

Follow Me

Week 11: Whom You Really Love? (Mark 12:38-42)

I. Today's Scripture reading is taken from Mark 12:28-34.

Mark 12:28-34 - "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?" 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."

A. Context: Please allow me to give an executive summary to help us understand the story better.

1. Where? From Mark 11 until Mark 13, the venue was in the temple in Jerusalem. Mark 11:15 says, "On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts." And later, it says, "He came out of the temple." (13:1)

2. When? These passages are in the final week of Jesus' life before the cross.

3. Who?

- a. Jesus, twelve apostles, and other disciples.
- b. The crowd, who were eager to see and listen to Jesus.
- c. The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (11:27).

Who were the Scribes? One of the scribes is a key character in our study today. They were legal students of the Old Testament Scriptures. Another translation for them is "teachers of the law."

- d. The Pharisees and Herodians (12:13).
- e. The Sadducees (12:18).

4. What Happened? (The events)

a. Jesus was inaugurated as a King.

"7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" 10 "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (11:7-10)

b. Jesus cleared the temple courts.

"15 He began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers.'" (11:15-17) He quoted two great OT prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah.

c. Jesus taught them parables (12:1-12)

5. The Responses. Jesus has challenged the religious leaders in the temple area, and now they have challenged him in return. They are trying to build a case against him.

- a. "The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill Him" (11:18).
- b. The chief priests, the scribes, and the elders questioned Jesus' authority (11:27-33).
- c. "The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders looked for a way to arrest Him" (12:12).

6. The Last Straw

And it is not going very well for the religious leaders. The Pharisees and Herodians failed in their attempt to pit him against Caesar, and the Sadducees failed to get him to say that the future resurrection was a silly doctrine. Jesus' wise words rebuffed each group. Jesus weighed in on their motives as they challenged Him. He knew their hypocrisy and ill thoughts because they wanted "to catch Jesus in His words" (12:13) and "to trap Him" (12:15).

B. After all the previous attempts failed, another person, a scribe, came onto the scene. "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that He answered them well." (12:28) Mark did not tell us who this scribe was, but he portrayed the man as an honest inquirer. This portrayal is very different from the one found in Matthew's account, which was slightly hostile to Jesus. "And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him (Jesus) a question to test Him" (Matt 22:35). Maybe he was part of the group. But as he listened to Jesus adeptly handle theological challengers, he concluded that He answered them well (12:28).

C. The Big Question

Like the Young Rich Ruler, this scribe asked Jesus a question that demanded strict obedience. He asked, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" We all love good questions for those ministering and engaging with people in evangelism and discipleship, parents and grandparents, teachers and educators, pastors, and missionaries. Have your students, children, grandchildren, people in your church, people you care for and serve, etc., asked you good yet tough questions? If they have, you understand what it means. You enjoy the moment of parenting, discipling, and helping someone closer to Jesus. Those great questions, how great they are, do not reveal the great mind or heart of the person who asks. Rather, it is about God and what He wants to convey or reveal to His people. He puts those questions in their hearts, yours and mine too.

1. Not all questions are good and should be answered. In the previous chapter, the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders asked Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things?" "Who gave you authority to do this?" (11:28) Jesus chose not to answer these questions. He knows the heart of those who ask.

2. Who is Jesus to you?

Think about it for a moment. This scribe asked a great question, but did he know that the person he directed his question to was God in the flesh? If he and those like him at the time knew that the man, they questioned about God is God Himself, they would have a different attitude. They would praise and honor Him. They would prostrate and fall on their knees and worship Jesus because He is a second person in the Trinity. As God, He is also a Creator God, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the One who put eternity in our soul; He forgives our sins, cares for us, performs miracles, heals the sick, raises the dead to life, He gives us eternal life, etc. Who is Jesus to you?

a. Jesus: God of the Covenant

In the previous chapter, Jesus says, "God spoke to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.'" (12:26-27). When we studied OT, God introduced Himself as the God of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Here, Jesus told His audience, "Just as I was the rescuer and protector of the ancestors, so that I will be your rescuer and protector here and now." God made a covenant with those men and women in the Old Testament. He gave them promises. He looked after them year after year and will do the same for Moses.

(1) Here, Jesus presents Himself as the "LORD" of the Covenant. This statement really says in plain words: listen and obey Jesus Christ because He is the LORD. The scribe obviously did not grasp it.

(2) Our God has made an unbreakable commitment to his children – unbreakable by anything in life and unbreakable by death. God was faithful to them all the way through. He does not drop us at the toughest times, even in persecution, health concerns, mental health, rejection, etc. He will take us through, and one day will come our resurrection to new life in His timing.

D. 613

The question the scribe asked was not a new one. Many followers of Judaism had been asking the same question for years. But, really, how many commandments are there in the OT? They concluded there were 613 commandments in the Old Testament: 248 are positives ("Do this" – good things to do) and 365 negatives ("Do not do this" – things to avoid).

Can you imagine how difficult it is to live up to all the 613 commandments? I try to understand the mind of this scribe. Naturally, with so many commands, they may have wondered if they could condense them into brief statements that summarized many laws into one. You know, like The Super Commandment or something. Like in the superhero characters in fiction books or movies, one superhero can do everything.

And they wondered whether one commandment was the most important of all. This scribe wanted to know. He had been wondering. And now, with the wise teacher calling Jesus before him, he thought he might find the answer.

1. Jesus' Response #1: Shema (Mark 12:29)

Please pay attention to how Jesus answered the scribe's question. Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'" (12:29)

To answer this question, Jesus quotes what is known in Hebrew as the "Shema" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Shema provides a commentary on the first half of the Ten Commandments, which sets forth the perspective Israel is to have toward God. The Shema is considered the most essential declaration of the Jewish faith. The fact that Jesus quoted the Shema as the greatest of all the commandments makes it a cornerstone for New Testament believers as well. He uses this prayer, this statement of faith, to sum up what it means to obey the law. We are in a covenantal relationship with one another and God himself; see the word "our God." Finally, the Shema ends with the language, "The Lord is one." This reflects not only that God is one monotheistic God. It affirms the unity of God. Because our God is the only God, we are not in a position, as some religions claim, where we can pick our favorite god and worship that One. No, there is one God with almighty power in this universe, only one who holds sway, who is sovereign, who has created us, and to whom we, the people from every tribe, nation, and tongue, must answer.

a. This statement also reflects the language of the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other Gods before Me." (Exodus 20:3)

b. Or, we can read in Isaiah 45:21b-24 "21b For there is no other God but Me, a righteous God and Savior. There is none but Me. 22 Let all the world look to Me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. 23 I have sworn by My own name; I have spoken the truth, and I will never go back on My word: Every knee will bend to Me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to Me." 24 The people will declare, "The Lord is the source of all My righteousness and strength."

c. He has no rivals; He is unique and infinitely wonderful. Nothing in creation even comes close to His perfection. God is alone in our lives; He will not share His authority or place with any other. There is no room for idols of any kind (even modern ones like our careers, wealth, status, etc.) in the lives of God's people. God is God alone.

2. Jesus' Response #2 (Mark 12:30)

"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." (12:30)

This God has made the first move. The Lord is 'our God', 'your God' (vv.29-30). Back in the days of Israel's desert wanderings, when these words were first spoken, Israel was already God's own people because He had called them to Himself. He brought them into a relationship and declared his unbreakable commitment to them.

The commandments do not affect a New Testament believer's relationship with God—we are His children solely by faith. We are declared righteous in the sight of God solely by grace through faith, as was Abraham.

So, in this response, the emphasis is on the grace of God. That grace came first; that was how He became 'your God.' You see how much of this is about God and what He has done and how little is about us.

a. ἀγαπάω or agapáō

In His response, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

"Love" here doesn't just mean to have affections. It is from the Greek root word agapáō, which many are more familiar with through the noun agape. In the NT, usually the active love of God for His son and His people, and the active love His people are to have for God, each other, and even enemies.

In response to such a great and unique God, in response to His first move reaching out to us, this is what our love for Him must look like.

To agape-love someone is a choice. It is to choose to see them in a favorable light, to choose to delight in them, and to choose to act on their behalf faithfully. When we agape-love God, we see Him as honorable, true, and loving. We trust Him and respond to that trust with obedience.

It is a sacrificial love. It is an extreme love, wholehearted, single-minded, full-strength. It is a love that changes our decisions because we are determined that our lives will count for his glory. Our life choices, career choices, relationship, and marriage choices will be made deliberately for the love of God as we delight in him for all that he is. It is a love that takes us to places we would never otherwise go for God's glory. A love like this, so strong and uncompromising, cannot come from us. It can be in us only if God himself has put it here in the first place!

- b. ALL - "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." (12:30)

Some have called this commandment the "ALL-command" because of the four-fold "ALL." There is no room here for divided affections or allegiance. As Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters" (Matt 6:24). As we read earlier, because there is only ONE God who stands supremely powerful and valuable (Deut. 6:4), this demands, then, a supreme and total loyalty from you and me, a loyalty that starts with the heart.

Let us pause today and think about it—this is a commandment. God's greatest commandment is that we love him with everything we have and are. This shows that what God really wants from man is love. We can obey God without loving Him, but if we do love Him, we will obey Him.

- (1) Loving God with All Our Heart (kardia)

Jesus adds more nuance to this love. "Heart" is from the Greek root word kardia and means the center of One's life, whether physical, spiritual, or mental. The heart drives one's beliefs, emotions, thoughts, and intentions. From the heart, "flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23), and without one's will, desires, passions, affections, perceptions, and thoughts rightly aligned, the life of love is impossible. In Jeremiah 31:33, God says, "But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my instructions deep within them and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

- (2) Loving God with All Our Soul (psyche)

Along with our hearts, we are called to love God with all our souls. "Soul" is from the Greek root word psychē, which is like the heart but focuses on the vital force that keeps us alive. It is about the whole being as a living person, which includes One's "heart," but is so much more. So, we must love God with our passions, hunger, perceptions, and thoughts. But we are also to love him with how we talk, do with our hands, utilize our talents, and react to challenges — our entire being is to display that we love God.

- (3) Loving God with All Your Strength (ischyos)

"Strength" here is from the Greek root word ischyos and means force, power, and ability. This "strength," also translated into English as "might," is the effort and passion with which we love God. How we use our "strength" to love God differs slightly from others. Where the heart, soul, and mind direct how we feel and what we do, might is the force that determines the extent. This means that the call to love God is not only with our physical muscles but with everything we have available for honoring God.

- (4) Loving God with All Our Mind (dianoia)

"Mind" is not found in the original Old Testament quote (Deut. 6:5) but is certainly appropriate to add for an audience influenced by more logical Greek culture. It comes from the Greek root word dianoia and has a similar definition to heart but with a more mental bent.

I am really glad that Jesus included "mind" here. I know that I am not the only one, young people and young believers too. Some of them feel disconnected with the church. Without knowing, they heard that people in the church are not engaged with challenging issues that require a lot of intellectual thinking. Maybe they heard the term, "people are asked to check their minds/brains out at the door when they come to church or investigate Christian faith."

The intellectual part of our faith is an important component of having a deep love for God. Without this component of intellect, having a meaningful relationship with the Lord that goes beyond momentary emotions is difficult.

E. How to Begin Loving God with the Mind

Remember, knowing about God is a big step closer to knowing him. To help, I want to provide some ways to help you begin loving God with your mind.

1. Pray for God's wisdom and knowledge.

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you seek to love God with your mind as well as your heart and soul.

Doing this will reveal your need and spiritual hunger to love God with all that you are truly. If you ask Him and truly seek to love Him with the mind, He will answer.

2. Dedicate your mind to knowing Him.

After praying, this is the first step to loving God deeper and more profoundly than ever before. You can do this practically by reading books and online resources, listening to podcasts, and watching YouTube channels dedicated to the intellectual side of Christianity. I highly encourage Christians to read good books that aim to help us think critically.

3. Be careful with what you put in your mind.

When we know who God is, the truth about His character, nature, and commands will mold our thoughts and experiences. As Christians, we, therefore, must beware of what we allow to put in our minds. With electronic devices easily accessible, even for children, the danger is a click away. I cannot deny that many worldly thoughts compete with Biblical minds to control us. We must be careful to filter what we let into our minds. Paul also reminds us that we are not without help when it comes to the battle of the minds, as he says, "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." (2 Cor. 10:5)

4. Read the Word of God faithfully.

Back to the basics! To truly know God intellectually, we must read God's Word. The Bible reveals the truth about God's character and nature. The best way to start doing this is by reading Scripture, meditating on what it says about God and His character, listening to sermons, reading Christian books, and joining Bible study groups.

[D.] 3. Jesus' Response #3 (Mark 12:31)

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (verse 31)

Jesus quoted this commandment from Leviticus 19:18. The word "love" here is the same One used in the previous commandment for God, *agapáō*. So, Jesus intends us to love others the same way as we love God, not just ourselves. Jesus does not only love people who deserve love. God's love is not based on our worthiness or performance but upon His choice.

a. "Who is your neighbor?"

Seriously, "Who is your neighbor?" If we think that loving neighbors is like loving ourselves, it means, practically speaking, loving people who are just like us, maybe think like us, talk like us, believe things like we do, live in the same neighborhood as we do, eat the same food as we do, etc. We are wrong.

(1) In Luke 10, Jesus taught a parable of a Good Samaritan to a teacher of the law who wanted to justify himself by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" They are a priest, a Levite (a worshipper), and a Samaritan passed the same road where a Jewish traveler got beat down by criminals and left there to die. At the time, Samaritans and Jews hated each other. You know the story! Both priest and Levite ignored and left, but the Samaritan man came down to help the traveler and did more, even sacrificing his own resources. Jesus then asked the teacher of the law which One was proven to be a neighbor. He answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus then told him, "Go and do likewise."

(2) This type of love is what a husband should have for his wife, parents for their children, and Christians for each other. This type of love, however, can be hard to show, especially when we have issues with others. We might say, "I love everyone the same, but I don't like them the same." People will hurt us, do unfair things, betray us, disappoint us, abandon us when we need them the most, and say things that will hurt us. Do you want to hear the good news about all these hurts? We can let it go. We can give it to God. God has blessed us too much to be angry for one moment of life. We can love people just where they are. No one is perfect. No one is perfect, including yourself.

F. ALL the Law and the Prophets

These commandments summarize the Ten Commandments, where the first four commandments are between God and His people (Love God), and the last six are between His people (Love Others). Jesus then said these

two commandments were not only the greatest commandments but also "There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:31) Matthew wrote it differently, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:40)

1. Redefine Love

"We love because God first loved us." (1 John 4:9)

Both commandments that Jesus prescribed, "Love God and Love Others," are very hard to do. Because we are selfish creatures, that's our human nature. Parents never have to teach their children self-love. We love ourselves more than anything or anyone in the world. Since birth, we do not have to go to school to learn about being selfish. Do you know what are some common words that toddlers have? The answer is M.I.N.E. "What I touch is mine," "What I see is mine," "What you have is mine," etc. They do not have to be taught to be selfish. As they grow up and become part of their social life, we have to teach them how to S.H.A.R.E intentionally.

2. All this helps us understand Christianity is not a bunch of rules. Yes, all the Christian life is a response to the love of God. We cannot fulfill what God asks of us with our strength. Therefore, God has to come to rescue us. God redefines love. John writes, "We love because God first loved us." (1 John 4:9)

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God knows we will never be able to satisfy His perfection and obey ALL His commandments. Therefore, He provided us with a much better and more satisfying sacrifice: His own Son, Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

[D.] 4. The Response of the Scribe

The scribe's response to Jesus was right on the mark. He repeated what Jesus said, almost verbatim. Part of the shock of this story was the agreement of the Jerusalem scribe. Throughout Mark's Gospel, the scribes always evaluate Jesus' activities. They judged Jesus theologically, charging him with "blasphemy" because He forgave someone's sins (2:7); they evaluated Jesus' eating company (2:16); questioned his disciples' hand-washing practices (7:1,5), along with priests and elders, probed into the origins of Jesus' authority (11:27-28); along with Jerusalem priests, wanted to kill Jesus because the scribes were afraid of His popularity (11:18, 32; 14:1), and many more until near the end of the story, Mark's final reference, they "mocked" Jesus on the cross: "he saved others; he cannot save himself" (15:31). Ultimately, in Mark's Gospel, some of the scribes, along with other Jerusalem leaders, were responsible for his condemnation and death.

- a. But this one individual scribe decided to engage Jesus. Furthermore, the scribe took it further than Jesus by adding that this love was "more important than ... sacrifices." Can you imagine the reaction of the priests, other scribes, and religious leaders? Perhaps, in our day, it is like saying, "Guys, you just show your love to God and others and do not make any tithes, financial offerings or gifts to the church?"
- b. Do you think his peers received his response well? NO. Maybe he needs to start to find a new job in Jerusalem or elsewhere.
- c. It is easy to think that religious ceremony and devotion are more important than love for God and our neighbor, but this is not the case. A thousand empty burnt offerings do not mean more to God than a single act of love done in His name.
 - (1) David also mentioned this principle in Psalm 51:16-17: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise."
 - (2) In Hosea 6:6, God says, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."
- d. Jesus later condemned the practice of the teachers of the law. In their self-righteousness, they liked to appear to be religious and self-important, but they oppressed others, "They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely." (12:40)

[D.] 5. Jesus' Final Response

Mark 12:34 - "When Jesus saw that, he had answered wisely. He said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

The scribe immediately saw that such a requirement from Jesus was greater than all the requirements of the sacrificial system. He realized that God required change within people's hearts more than formal obedience to ceremonial laws. He began to see what many of the Jews failed to see and made definite progress towards the Kingdom of God.

a. The distance from the new Kingdom appears to be measured neither by miles nor ceremonial standards but by spiritual conditions. To some extent, the man was intellectually qualified for the Kingdom; certainly, he had grasped one of its fundamental principles. It would be interesting to compare this scribe and the ruler of Mark 10:17. In both cases, they wanted to convert admiration into discipleship. If wealth was the barrier in one case, pride of intellect may have been fatal in the other. The mental understanding that detects and approves spiritual truth may keep its possessor from entering the Kingdom of God in the tragedy of human life.

H. Reflection - I must point out the mistake of getting Jesus' commands backward. Some emphasize the "Love God" commandment first and completely ignore the "Love Others" commandment. This is what the priests, scribes, teachers of the law, and elders do. Some think the first commandment is loving people, but this can lead to tragic consequences too.

1. For instance, without a love for God, we'll lack the mental and emotional fortitude to confront the world with the gospel. Without a love for God, we will begin approving harmful things that harm people made in God's image. Without a love for God, we won't speak God's truth.
2. Jesus isn't telling us to approve of everything, confront nothing, and preach to no one. He isn't telling us to figure out self-love and then love others before finally loving God. Jesus is telling us we must love God before anyone, including ourselves. And He knows that love will produce the healthiest love for others.
3. Again, this is where our society often gets it wrong. Many are trying to love humanity without a love for God. We are made in God's image, so we should expect a level of care for others to arise from humanity. But it always runs uneven. It doesn't know how to love in helpful ways. And it often harms people because it doesn't know how to love in the light of God and His word.

I. Love God by Loving People

But let us be a church that loves God by loving people. With respect and fear of God in our hearts, let us reach out to our community.

In the book *Friendship at the Margins*, the authors, Pohl and Heuertz, talked about their experiences ministering in difficult places in the world among the poor people who were forgotten and rejected by society. They mentioned that the heart of their friendship with the people they ministered to lies in their experience and relationship with God. With their passion, they extended God's love to others.

You can serve people in your community, and there are many different ways to serve. The foster kids need homes. Sports teams need coaches. Young believers need mentors. Lonely people need living rooms. Schools need helpers. Offices need people willing to sacrifice. Churches need servant volunteers. Our ministry needs people who love international students and immigrants. The list goes on with the ministries to the inner-city children, the crisis pregnancy center, people in jail, etc. And people need the love of other people. Let's ask God for the wisdom to love as he would have us love.

J. The Real Problem?

A small cross, A Big cross. A small Jesus, A Big Jesus

What must we do?

1. Repent
2. Love God crazily with all you've got.
3. "Preach, Pray, and Plug away!" – Dr. Hap Struthers
4. Recharge your heart, soul, and mind by serving people.

K. Love has a name. Its name is JESUS! The Love of God