

Mark 12:28-34 The Greatest Commandment

In Mark 12:28-34 a Scribe asked Jesus, **“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**

Mark 12:28 reads, **“One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating.”** A teacher of the law was another name for a scribe. Initially the scribes were responsible for making copies of the law but in the process of copying them over and over they became authorities of it and still later they assumed the role of interpreting it.

When we read the two phased answer of Jesus to love God and love our neighbor we are tempted to say, *“That was obvious”* but it was not all that obvious in Jesus’ day. In Jesus’ day the scribes had made the law so complicated not even they knew what was really important.

The scribes determined that in the first 5 books of the Old Testament, where the Law was given to Israel, there were 613 specific commandments. In evaluating the 613 commands they decided there were 248 positive commands, that is commands of things that the people must do, and 365 negative commands related to things they must avoid. Then things got a little complicated because they knew it was impossible to keep all 613 so they broke the commandments into those that were essential to keep and those that were less important. They were labeled as *Heavy* and *Light* commandments.

Even that did not answer the question of which laws were essential to ensure everlasting life, so the debate continued among the rabbis. That is the background to the rich man who came to Jesus and asked, according to Mark 10:17, **“Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

That is the problem with any form of legalism or salvation by works. Ultimately, we have no way of knowing if the good balances out the bad. When do the scales tip to the good? That is why when people who don’t know Jesus talk about heaven it is usually with something like, *“I hope my good outweighs my bad.”* That issue is at the heart of the scribes’ question **“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**

Read Mark 12:29-30.

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:4, known by every Jew as the **“Shema”**, which is the Hebrew word *“Hear.”* This verse was to be quoted in prayer twice a day by every Jew and was contained in a small leather box often worn on one’s forehead when praying. Pious Jews also kept a copy of it in a small box attached to the door as a reminder of it whenever they left home or returned. Every Jew knew it by heart.

The command is to “**Love the Lord your God.**” The word used for “**love**” is “*agape*”, a word used by the early church to describe the type of love God has, as opposed to sensual or even brotherly love that we often see among men.

The Deuteronomy passage described the one we are to love as the “**Lord your God.**” Two different and important words are used to describe Him. In English it is too easy to see “**Lord**” and “**God**” as simply synonyms for God but in the Hebrew, they are two distinct words that denote two very important aspects of who God is.

The word translated “**Lord**” in Hebrew is Yahweh or Jehovah. That name was reserved for a description of the covenant God. It was a very personal name they had for God and reflected their unique relationship with Him. As Christians we have a unique covenant relationship to God made possible because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. If the Israelites had reason to love God because of the covenant He made with them, how much more should we express our love for God because of the provisions He made for us?

The second word used in Deuteronomy and translated “**God**” is “*Elohim*”. It was used to describe God in general and in particular the God of creation. Elohim is a powerful God who can accomplish all He desires to do. For us as Christians that power is nowhere seen more dramatically than in the resurrection of Jesus and the promised resurrection to life of all who have made Jesus their Savior. We are called upon to love a powerful God who can meet our every need both in time and in eternity.

Jesus went on to note that the love we are to have for God is to be “**with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**” Scripture is not seeking to describe various parts of a person but to depict one’s total self. The message is clear. We are to love God with all we are and all we have 24/365. It is a comprehensive description. The love we are to have is not something we simply say in church or sing about on Sunday morning but is a love that envelops our entire being all of the time.

Jesus went on. If we love God, we have to love others also because that is the nature of His love and the love He put in us. Jesus added, according to verse 31, “**The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.**” That is a quote from Leviticus 19:18. Note that the law to love one’s neighbor is as old as the Law itself, and that is significant. Created in God’s image means we were created to love not only Him, but one another.

The question is “*Who exactly is my neighbor?*” The identification of one’s neighbor has always been a challenge. Earlier in His ministry a scribe asked Jesus, “**Who is my neighbor?**” Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. All those with whom we have interaction are our neighbors, not just those we can easily identify.

We read next that the scribe replied to Jesus, according to Mark 12:32, **“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right.”** The issue for us is not *“Is Jesus right?”* but *“Are we going to accept those truths and live by them?”* It is easy to acknowledge what we should be doing. It is a lot more difficult to evaluate our actions and attitudes and adjust them so as to reflect what we know is truth.

Read Mark 12:33. The Old Testament abounds with passages where God said through the prophets that what He wants from His people is not ceremony or lip service or actions without heart, but instead a clear daily love commitment to Him.

Then we read in verse 34, **“From then on no one dared ask him any more questions.”** Everything is set for His arrest and crucifixion. They cannot trap Him so the people will turn against Him or the Roman authorities will arrest Him. They will have to find another reason to bring Him before Pilate.

Between the declaration of the scribe that Jesus answered well and the note by Mark that they decided challenging Him was useless, we have an interesting observation by Jesus. Read Mark 12:34. We wonder if he ever moved from **“not far”** to **“into the kingdom.”**

“Not far” is a very dangerous place to be. It is dangerous because it is too easy in that place to think one is OK, when in reality one is not. Almost but not is not almost saved but totally lost. **“Not far”** can be knowing about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus but never making it personal. **“Not far”** can be knowing one must make a personal commitment to Jesus but never actually doing it.

Unfortunately, too many of our neighbors know enough about Jesus to be **“not far”** but still lost. It is a challenge to us to share the truth with them, so they move from **“not far”** to **“in the Kingdom.”**

Presenting the truth of the gospel to our neighbors is actually the second step in the process. We dare not try to share the importance of a commitment to Jesus if we have not determined to seek in our own life to model the first part of Jesus’ response. Our effectiveness in a witness will be in proportion to our honesty in seeking to **“Love the Lord our God.”**

Nothing has changed in the last 2000 years since Jesus answered the scribe’s question. We are still called upon to love our covenant God who has all power to meet our needs with everything we are and have. And we are still called to love our neighbors and there is no greater way to show that love than to introduce them to Jesus.