

The Most Important Commandment
Mark 12:28-34
July 28, 2024

One of the teachers of the law approached Jesus and asked him a question. It was simply, "Of all the commands, which is the most important?" The question is simple enough, but the answer not so much. There were over 600 commandments in what we call the Old Testament. Which one was the greatest? What was Jesus' answer? Jesus said: "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) Jesus' response to the question was to take two great commandments and put them together. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one" is Deuteronomy 6:4 and it begins what is called the Shema. It is the core belief for the Jews. It was the one verse which began every service in the synagogue in Jesus' day and still does. The full Shema begins with this and includes other verses from Deuteronomy and from Numbers. These verses were copied and placed in phylacteries, which are little leather boxes worn by Jewish men during their morning prayers on the left forearm and the forehead. (see Matthew 23:5) They are also found in a little box called a Mezuzah which is affixed to the door of every Jewish house and the door to every room within it. They serve to remind the Jews of the presence of God. When Jesus said that the Shema was the first commandment, every Jew would have agreed with him.

Jesus goes on to say that the greatest commandment has a second part. The second being that, "You are to love your neighbor as yourself." This quotation is from Leviticus 19:18. What Jesus did here was new. He freed the original verse from its shackles. The original verse reads: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." As you can see, this verse addressed only Jews, but Jesus removed the limitations. "He took an old law and filled it with new meaning." (1) For Jesus it was important to love your neighbor Jew or Gentile alike.

No rabbi before Jesus had ever put these two verses together. Following Jesus required loving both God and your neighbor. Dr. Eduard Schweizer says: "Love for God is something concrete and can be experienced only as one exercises love for his neighbor." (2) This is so true. To love God and our neighbor involves action. Going to church, giving an offering, do good works, being kind and compassionate towards others and showing thanks with our words and actions. What did James the brother of our Lord Jesus say? "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16) Love is not only a noun my friends, but also a verb. Love is total and involves one's whole being.

The Shema says that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our culture uses the word heart in many different ways. As human beings, we can have all kinds of heart conditions – some requiring surgery, but not all. We can also have a brave heart, a broken heart, a heart ache, a “heart of gold,” a pure heart and a joyful heart. When we love someone with every fiber of our being we are said to love them; “with all our heart.” Jesus said we are to love God like that. The Bible tells us: “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) God makes it possible for us to love him and others including ourselves.

God loves you and me! We should never doubt that. He has a big heart and wide shoulders to cry on. He will help us through the rough times. He has a plan for our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 reads, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” He has words of wisdom and guidance along the way for those who will listen. We have a guide book to follow called the Bible. He wants only the best for each of us. He has happy feet and will dance for joy with us. He has provided for our every need including the sacrifice of his son on the cross of Calvary as the perfect offering to take away our sins that we may receive Christ’ righteousness and be reconciled to God. (see 2 Corinthians 5:21) His plan for each of us includes eternity with him. God truly loves each of us!

Perhaps you do not know and love God like you want to or wish you did. Maybe your search for the Lord is a work in progress and you have yet to find what you are looking for. You are just not quite sure about where you stand with God. If that is where you are at don’t despair! The battle is yours to win, because God is pulling for you! He wants only the best for you! God is at work in your heart providing opportunities for commitment to him and urging you to have faith. What should you do? Jeremiah 29:13 reads, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with your whole heart.” Spend time with God and his Word. Spend time thinking about him, talking with him, praying to him, asking for his help with your search. You are more than half way there. Seek to live close to God and with his peace and be thankful. “Loving God with all your heart, is a love for God that is saturated with thanksgiving.” (3)

“In the middle of President Lincoln’s Presidency, an elderly lady made an appointment to see him. As she entered his office, he inquired, ‘How can I be of service to you, Madam?’

The lady answered, ‘Mr. President, I know you are a very busy man, and I have not come to ask you for anything. I simply came to bring you this box of cookies.’ There was a long silence. Tears flowed from Lincoln’s eyes as he began: ‘Madam, I am greatly moved by what you have done. For since I have become President, people have come into this office one after another asking for favors and demanding things from me. You are the first person who has ever entered these premises asking no favor, but bringing a gift. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.’” (4)

Jesus says that we are to love God with all our soul. The soul is our inner being. The essence of who we are. Jesus is asking for a real commitment, not a half-hearted one but a commitment using our time, talents and treasures for God.

Mal Fletcher in his book, Youth: The Endangered Species which was written several years ago tells the story of a friend Rohan Dissanayake, a pastor in Sri Lanka. He and his wife were natives of New Zealand, but moved there to do youth ministry during a troubled time. The Tamil people, who were of Indian descent, were trying to establish a separate independent state within the country. The Sinhalese who were in the majority were opposed. Disagreement turned into fighting and bloodshed. Their ministry tried to help the kids deal with the violence in their communities. One night their van was attacked and Rohan was killed along with some of his young charges. When Mal Fletcher looked back, he remembered the joy and enthusiasm Rohan had. He died doing what God called him to do. (5) Rohan, one of the many Christian martyrs in Sri Lanka was wholly committed to doing the Lord's work. He loved the Lord God with all of his soul.

Jesus says that we are to love God with all our mind. Our mind "is our intellectual capacity for reasoning, reflecting, understanding, and desiring. The mind makes it possible to have different opinions" and make different choices. (6) Somewhere around thirty years ago before personal computers, tablets and lap tops, I took a college class in computers. It wasn't much fun and dealt with programing computers, etc. I remember one thing about the class which was the phrase "garbage in—garbage out." There are a lot of things that could be said about our minds, but I believe that God is most concerned about what we put into them. As Christians we are to make good choices. Paul sets the standard for us in Philippians 4:8, he writes "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praise worthy—think about such things." What we think about has a profound influence on who we are.

Jesus says we are to love God with all of our strength. This also requires a total commitment to the Lord. It is like lifting a bar with weights off the floor and above your head during a competition. You've got to put everything you've got into it. This kind of love, loving with all your strength, should affect how we worship him on Sunday and how we live for him on Monday through Saturday. Most of us are retired from a professional position, but not from life. And whatever we do as Paul says, "do it all for the glory of God." (1 Corinthians 10:31)

A pastor had a Thursday afternoon confirmation class. There should have been fifteen students, but there was only one, a thirteen-year-old girl. He thought about canceling the class, but she was there every week and participated in all the other church activities. Her mother was determined to get her involved in church and at the beginning of confirmation class told the pastor: "I did not have the benefit of a church when I was growing up. I am determined that things will go better for my daughter than they went for me.... Ten years later when the pastor returned to that church, a beautiful young woman came up and introduced herself to him. She was a new teacher, specializing in children with learning disabilities. She was also an officer in the church: a leader of the young adults' group. Then the pastor remembered: She was the lone little girl in the confirmation class that Thursday afternoon...

She was the fruit of her mother's determination that her daughter would receive a blessing from the church." (7)

"What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? The key word is all." (8) Jesus says that we are to love God with a "total commitment of our whole lives." (9) Loving God means loving with a passion and boldness which involves our whole self—every fiber of our being.

Jesus says: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31) Who is your neighbor? Anyone with whom we come in contact is our neighbor. And Jesus said that we are to love them as we love ourselves; in other words, to love them and treat them as we would want them to love and treat us. This begs the question, "Do I love my neighbors as much as I love myself?" For many the answer is "no." Jesus tells us it needs to be "yes." By the way, these two commands work together. You cannot love your neighbor until you love God and when you love God you will in turn love your neighbor. 1 John 4:7 and 8 reads: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself are inexplicably linked.

The teacher of the law who asked Jesus the question was probably in shock at the Lord's answer but was also in agreement saying to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself "is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:33)

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:34) Not far is still missing the Kingdom. Why had he missed it? Because he failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah who was standing right in front of him. When presented with the truth this man agreed with Jesus but it never got from the mind to the heart. There was no change of mind and heart, no repentance and about face—turning away from the world and to Jesus. To enter into the Kingdom of God is to have Jesus as Lord of your life. Jesus is here for each of us. Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock." Let him into your heart and life. He's longing to be your Savior and best friend. Alleluia! Amen.

(1) Mark William Barclay p. 295

(2) The Good News According to Mark Eduard Schweizer p. 251

(3) Sermoncentral "Just 'That Close' to Loving God Series" Jeff Strite February 7, 2010 p. 3

(4) Ibid. p. 3

(5) Dynamic Preaching Nov/Dec 1997 p. 60

(6) Sermoncentral "Just 'That Close' to Loving God series" Jeff Strite February 7, 2010 p. 3

(7) Dynamic Preaching Nov/Dec 1997 p. 60

(8) Sermoncentral "Just 'That Close' to Loving God series" Jeff Strite February 7, 2010 p.3

(9) Ibid. p. 3