely on who you ask and how the story gets told on down the way. There are some that see history as linear as we do in the Western context with the past, present, and future.

Some worldviews see history as cyclical. They see it in a reincarnation kind of a motif, around a kind of a seasonality. Some existentialists see history as chaotic. They would say that you're just dots on a board, and there really is no past, present, or future. Jean Paul Sartre, a well known existentialist said that.

The courage is to face life as it is. Martin Heidegger said you're an actor on a stage with no script, audience, or director. Or no past or no future and you just do the best you can with what you have. And so the very definition of history depends on who you ask itself.

The way history gets recorded is in no sense objective. This conversation is probably not going to be recorded in tomorrow's newspapers. Now, if somebody walked into one of our homes with a terrorist attack, then it probably would be. But as it is, we hope it won't be because those that are going to be deciding what to include in their newspapers tomorrow would consider this to rise to that level.

So even deciding what gets recorded is a subjective decision. Not to mention how you record what you record. Which is obviously subjective as well. I think Ryan said it really well when if you distinguish between what happened and why it happened we can be as objective as possible about the what although even then deciding what to leave out is a subjective decision as I said, but when you decide how to look at the why of it, then there's no way to be objective about that.

So at the end of the day, the best way I think that you and I can look at history is to understand it's always written through an interpretive lens. It's always written with an ideology or an agenda in play. That's true of contemporary history being recorded every day in the newspaper or long form history, however you want to see it. But at the end of the day, the bottom line is what my pastor used to say. History is his story. What is God doing through the history that we're studying, that we're discussing, that we're looking toward? Biblical history and so called secular history as well, because it's all his God doesn't distinguish between secular and sacred or between Sunday and Monday. So we're asking about everything that we find in history.

What's God at work doing there. What was God doing there? What could we see about God? What can we learn about God? How can we love God? How can we love our neighbor more effectively because of this event that we're studying now? That I think is the ultimate question to ask. How is history his story?

Understanding that the recording of it, the interpreting of it is subjective, but the providential objective fact is, God's working through all of that, redeeming all of that to advance his kingdom, and he invites us to join him in that process and in that journey.

[00:29:32] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, that's so helpful as a perspective and really is applicable not only to history as a practice, but as an institution, as well as to other institutions. You know, we can bemoan the fact that authority and institutions are in many ways being questioned and doubted. But the question is, well, where do we go with that?

Ultimately if you follow that along and decide to carry it out to its conclusion, you end up with chaos and anarchy if you decide that you're not going to trust anything. And the truth of it is, history and other things, but in this case, particularly history it's always going to be an imperfect science and art, as most other things are that human beings are involved in.

We're never going to get it exactly right. Because of our fallenness and because of our subjectivity. Like, you know, many people have heard this story, right? You put four different people on four different corners at an intersection and there's an automobile accident. They won't all see or report it the same way.

Their perspectives are different. And then what you mentioned a moment ago, sometimes it's just a question of volume. You can't record everything. So, you know, John says in his gospel that he had to be selective about what he recorded about Jesus, because if he had tried to write it all down, there would have not been enough books to contain it.

So even in that context, you have to be aware of that humans cannot do otherwise other than to be selective, subjective, and less than perfect in this. Even this morning, I was reading a short article about the Buffalo soldiers, the African Americans who were significant for 30 years in the late 1800s on the frontier of America, these African American soldiers who did a lot of things, not the least of which they were part of the security force when we started establishing national parks. Okay, well, I don't know that anybody intentionally tried to keep that information from me, but there's just only a certain amount of information that you can get to at any one time or in any one lifetime and that is something that we ought to continue to be open to.

I think many of our African American friends that I've talked to have said, you know what, we're not asking you to necessarily change history, but we want to add in some stories and some chapters that have not been included or not been well known. I had that experience with the story of Emmett Till that I learned a few years ago just a couple of years ago, the Tulsa riot was another experience. In my own experience, I had not known much of anything about either of those two stories. And I had some African American friends said, look, I don't want you to change anything. I just want you to listen more. There are more stories to be told. And that's part of gaining a deeper understanding of the world and the people in it.

Ryan, I wanted you to talk about this, particularly from a biblical history standpoint and how history and how remembering history is a part of our faith. Let me set this up. We are all somewhat fans of Frederick Buechner. I found this quote, which in some ways inspired this conversation for me. Buechner said this years ago, "Unlike Buddhism or Hinduism, biblical faith takes history very seriously because God takes it very seriously. He took it seriously enough to begin it and to enter it and to promise that one day he will bring it to a serious close."

He goes on by saying, " it is each of us, history is each of us, a series of crucial, precious, and unrepeatable moments that are seeking to lead us somewhere. The true history of mankind and the true history of each individual man has less to do than we think with what kind of information gets into most histories. The real turning point of human history is less apt to be the day that the wheel was invented or Rome falls than the day a boy is born to a couple of Hick Jews." Ryan, you've spent a lot of time studying biblical history, church history. Give us your short perspective here at the beginning of just how important is history to our faith fundamentally.

[00:33:59] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** it's extremely important. I mean, even going back to what you alluded to with God's approach to history. I mean, if you read the Old Testament throughout it, he's calling his people to remember and to remember , how he brought them out of the promised lands. Remember how he led them to the wilderness to remember all that he's done for them. a lot of ways, that really forms the foundation of his relationship with his people. And I think that same theme is continued throughout history. One of the reasons that I believe in Christianity is that the New Testament was written at a time when if the Gospels were telling lies, people were around to know they were lies and could call them as such.

And, one of the things that really makes Christianity unique is that the story of Christ was written and popularized and became foundational to our faith at a time when, if it was false, people would have known it was false. And I think that's one of the great things. powers of history is that if we can trust it and if we can understand which parts of it we can trust, there really is a great deal of encouragement to be found in it, a great deal of security.

He just talks about how blessed will be those who believe without seeing. And I think that's one of the things that history lets us do is see in a way that we can't otherwise. Throughout a lot of the story of the early church and the way that it grew. I mean, granted, a lot of that was written more after the fact than moment by moment, but even a lot of those stories are, I think, recorded in the history to give us a sense of perspective and a sense of purpose for how we should go forward with our faith and just to remind us that when we face problems, they're very rarely new

to us. Usually you can find some corollary throughout history of other people that have faced something similar. And while the circumstances may be different enough that we can't copy their example precisely, I think God intends us to be able to find some level of peace from that and some level of just security in the knowledge that he brought them through it. He can bring us through it as well. And that's one of the, I think our biggest problems as a culture today is that we've lost sight of so much of that perspective. We tend to think that everything that happens to us is new, when it very rarely is. And that's one of the great parts of our history is it just reminds us of our small place within a much bigger picture.

[00:36:14] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, it's so, so helpful. I was I remember a comment from a secular historian who said, you know, we study the past so that we can see the future better. And so that we can plan for it so that we can embrace it better. And like you said, helps us to remember that as Solomon said, there's nothing new under the sun.

And yet, at the same time, each of our lives and each of our days is unique, precious and unrepeatable, as Buechner said. But it's just, you know, I was thinking about my own history. I've been alive 60 years, six decades. And as I was thinking about that in terms of the chapters of my life, the first 15 years of my life seemed very idyllic, very calm.

I was born to great parents, a large family, a small town. And it was like leaving to Beaver. It was like living in Mayberry. But I was born in a decade that was marked by three traumatic assassination starting with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. It was a season of great turmoil around the sexual revolution and around Vietnam.

But I was oblivious to all that as a child because of the way that my parents structured my life. I can remember sitting on the edge of the bed in my mom's room watching some of the Watergate trials, but As a person that was 12 or so years old at that point, it didn't disturb me, but the world was chaotic, but my world was not chaotic because of the way that the people that were looking after me.

But it's just a reality that history has so much to teach us and so much to inform us. Jim, I'm wondering how an understanding, a proper, healthy understanding of history, as Ryan made a statement a moment ago That when the story of Jesus was being told and retold and written down, that if it had been a lie, there were people alive who could have verified that it was a lie. So talk a little bit about how the understanding of history and biblical history helps us with biblical authority. Why we can trust Scripture.

[00:38:21] **Dr. Jim Denison:** That's a great question. I love that Ryan said that, because that's one of the key ways that apologists go about defending biblical statements is to put them in historical context and use historical evidence to demonstrate the veracity of the truth claim that's being made here. And again, that's one of the things as Buechner says, it makes Christianity so different from other world religions.

The Judeo Christian worldview is that it is based and rooted so fully in historical events that can in fact be verified. Just the other day there was some archeological discoveries that gave even further credence to the dimensions of King David's empire. And that again runs counter to the kind of skeptical claim over the years that King David, if he ever existed, certainly wasn't a king like the Old Testament describes him to be.

Well, now they're finding further evidence of how large his palace was, of how large his his empire was. And again, verifying biblical evidence. Truth the veracity of Scripture, the timing of the gospels within a context, when so many, why witnesses were still alive and could easily invalidate the things that were being said here, the claims that were being made here, even Roman history.

You had Pliny of the Younger back in 81, 12 recording that Christians saying an alternate hymns versus to Christ as to a God. Demonstrating that even in that early era, people were seeing Jesus as a god. As opposed to Dan Brown, the Da Vinci Code, that said that over centuries, the church evolved this idea that a man became a god.

And by the Council of Nicaea, he was worshipped as a god when the early followers just knew that he was a man. Well, even Roman history gives a lot of that. You could look to Josephus, you could look to Tacitus, you could look to Marabar Serapion or a variety of Suetonius, a variety of contemporary Roman historians that demonstrate the veracity of the biblical claims.

And so historical arguments, verifying, certifying biblical truth are absolutely important to the conversation. Nelson Gluck. A well known Jewish archaeologist says that as he's writing his book, and this was some time ago, there was not a single archaeological discovery that contradicted a biblical claim. As he understood archaeology in the context of biblical book. truth. He felt that archeological evidence and historical evidence was unanimous in its declarations of biblical veracity, biblical truth.

To illustrate that Mark, and I don't mean this unkindly, but just to make a kind of a apologetic point very quickly, the book of Mormon cites a large number of historical and geographical events, none of which have ever been certified by historians.

Now I don't mean that to be unkind to my Mormon friends, it's just simply a statement of fact. And a lot of that is because the golden plates that made up the Book of Mormon have not been seen except by a handful of early eyewitnesses before in Mormon theology that were taken back to heaven. And a lot of what they claim from a historically geographical point of view has not been able to be verified.

Well, in contrast, the Judeo Christian truth claims of the Bible have just this remarkable, I mean, we could have a long conversation talking about all of the historical and archaeological evidences that demonstrate the veracity of biblical truth claims. But back to Ryan's point, so much of what's written in the New Testament context is obviously, well, all of it is in the context of eyewitnesses.

Who so easily could have invalidated the statement if they'd wish to do so. This was at a time when the enemies of the gospel very much wanted to be able to do that. If there'd been eyewitness testimony invalidating Scripture, the historians would have written it down. It would have been known. As so many attempts were being made to disparage the gospel, none of them was ever able to prevail on historical grounds.

Because the eyewitness evidence was so clear and so unanimous and so consistent with biblical claims.

[00:42:09] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and what's one of the things so great about the Bible is the multiplicity of authors and how , that multiplicity of authors becomes really a symphony of credibility. both in Old Testament and in New Testament experience and something that really gives a lot of depth and credibility.

And, you know, as I continue to think through this, that, you know, we talk about people that don't believe in Christ, don't believe in God. They say that you can't prove God. Well, God could prove himself anytime he wanted to. And he's left,

[00:42:41] **Dr. Jim Denison:** And you will one day.

[00:42:42] **Dr. Mark Turman:** and will one day and has left plenty of evidence in history and in even this moment. He has provided plenty of evidence to give us the ability to believe But not so much evidence as to take away the choice and that's the privilege and the honor that he's granted to us in this season. That's the opportunity of faith and belief that he offers to us not without evidence, but with mountains of evidence both historical and present

Ryan, I wanted to give you a shot at the last question to kind of put a bow on this.

How is an understanding of history, all history, and particularly Bible history, how is that important to the living out of the Greatest Commandments? How does that help us to do what Jesus said? This is the most important thing, love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

How does historical understanding help us

[00:43:40] **Dr. Ryan Denison:** Thanks. Thanks And I think one of the clearest ways is just going back to what I mentioned earlier with regards to how God treated his history with his people is the foundation of that relationship. I think that's what we see from the start is that God never took for, God could have easily taken for granted that we should love him.

And all other religions throughout history, for the most part, the God, God, or the gods take for granted that their people should love them. Our God doesn't. When he asks us to love him, he repeatedly grounds it in all that he's done for us to show his love for us. And I think when we look at history, the biblical history biblical truth is just so much of it points back to God is worthy of our love.

And so given that fact and given that foundation, how then do we go and love him in return? And I think that's what the course is intended to do is help us understand how we should love God better how we can love God the way he wants and deserves to be loved. But I think it is so important to understand from the start that that is based on all that God has done to prove that he is worthy of that love.

And I think that's what makes Christianity unique is that God invites us to love him without demanding it of us and without just expecting that we should because he's God, he proves himself to us. And one of the great things about history is that even in our personal histories, all of us can look back on times where God has proven that he's faithful, that God has proven that he loves us, that God has proven that he's worthy of our love in return.

And when you love God from that perspective, it gets easier to make the choice to prioritize him over ourselves, to love him over even at times when it may seem to go against our self interest. And that's so much of what it means to love God well. And so that's what we hope to unpack throughout the course.

And I think one of the other, because so much of that is a personal story, I think it's great to go through it by yourself. I also think it gives the opportunity and a blessing to go through this with other people, whether it's in a small group setting or with a spouse or good friend. And I think that gives some accountability to stay stronger with it.

But also just hearing the stories of how God has shown that he's worthy of love to other people, the way that God has loved other people can enhance that as well. And so, that is one final piece that I would give about the course is that if possible, I do think there's a lot to be gained by going through it with other people at the same time.

And then talking about those reflection questions, talking about it with one another. But our goal at the end was just to give a framework for people to grow in their love for the Lord. And I hope that's what happens.

[00:46:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** That's a good word and a good place for us to land. I want to thank both of you for being a part of the conversation. The first one for 2024, I want to thank all of our listeners and followers. And if this has been helpful to you. As we always ask, please rate,

review us on your podcast platform, give us a review that helps people to find us and in the world of algorithms and that type of thing helps people to get to us more.

Also, please share this with friends and family as you find it useful and helpful. And again, we look forward to seeing you and being a part of future conversations at the Denison Forum. And you can find the course one more time at denisonforum.org. Under the media tab where it says courses, you'll find the greatest commandments course.

We hope you'll participate. God bless you until next time.