

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/3/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, November 3rd

Mark 12:28-34

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Reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God

This week's Gospel lection finds Jesus in the temple debating with a scribe over the most important commandment. This debate is the finale in several previous debates with the religious establishment (11:27-12:27) that seek to challenge Jesus' authority and entrap Him. Unlike the prior protagonists, this scribe seems to have a favorable disposition to Jesus and reflects a minority supporting view to Jesus' message amongst the establishment. What Jesus reveals in his response is the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Sacrificial love of God and neighbor is emphasized over the law and the temple sacrificial system. To respond to the scribe's question, Jesus turned to the Scriptures for His response. It was the same thing during the Reformation: human misunderstandings, corruption, ritualism, and legalism were corrected by turning back to the Scriptures. The lectionary text reminds us to continue to do the same in our time and place.

Mark 12:28-34 Commentary

After the healing of blind Bartimaeus, the Gospel continues with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (11:1-11). During this last week of Jesus' life, the Gospel recounts several events in Jerusalem that bring into even more focus the conflict between Jesus and the established religion:

- Jesus cleansing the temple intercalated between cursing a fig tree (11:12-26) – a clear statement of the state of temple religion
- The authority of Jesus is challenged by the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (11:27-33)
- The parable of the tenants aimed at the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (12:1-12)
- Paying taxes to Caesar - an attempt trap Jesus by some Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17)
- Sadducees attempt to argue with Jesus against the resurrection (12:18-27)

It is against this backdrop and still within the temple complex that this week's pericope of Jesus engaging with a scribe occurs.

²⁸ 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?"

Matthew (22:34-40) and Luke (10:25-28) depict this scribe as another adversary come to test Jesus. Mark appears to paint this scribe in a more favorable light. In the previous verses Jesus convincingly argued against the Sadducees' position on the resurrection. The scribe would have been pleased that Jesus had stumped his

opponent. Scribes studied the minutia of the law to develop comprehensive rules and regulations to ensure that each of the 613 commandments of the Torah were obeyed faithfully. This scribe, apparently impressed by Jesus' previous response, approaches Jesus, and asks Him which commandment is the most important of all and thus the one that all the other laws must depend upon. This was a popular topic of scribal debate about the law and thus an honest rather than prejudiced question.

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."

While the scribe asked for the most important commandment, Jesus replies with two. First, He cites from the Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This text is from the opening of the "*Shema*" which is Hebrew for "*to hear*" after the opening words. The *Shema* is the centerpiece of morning and evening prayer services for the Jews. It captures the essence of Judaism. This is one of the Scriptures that devout Jews wear on their persons and in the door posts of their houses as constant reminders. Jesus here is appealing to the central tenet of Judaism as the foundation. Second, Jesus cites from Leviticus 19:18: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus would of course transform the definition of neighbor during His ministry from "*sons of your own people*" to something much broader in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

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."

The scribe here reveals he has no hostile intent towards Jesus. He affirms what Jesus states only he replaces soul and mind with "*understanding*" in his interpretation. The scribe also supplements his response with how at the heart of true faith lay in the positive loving attitude to God and others rather than in a series of "do nots" or negative commands. This scribe essentially undermines the entire temple system – the place where they are both standing.

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.

Jesus in turn acknowledges how the scribe's response with an unprecedented positive response. This scribe's understanding brought him very close to the Kingdom. Yet close is not enough! After this no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions. This essentially declares Jesus as the victor in the series of debates that began at 11:27.

Reflection and Application

Jesus summarizes the whole of the written Torah into two commandments: one God-ward command which essentially summarizes the first four of the Ten Commandments and one human-ward command which essentially summarizes the last six of the Ten Commandments. One summarizes the first tablet, the other the second tablet. While the scribes argued over "heavier" and "lighter" commandments within the Torah, Jesus presents love being greater than ritual obedience. The balance between loving God and loving neighbor is fundamental. Loving God is not possible without loving neighbor and loving neighbor is not possible without loving God. Loving God is not possible through legalism which excludes neighbors. Loving neighbor through social justice grounded in humanism is not possible without first loving God.

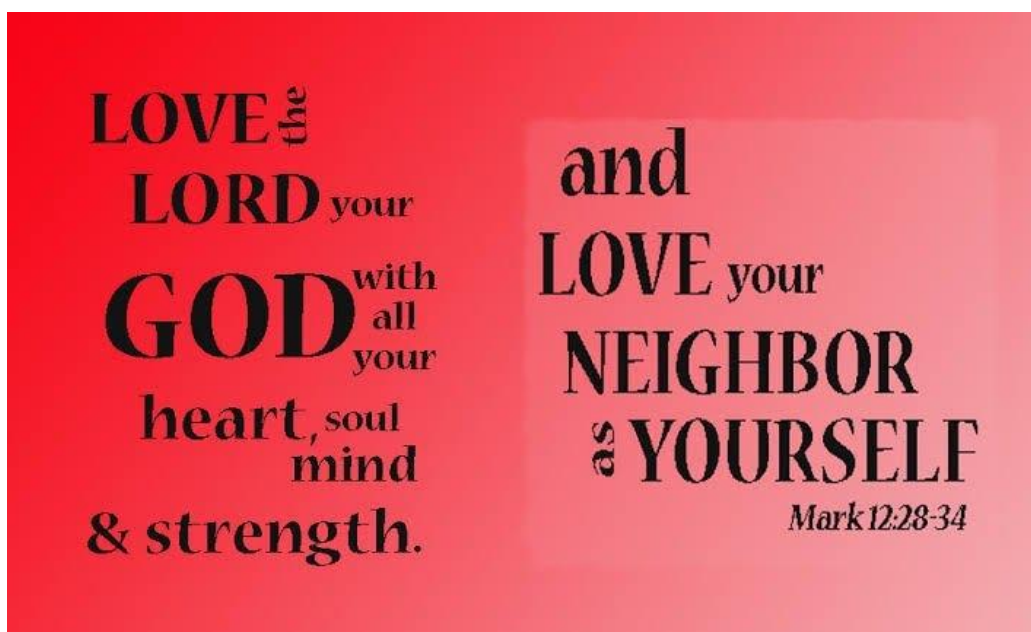
In case it is so obvious it is missed; Jesus did not come up with any new commandments here. He turned to the Scriptures. He cited from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus' teaching and the scribe's response are of course in keeping with prophetic tradition and the importance of a contrite heart (Psalm 51:16-17), steadfast love of God (Hosea 6:6), and to do justice and love kindness (Micah 6:8). The New Testament epistles continue to emphasize love and deemphasize temple worship.

Jesus' response to the galloping human legalism of the oral Torah was to go to His Father's Word – the Scriptures. In many ways this is a precursor to what would happen some 1500 years later in the Protestant Reformation – human-inspired legalism and corruption across the centuries in the institutional church was addressed by going back to the Scriptures. Some 500 years later in the present, the church is Reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God. This means we do not have to be stuck in 1517, 1646, 1983, or any other time or place. The Gospel is now. Discipleship occurs in the present. At the same time, we are not free to reform the church based on the whims of human understanding and politics. History suggests this does not work very well.

In our time, the definition of neighbor comes under renewed scrutiny in the current Anthropocene Age where human activity is argued to have the greatest impact on climate and the environment than any natural process. Today we now must consider every other soul on the Earth our neighbor since our Earth practices can help or harm people on the other side of the world. It is often the poor who are most impacted by environmental degradation underscoring the link between economic justice and environmental justice. In the Anthropocene Age, the biblical mandate of loving your neighbor cannot be separated from the biblical mandate of caring for creation.

This encounter between Jesus and the scribe presents a tantalizing picture of what could have been if Israel had responded to Jesus. What if more of the religious establishment had been as open-minded as this scribe? What if they had opened their eyes to the corruption around them? What of today? Alas, the scribe is a prefigure of the minority of the support for Jesus and His followers.

The scribe, despite drawing praise from Jesus for his response (in contrast to the rich young man 10:17-22), was still only "not far" from the Kingdom! Close, but no cigar! What else did the scribe lack? It is no surprise to those living on this side of the cross that the best of human efforts and understanding can at the very best bring us "not far" from the Kingdom. One thing is still lacking. God's grace is the key, offered through faith alone in Christ alone.



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