

Series: What We Need Now

Title: Great Commandment Love

Text: Mark 12:28-34

Date: August 23, 2020

Verse 28

In Mark 12:28-34, Mark began to share about Jesus' recitation of the Great Commandment. He sets the scene in verse 28 by telling of the events that led to our Lord's famous pronouncement. He says, "One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, 'Which command is the most important of all?'" (Mark 12:28). In the context of Mark's gospel, the question from the scribe is nested within a series of questions from Jesus' opponents. Our Lord's authority was called into question back in 11:27-28. In Mark 12:13-14, the Pharisees and Herodians interrogated Him about tax laws. The Sadducees drilled Jesus about the Resurrection in 12:18-23.

Such questioning should have been expected, to a degree. During the Passover, worshippers had a liturgy wherein they used a series of questions to prepare themselves for the observance.¹ One could say that it was the season for religious questioning; however, the questions Jesus faced went beyond the norm. As He entered Jerusalem for the Holy Week, His enemies were on the attack. They wanted to ensnare Him in His words so that they could fulfill their plot to have Him killed (Mark 3:6). In describing Jesus' response to His adversaries, Mark presents Jesus as being special in two regards. First, He depicts the Lord as confounding the religious leaders of His day. He demonstrated that He indeed was the all-wise Messiah. He proved He was the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17). Secondly, in Jesus' ability to volley back and forth with the liturgical questioning of the Passover season we see an allusion to His role as the Passover Lamb. His participation in the rituals was meant to demonstrate that His mission was to be slain as a sacrifice for sinners. The full meaning of this reality will be put on display in Mark 14:12-26.

In regard to the question in our current text, the scribe asked, "Which command is the most important of all?" Matthew's gospel tells us that the man's motives were just as sinister as his cohorts (Matthew 22:35).² He wanted to trick Jesus into saying something that might mar His reputation. He most likely wanted Jesus to say something that would warrant a charge of blasphemy. Maybe he hoped Jesus would claim authority for Himself that outweighed the authority of the Law.³ If Jesus made such a faux pas, the plot to have Jesus killed (Mark 3:6) would have likely succeed.

Notice that the scribe approached Jesus after he "saw that Jesus answered them well." The man was undoubtedly a Pharisee. He took great pleasure in seeing Jesus put

¹ Ferguson, 199.

² Robertson, 368.

³ Schnabel, 300.

the Sadducees in their place concerning the resurrection (Mark 12:18-27). The two rival religious groups had a long-standing feud over that particular doctrine. Happy that Jesus had confounded the Sadducees, the scribe hoped that he himself would be able to stump the Galilean teacher.

The question he used was a famous one amongst scribes. He asked, "Which command is the most important of all?" The Greek language of the text speaks of that which is "first in rank and importance."⁴ In regard to the Law, the religious elite loved to pontificate on the topic. Scribes had created a system in which they differentiated between "heavy" and "light" commands of the law. The former were focused on actions that might threaten one's life or property, or issues related to God's holy character and Sabbath observance. The latter dealt with less consequential matters.⁵ Through their system, the scribes had identified 613 separate commandments within the Law. They regarded 365 of them as being negative. The rest (248) were seen as positive. These were broken down further into the aforementioned "heavy" and "light" classifications.⁶

Though the legal expert tried to entrap Jesus, he himself was in bondage to an old religious trap. He wanted an easy checklist, a conscience-affirming and convenient system for pleasing God and making himself feel good about religious achievement. Jesus' response will show that the godly life is not one of man-centered rule keeping and religious performance. Ceremonies, creeds, doctrines, and lists of rules aren't at the heart of a holy life. Instead, it is a heart devotion to God that the Lord desires. The scribe in our story was misguided. He had an obsession with externals, all while being blind to the need for an internal relationship with God. Jesus was known for preaching against such outward-focused religion (Matthew 5:21-22 and 27-28). He also extolled the need for a heart devotion to the Lord (Matthew 6:21 and 24). The scribe in our passage had a problem with religion devoid of relationship. Jesus used the man's question to present the "even better way" of Christian living (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13).

Verse 29

In response to the scribe's inquiry, Jesus replied, "The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Mark 12:29). The Lord's response contained a direct quotation of a seminal passage from the Torah, a passage known as "the Shema" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). The title for the passage of Scripture is based on the Hebrew word translated "hear." The Mishnah encouraged faithful Jews to recite the text daily. The most devoted recited it everyday day in both the morning and evening.⁷

⁴ Robertson, 368.

⁵ Schnabel, 301.

⁶ Brooks, 197.

⁷ Schnabel, 302.

Verse 30

After reciting the opening declaration of the Shema, Jesus shared what He regarded to be the most important command, saying, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). The same command from our Lord is found in Matthew 22:37 and Luke 10:27. It is important to note that the “love” of which Jesus spoke isn’t just an emotionally-driven interest in God. Our Lord did not call the scribe to simply muster a keen fascination toward God. Loving God isn’t about merely having strong feelings about Him, nor is it about giving Him a place in an already cluttered list of life priorities.

Loving God involves placing one’s affections fully on the Lord. It is about bending the will toward Him. It is the act of making Christ first in all of thought and action (Matthew 6:33). When one loves the Lord, the Lord becomes the hub, the center, of his or her life. One has described such love:

God is to be the object of the devotion of my heart. The centre of my whole being must be directed towards him and his glory. He must come first in my ambitions and motives. I am to love him too with my soul – so that all my affections and emotions will be in tune with his will and set aflame with a desire to serve him. Then, I must give my thought life to him, seeking to keep my mind pure, and to have all my thinking disciplined and controlled by what he has revealed in Scripture. And all my strength and energy must be his.⁸

Such love is demonstrated through Jesus’ instruction for one to love God with “all” of one’s “heart...soul...mind...strength.” While some try to make each of Jesus’ words represent a different domain through which we love God, the meaning seems to be different. This is clear when we consider the discrepancies between the Lord’s command in different texts. The Hebrew of the Shema only mentioned “heart,” “soul,” and “strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Matthew’s gospel spoke of “heart,” “soul,” and “mind” (Matthew 22:37). Luke’s gospel listed “heart,” “soul,” “strength,” and “mind” (Luke 10:27).

Why is there a difference between these different passages? The various authors didn’t list different components of the human constitution in order to encourage believers to focus on loving the Lord with those different components in a strict and literal fashion. Instead, they simply meant to convey the idea that we are to love God with the totality of our being. One commentator has noted: “The piling up of the terms ‘heart,’ ‘soul,’ and ‘mind’ is just a way of saying, ‘with your whole being.’”⁹ Ryle has said Jesus meant we are to love the Lord “with all the powers of our inward man. We cannot

⁸ Ferguson, 201.

⁹ Brooks, 197.

love him too well...He is worthy of all we can give him. We are therefore to love him with all our heart.”¹⁰

Jesus gave His response for good reason. He knew the religionists of His day were guilty of legalism. They had missed the heart of the Law. They viewed it as a rule book for making oneself righteous. They overlooked the fact that love is to be at the center of one's worship. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this fatal misunderstanding in Luke's gospel, saying, “But woe to you Pharisees! You give a tenth of mint, rue, and every kind of herb, and you bypass justice and love for God” (Luke 11:42). In all of their attempts at pleasing God, Christians must make sure they don't fall into the trap of the Pharisees. Relationship cannot be sacrificed on the altar of religion, nor should legalism for God outweigh love for God. Love for God is to be at the heart of the Christian experience. It is for this reason that Paul called believers “those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

Verse 31

In verse 31, Jesus adds an addendum to the most important command of the Law. He says, “The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these” (Mark 12:31). While our Lord's first command contained a quotation of Deuteronomy 6:5, the second contained a quote of Leviticus 19:18. Interestingly, Jesus was not asked to give a second commandment. He was only asked to share His opinion on “the most important” (Mark 12:28). In going beyond the request of the scribe, Jesus positioned Himself in an elevated position above scribal debates. Without the scribe even realizing it, He showed Himself to be God, the one who can dispense special revelation from God.

In giving additional revelation, Jesus made love for one's neighbor another requirement for godly living. In Jesus' paradigm, to fulfill God's Law, one must love God and others. By sharing this truth, Jesus established what we could call “the Master's Law.” The law of love is the law by which Christians are to live. In following this “Master's Law,” one will naturally keep God's Moral Law and fulfill all that the spirit of the Mosaic Law required (Matthew 22:40). Jesus' two important commands – love God and others – are the main method for living the Christian life.

It is important to note that our Lord did not aim to reinvent the Old Testament. It was not His goal to perform an overhaul of an outdated Mosaic system. His aim was to undo the years of man-made tradition that blinded people to the essence of God's Law. He attempted to exegete God's Word more correctly, to give a proper interpretation of the Law (Matthew 5:17). He wanted people to see that a heart love for God and others is at the heart of real religion.

To follow the second command, Jesus said we are to love our “neighbor.” It is critical, if we want to be faithful to the Great Commandment, to deconstruct the word “neighbor” and strip it of all of its twenty-first century tapestries. We often think of the term as referring to the person who lives next door to us. In the first-century world, it

¹⁰ Ryle, 207.

had a different meaning. The original language of our text literally means “the next one.”¹¹ It could be seen as referring to one who is near. In calling people to love their neighbor, Jesus called people to love anyone and everyone they came in contact with. He highlighted this teaching through His famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37).

Notice the two small words at the end of the second commandment – “as yourself.” What is meant by the short qualifier? In a world dominated by popular self-help psychology, many well-meaning Christians try to use Jesus’ words as a license for an unhealthy self-focus. Indeed, as beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27 and Psalm 139:14), we should have a healthy regard for our own selves. However, we must be on guard against using Jesus’ words as a springboard for sin. Most of us have little problem showing adequate love to ourselves. Consider Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5:29. One has commented, “The phrase *as yourself* does not commend self-love but assumes that people love themselves: people have a basic self-interest.”¹²

Jesus didn’t encourage the scribe to exercise some sort of self-validating self-love. He assumed that the scribe, and all men and women for that matter, had a normal degree of self-care. Jesus’ words, instead, were intended to simply acknowledge the reality that we all naturally care for self. Furthermore, Jesus wanted the scribe, and His disciples as well, to know that the second command involves a love for others that parallels the love one naturally has for his or her own being.

The words “as yourself” also give a clue to how we can actually go about loving others in the way Christ desires. Our kindness toward our fellowmen isn’t based on fleeting feelings or unpredictable emotions. Instead, it involves an active and willful placing of our affections on the needs of others. Similar to the way in which we care for our own needs, we should look out for the needs of others. J.C. Ryle has explained the concept, saying such love involves dealing with another “in all respects as we would like him to deal with us.”¹³ This is what’s involved in fulfilling the second commandment. Jesus echoed this truth when He gave the vaunted “Golden Rule.” He said, “Therefore, whatever you want others to do for you, do also the same for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Paul undoubtedly drew upon Jesus’ teaching when he told the Philippians, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Mark’s original readers needed to hear the Lord’s commands. They were surrounded by neighbors who were intensely opposed to their faith. It was undoubtedly tough for many of them to show affectionate regard to those who were persecuting them. By reciting the Great Commandment, Mark reminded them that they had been called to love all. In His famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said, “You have heard

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 95.

¹² Schnabel, 303.

¹³ Ryle, 207.

that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

Verse 32

The scribe responded to Jesus’ teaching by saying, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him” (Mark 12:32). Mark is the only gospel writer to include details related to the man’s response.¹⁴ The title the man uses for Jesus is telling. He still regarded the Lord as “teacher,” a simple rabbi. He made the same mistake the disciples made earlier in Mark 4:38 and 9:5. He held Jesus in too low esteem. He didn’t have a full perspective of who Christ really was.

However, the fact that he used the term shows that he did have some degree of respect for Jesus. The man approached Jesus as a critic and a challenger back in verse 28. He didn’t initially use any formalities, titles, or signs of respect. After hearing Jesus quote from the Torah, the man changed his tune a little. He began to have a bit of respect for our Lord; thus, he used the word “teacher.”¹⁵

After affirming Jesus’ explanation, the man launched into a discourse concerning his perspective of the Law. It is slightly comedic, when one thinks about it, to see the propensity of human nature displayed through the man in our text. Though he seemed to have interest in Jesus’ perspective, he was actually more interested in expressing his own. Such self-interest is all too common in many religious debates today. It is often the sad hallmark of many relationships. All too often, humankind is more interested in talking than listening. May we remember James 1:19.

In the latter part of verse 32, he agreed with Jesus’s teaching from the Shema, quoting the opening line of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). He also tacked on a quote from the Decalogue (Exodus 20:3) to stress that there is no God apart from the Lord. Maybe the man had heard rumors of Jesus’ claims of divinity (Mark 2:10). Perhaps he attempted to put Jesus in his place by quoting one of the Ten Commandments.

Verse 33

In the first part of verse 33, the man continued his own diatribe about the Law by reciting the heart of the Shema – the part Jesus recited in verse 30. He agreed that love for the Lord is paramount in the the pursuit of religion. He added on to Jesus’ teaching by saying love “is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The word “burnt offerings and sacrifices” were often used to speak of the entire sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law.¹⁶ The man correctly noted, whether he truly believed it or not, that love is more important than legalistic devotion. His assertion was based on numerous Old Testament passages. The prophet Samuel once declared, “Does the Lord take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? Look: to

¹⁴ Robertson, 369.

¹⁵ Schnabel, 303.

¹⁶ Brooks, 199.

obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). Through the prophet Hosea, the Lord said, “For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Isaiah proclaimed similar truth (Isaiah 1:11-17).¹⁷

Verse 34

Observing the man’s response, Jesus offered an evaluation of the man’s spiritual status. The man pronounced a judgment on Jesus’ religious astuteness, so our Lord returned the favor. He said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). The man had some spiritual light, but he needed more. He regarded Jesus as an excellent teacher of the Law (Mark 12:32), but he needed to expand his horizons. He needed to see Jesus as the Messiah – the Son of God who came to live, die, and be raised as a substitute for sins (Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:33). Only through the repenting and believing in such truth would the man be able to experience the true life of God (Mark 1:15).

The scribe in our text reminds us of other characters in Scripture. Like Agrippa before Paul, he was impressed with the gospel, but he wasn’t willing to take the next step. He could have said with the king – “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28, KJV). Who knows the ultimate fate of the man? Maybe he eventually came to his senses and believed in Christ. Maybe he, like the rich, young ruler of Mark 10:17-22, walked away, unwilling to humble himself to the full commands of Christ.

Many suffer from the same dreaded condition of the man in our text. They are close to Christ, but not close enough. They know of Him, but they don’t truly know Him. Christian doctrine is on their tongue, but it isn’t in their soul. They have a head knowledge without a heart knowledge. Religious involvement, affections, interests, experiences, and activities mark their lives, but they’ve never been born again. They will die having heard a lot of sermons, and having appreciated a lot of religious activity, but they will die lost – cut off and separated from God forever. Without repentance and regeneration, all of our religious dabbling is in vain. May we search our own souls and make sure we are not guilty of being “not far from the kingdom of God.”

Verse 34 ends by observing that “no one dared to question him any longer.” Our Lord had fully rebutted the chief priests, the scribes, the elders, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees (Mark 11:27; 12:13; 12:18; and 12:28). He had no more challengers. The original language of the text uses a double negative, placing emphasis on the fact that Jesus completely confounded His adversaries.¹⁸ As the omniscient God, He displayed perfect wisdom in standing His ground. He showed Himself to be the incarnate Word of God (John 1:1). No one could stand against His wisdom or challenge His authority (Matthew 7:29).

¹⁷ Brooks, 199.

¹⁸ Robertson, 369.