

Many of the teachings of Jesus are centered around confrontations with the religious leaders of His time. The Pharisees and Sadducees were always trying to trick Jesus and get Him into trouble with the Roman authorities and the Jewish people. So in our story for this morning, they sent a bunch of lawyers to ask Him a series of questions. Now if you have ever have been through a deposition like I had to several times when working with the government, you know what Jesus was dealing with. Did you know that there are three reasons why research laboratories are switching from rats to lawyers: 1) there's no shortage of lawyers; 2) you don't get so attached to them; and 3) after all, there are some things you can't get a rat to do. Did you also know that it was so cold last winter that people even saw lawyers with their hands in their own pockets?

But as hard as they tried, the lawyers could never get the upper hand with Jesus; He was always one step ahead of them, He knew what they were thinking, and He knew exactly what to say. He could see through their schemes and always turned their attacks and questions into teaching opportunities; opportunities to show those listening how to truly worship and serve God; how to really live; and where to find true peace and happiness in life. This morning, let's look at the last time the religious authorities tried to trick Jesus as recorded in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 28 through 34. In the previous verses, Jesus has been questioned by several lawyers when another lawyer approaches and asks Him a critical question.

Read Mark 12:28-34

For days, the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees had been peppering Jesus with questions trying to trap Him. Now one of the scribes, a legal expert, impressed by our Lord's skillful handling of His critics' questions, came forward with an honest question and an open heart. He asked Jesus which of the commandments was the most important. What the scribe really meant was "which is the first in importance?" You see, the scribes had taken the Ten Commandments, the Law, and divided it into 613 rules – 248 do's and 365 don'ts. To them the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, sacrifices, and the style of their religious robes were extremely important. But now comes an honest, heartfelt question, and in some ways, one of life's most basic questions. The legal expert was really asking for an answer as to why we are here on earth. C.S. Lewis wrote that there are two important days in our lives: the day we are born and the day we discover why.

Passing over the worldly things that the religious leaders had focused on, Jesus began by quoting from the Shema, a Jewish statement of faith taken from Deuteronomy 6:4 – "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Jesus reaffirmed that the first commandment is to

love God. Jesus summed up our responsibility to God by stating: “Love Him with your entire heart, soul, mind, and strength.” Or as the *Message* paraphrases it: With all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.” God is to always have the supreme place in our lives; He is to be number one. No other love must ever be allowed to compete with our love for God.

The second commandment teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to love God more than ourselves, and our neighbors as ourselves. Let me repeat that – we are to love God more than ourselves, and our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, the life that really counts is concerned first with God, then with others. Material things and possessions are not even mentioned. God is important and people are important. With this answer Jesus provided the focus for faith which the religious leaders of His time and many of us today have lost.

Unlike the others who had been questioning Jesus, the legal expert agreed right away that to love God and one’s neighbors were far more important than any religious rituals or traditions. He realized that people could go through religious ceremonies and put on a public display of piety without the inward, personal relationship that is really needed; that it is always easy to let ritual and words take the place of real love and action. He acknowledged that God is more concerned with what is inside a person, because it is what’s on the inside – the kind of person we truly are – that will eventually surface in our words and actions. It really comes down to the desire of our heart; it is the intent of the heart that determines our moral character.

When Jesus heard this remarkable observation, He told the legal expert that he was not far from the kingdom of God, not far from a personal relationship with the Lord. Only when our faith is squarely focused on loving God and our neighbor do we ever approach the kingdom of God and become more like Christ. After this answer, the Bible tells us that no one dared to try and trap Jesus again with questions.

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish leaders had taken the Ten Commandments that God had given Moses on Mount Sinai and subdivided them into hundreds of rules and regulations. They had fallen under the false assumption that they could earn God’s favor and their salvation by following a checklist of dos and don’ts. Their focus had shifted from God to a set of manmade laws. Instead of a personal relationship with God as He had originally intended, it had become an obsession of following a set of guidelines, focusing on looking religious and not acting it.

Here Jesus used the scribe’s question as an opportunity to refocus the religious leaders and people back to God and to the real purpose for life. Did you notice that instead of creating hundreds of rules based on the Ten Commandments as the scribes had done; Jesus simply reduced the Ten Commandments to two? The first four Ten Commandments all apply to our relationship with God. Do you remember the first four: 1) you shall have no other gods before

me; 2) you shall not make for yourself an idol or bow down and worship them; 3) you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God; and 4) remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

The last six commandments apply to our relationship with others. These are: 5) honor your father and mother; 6) you shall not kill; 7) you shall not commit adultery; 8) you shall not steal; 9) you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor; and 10) you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or other possessions. Our duties to God come first; then comes our responsibility to our neighbors.

These two statements from Jesus are quite simple, yet complete. But what did Jesus mean when He said love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself? Let's examine each in a little more detail. First, the multiple use of words – all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength – emphasizes the thoroughness and enthusiasm that our love for God should entail. We are to love God with all that we are. We must give God our total love; a love that dominates our emotions, and a love that directs our thoughts and actions. God requires the number one spot in our lives; but is He? That's the question for each one of us this morning. Some of us still cling to power, positions, money, toys, and other material possessions. Which god is first in our lives? Someone once said that you can tell a lot about a person's relationship with God by examining their checkbook or their monthly credit card statement. Does God get your first fruits or does He get what's leftover after you have satisfied your personal desires?

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find it easier to follow the first commandment, to love God, than the second commandment to love my neighbor. Maybe Linus in the Charlie Brown comic strip was right when he said that he loved mankind, but it was the people that he could not stand. We all have that one person or maybe several in our lives who are just hard to like, much less love. I bet if you close your eyes right now and think for a moment, you can picture that person. You know the person who gets under your skin; who is always criticizing what you do or saying hurtful things or being rude to you. That person who makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck when they walk into a room. It can be a loved one, a relative, a neighbor, co-workers, the person sitting next to you right now, or a fellow church member or me! The Bible tells us to love our neighbors and also to love our enemies; and they just might be the same person.

Some people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered, and yet Jesus is telling us to love them anyway; not only those we like, but everybody we meet. Now if you study the Greek language that the Bible was written in, you will find that there are different words used for love in the Bible. There is a word for the love of your child, and there is the word for the love of a spouse. But here Jesus is referring to agape love that we have discussed before. Agape is the love that seeks the best for the other person no matter what they have done to us or said

about us. Now I realize that this may seem impossible, always seeking the best for others, but in reality, it is not impossible. However, this love comes to us only when Christ dwells within our hearts and is the focus of our life.

As you watch the news, you may ask yourself: “Why is there so much hatred and bitterness in our communities, nation, and world today?” Well, it might be because we have drifted away from the one true and only real source of all love and peace – Jesus Christ. As human beings it is impossible on our own to master the art of forgiveness, agape love, and the peace that passes all understanding. But through the power of the Holy Spirit, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, we can live the lives we were created to live. We are not meant to always be bitter and at each other’s throats. We were created in the image of God, and as the Bible tells us, God is love. The closer you walk with the Lord, the better you will be able to love and live at peace with those around you.

You know it’s easy to love lovely things and lovely people. That’s natural; but there is another kind of love that doesn’t look for value in what it loves, but creates value in what it loves. Take Rosemary’s rag doll as an example. When Rosemary was three, she was given a little rag doll, which quickly became her inseparable companion. She had other toys that cost a lot more, but none that she loved as much as her rag doll.

Soon the rag doll became more and more rags and less and less doll. It also became more and more dirty. If you tried to clean the rag doll, it became even more ragged. And if you didn’t try to clean it, it became even dirtier. The sensible thing would be to throw the doll away, but that was impossible for anyone who loved Rosemary. If you loved Rosemary, you loved her rag doll – it was part of the package.

In 1 John 4:20, we are told: “If anyone says I love God yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar.” “Love me, love my rag dolls,” says God, “including the one you see in the mirror each morning.” God calls us to love one another, even those who at times are unlovable.

The relationship between the greatest commandment, to love the Lord, and the second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself, is similar to the relationship between the cue ball and the eight ball in a game of billiards. The cue ball represents our relationship with God and the eight ball represents our relationship with others. If we are off center when we shoot the cue ball, we can forget about putting the eight ball into the corner pocket. This is why the love of God is the first and greatest commandment. Our relationship with God affects the way that we relate with others. Conversely, the way we relate to each other directly impacts our relationship with God. Jesus is basically saying that the only way in which a person can prove that they love God is by showing that they love others.

Love God; Love Neighbor. It's that simple, but the Bible indicates that they didn't get it back then, and some still don't get it today. We, like the Pharisees and scribes, have established countless rules and beliefs that hinder our personal relationship with Christ. We take the simple, but sacred teachings of the Master and try to improve on them by inserting our own opinions and thoughts. But when you get right down to it, it doesn't matter if you are Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, or whatever; Jesus clearly states here what it means to be a Christian, one of His followers. Outward ceremonies and observances are useless if the heart is not right with God. Love is the most important quality we should have – to God and to others – since God is love.

Don't you know that it must have thrilled Jesus that after all His teachings and patience with the religious leaders, people and even with His own disciples that somebody finally got what He was trying to tell them all along. The scribe got it; somebody finally got it; the question is – do we get it? It's that simple – love God, love others, don't worry about the small stuff. That's the answer to life. Just love the rag dolls in your life! Amen