

## **72 Mark 12:28-34**

### **The Great Commandment**

#### **Text**

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

#### **Introduction**

Mark begins his gospel with the voice of one calling in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord. Jesus follows and is promptly baptized. In that Baptism the heavens are torn open and God speaks from heaven saying, "You are my beloved Son." That kicks off Mark's first section as Jesus begins to minister in Galilee. It is a massive display of power and authority. The kingdom of God has indeed come with power, but there is very little understanding of what that kingdom is like. There is a short break for a series of parables on the kingdom of God. The focus shifts once again to his authority and power. The whole section is peppered with confrontations with the Pharisees and Scribes.

A new section begins when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ. This section is book-ended by the healing of two blind men. The first was a two stage healing where he did not see things fully just yet. Jesus teaches his disciples quite clearly and repeatedly about the things that are yet to come, but like the blind man, they do not yet see clearly. In a twist of irony, the section ends with blind Bartimaeus who sees most clearly and cries out for mercy from the Son of David. The final section begins when Jesus enters Jerusalem. There is a dramatic change in tone. It is all judgment. There are no healings, no cleanings, no miracles at all. The only exception is the cursing of the fig tree, which is loaded with destructive overtones. The confrontations have intensified. Every kind of leadership that Israel had at that time has come to oppose Jesus. The chief priests, Scribes, and elders in 11:27, collectively the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and Herodians in 12:13, the Sadducees in 12:18. Jesus will continue his attack, and the leaders will continue to try to kill him. The themes of destruction and judgment and desolation will continue. But there are two or three bright spots in this darkest section of Mark. Today's passage is one of them. However, as Watt's notes:

The larger hostile context of this pericope highlights other, less pleasant dynamics. Insofar as Jesus speaks for God, the leaders' hostility toward him means that they do not love God (cf. John 5:42-43; 8:42). Concluding with Jesus criticism of the scribes and the tragic situation of the widow, this section constitutes the final incitement on the "leafy tree" in that they have not loved their neighbor either. Watts 219

## **An Unlikely Ally**

*And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"*

This scribe, although likely a Pharisee, lacks the venom that the others brought. He seems genuine and amicable. He shows admiration for the answers Christ gave. That may be due, in part, to the fact that Jesus and the Pharisees agreed on the resurrection against the Sadducees. So it is possible that this scribe was tickled by the lesson that Jesus just handed to this rival party. As true as this may be, despite their differences on the resurrection, these warring parties were united against Jesus. So either way, this scribe shows that there is a different heart that beats in his chest.

Being impressed with how Jesus handled the question on the resurrection, this scribe decides to ask Jesus a puzzler of his own. Now before we go there, let me do a bit of audience participation. What is the third greatest commandment? Any guesses? It is easy to get the first two because Jesus gave them to us. Me asking you for the third greatest is like the Scribe asking Jesus for the first. But there were 613 laws in the Old Testament. How would you decide which is the greatest? Jesus pulled one from Leviticus, and one from Deuteronomy. These are not exactly high on our reading list are they? And yet in them are the first and second greatest commandments. What is third? Maybe it is found in Zephaniah. Maybe it is found in Numbers. I think because the story is familiar to us we pass over it too easily. I had the same problem in college. In class the teacher would work through some problem on the board, and I could follow well enough. It could see how he got there and it was all logical and sound. But doing it on my own was a different matter. I did not, in my classes, nor do most of us in our Bible reading, put ourselves into their shoes. I remember doing a book club at one point where we were reading through the classics. One of the participants commented about how they did not see anything terribly profound about any of the works. I expect that is because everyone else apes the greats. They simply copy them ad nauseum so that they no longer seem to be great artists or scientists, or theologians, or writers. Believe it or not, I can do calculus. I learned it in one year. But that is something entirely different than inventing it in the first place like Issac Newton did! So dear Christian, as you read scriptures, put yourself into them. Oh how we have lost the ability to read! When you read the scriptures well you will see Jesus more accurately and will therefore be more impressed by him. Jesus shows a great command of scripture by being able to answer as he does. Jesus has read and understood these 613 laws. He has meditated on them and has been able to assign them different weights. He is able to distill all of the commands into just these two.

## The Great Commandment

*29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

Jesus quotes from the shema in Deuteronomy 6. "Shema" is Hebrew for "hear." The Jews had the habit of naming books or sections after the first word that occurred in that book or section.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your

hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

First, the command is given to listen. Then follows the teaching that "the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Before we get to the greatest commandment, we are first commanded to listen and understand that the Lord is one. In our earlier verse memorization we read a lot in Isaiah (and other places) that insists that there is no other god besides our God. This passage sets forth both God's uniqueness as well as his number. He is completely different from the so-called gods of the other nations.

This is not a denial of the trinity. There is one God subsisting in three persons. The same book that sets forth God's oneness in the most rigorous manner is the same book where we read, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and the last; besides me there is no God." There are two persons speaking here, the Lord, the King of Israel *and* his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts. Both speak and both claim to be the first and the last. Both claim that there is no other god. Amazing.

God's absolute unity and uniqueness serves as the basis for this command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. It is only right that we value the most that which is the most valuable. We should be the most stunned by that which is the most beautiful. We should approach with fear and trembling that which holds all power. We should be humble before that which possess all knowledge. We should be most thankful to he who has most saved us - not from colds or shipwrecks, but who has saved us from our own depravity and its ensuing punishment. We should hold in highest reverence that which is most holy.

No one else is our Creator. No one else is our King. No one else is our Redeemer. No one else is our Sustainer. Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one! There is no other. He is everything! Consequently you literally owe him everything. He is the highest good, he is the most powerful, he is the most lovely, and he is without limitation. He exists everywhere and there is no place we can go to hide from him. Therefore love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength!

Notice first that we are to love him with every part of our being. That is clearly the point. We cannot compartmentalize God. It is not as though he is your God in church but then you can do what you want at work or in your home. It is also ludicrous to suggest that he is God of your heart, but not of your body or your mind. Oh sure, my heart belongs to God, but the rest of me belongs to me. No one else created you. You did not create you. Hear oh Christian, the Lord your God is the one and only creator. God alone is your Creator and every part of you that exists is a part of you that he made. He therefore owns every part.

Notice also the repetition of all's. Four times he says, "all . . . all . . . all . . . all." It is not as though God created it all and then made us 70/30 partners. It does not work that way. Inherent rights cannot be given away. You cannot give God all your members but only allow 10% access. Hendricks notes, "The point is that God's wholehearted love must not be answered in a halfhearted manner" (Hendricks 493). Spurgeon comments:

England—the great fault of our time is the fault of indifference—people do not care whether the thing is right or not. What is it to them? They never take the trouble to search between the different professors of religion to see where the Truth lies. They do not think to pay their reverence to God with all their hearts. Oh, no, they forget what God demands and so rob Him of His due. To you, to you, great masses of the population, this Law does

Speak with iron tongue—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

What does that mean? It does not mean that God is first in a line of things. God first, family second, work third. When you do that then God does not have your whole heart. He may have the lion's share, but work also has a certain part of heart. God is not first in a line of things, God is first in everything. This is where the second greatest commandment comes in.

## The Second

The scribe asked for the greatest commandment, but Jesus gave two. Why? Because they are inseparable. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." 1 John 4:20).

You cannot love God with all your heart if you are not loving your fellow man. Edwards rightly notes that

Jesus answer avoids the danger of mysticism, which results in a detached and disembodied love of God; as well as the danger of humanism, which acts toward humanity without reference to God and without the understanding that human beings are inviolable creatures of God. (Edwards, 372)

You cannot love man rightly if you do not love God. You may regularly attend church and do all the Bible studies there are to do, but if you do not care for the widows and orphans, if you do not provide for your family, you are not loving God with all of your being.

## Final Affirmations

*32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

The scribe basically repeats in agreement everything Jesus just said with one addition: which "Is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." That too fits well with Jesus just said. Jesus, in turn, affirms this man. He has answered wisely and has demonstrated that God has done much in his heart. So Jesus affirms, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Although this was a compliment, which transparently it was, William Lane remarks that

Jesus statement, "You are not far from the Kingdom" is deliberately ambiguous and was undoubtedly intended to provoke reflection. (Lane, 434)

So now ladies and gentlemen, with a high view of the great commandment having been set before us, the question is, "Where are you with respect to the kingdom?" Do you affirm, even with joy these truths? That is good, but so did this scribe who was not yet in the kingdom. What more was he lacking, and what more may you be lacking? Are you fooling yourself into thinking that you are saved just because you were raised in a religious home? Are you fooled into thinking you are saved just because you shook some preacher's hand and signed a card? Do you

think that you are saved because you are basically good? Do you think that you are saved just because you go to church and say your prayers? Do not be fooled. These are all good things, but it is Jesus alone who saves. It is Jesus alone to whom you must fly. It is upon Jesus alone that you must cast yourself and cry, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" As much preparatory work as God may have been doing in your heart through all these things, make sure that on judgement day you will not still be close to but not in the kingdom of God.