

# The Great Commandment

## Mark 12:28-34

There was a man who only had an eighth-grade education. But this man wanted to be a soul-winner. God had laid a brilliant attorney on his heart. Obeying the Lord, he went to talk to the lawyer about Jesus Christ. But no sooner had he begun when the attorney used his legal training and brilliant mind to turn the man inside out. The man finally apologized for coming and for taking the attorney's time. He left with tears in his eyes as he said to the lawyer, "I just want you to know that I came here because I love you."

Dejected, he went home to his wife and said, "I don't want to be bothered. I don't want to talk to anyone the rest of the day. I just want to go to my room and be left alone; I feel like such a failure. About an hour later, the lawyer came and knocked on the man's door. He told the man's wife he would like to see her husband. She said, "I'm sorry, but he is not seeing anyone today." "Oh," he said, "I think he will see me. just tell him who I am." So the husband allowed the attorney to come into his room. He said, "Why have you come? Have you come to make fun of me? Have you come to argue with me again?. You know I cannot argue with you." The lawyer said, "No, I haven't come to argue with you. I have come to ask you to tell me how to be saved." The man replied, "I don't understand. What changed your mind? Every time I tried to tell you about Jesus you came up with an argument that I couldn't answer." The lawyer said, "Yes, I did. But you came up with an argument that I couldn't answer." This soul-winner looked at him and said, "What was that?" The lawyer replied, "When you looked at me and told me you loved me, I couldn't argue with that."

Love can do amazing things. Do you know what the Bible says is the mark of a Christian? Is it our views on abortion or homosexuality? Is it our involvement in a Bible-believing church? Is it our doctrinal stance on salvation?

No. What arrests people, what causes us to stand out from the world, is not our convictions, as important as those may be, it is love. When we can live a life of love, the world sits up and takes notice.

In Mark chapter 12 we are following Jesus and His activities in the temple in Jerusalem during the week prior to His arrest and death. As Jesus moves closer to the cross, He finds Himself under attack by certain religious Jews who want to see Him dead. Three times already since Mark 11 different groups have come to question Jesus in an attempt to trap Him into saying something that would get Him in trouble with the authorities, or that would at least embarrass Him before the people.

In each case Jesus did not fall for their traps. He exposed their hypocrisy, and they were the ones who were publically embarrassed.

Next, in verse 28, a scribe came to question Jesus. This man was amazed by the answers Jesus gave he had a question on his mind that he wanted to ask the Lord.

He asked Jesus a very important question. His answer to that question gets right to the heart of what it means to be saved and what it means to worship. What Jesus had to say to this man has much to say to us today. The truths in these verses teach us how God expects us to live our lives, both vertically and horizontally. These verses teach us how we are to respond to God above and to our fellow humans all around us.

Follow along in your Bibles as I read Mark 12:28-34:

- 28 Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"
- 29 Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments 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, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' , Deuteronomy 6:5 This is the first commandment.
- 31 And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
- 32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He.
- 33 And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."
- 34 Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.

## I. THE QUESTION ASKED (v. 28)

The next man who comes with a question was a "scribe". Scribes were men who not only copied the scriptures, painstakingly writing out each letter of each word in those days before the printing press--but scribes also were considered to be experts in Old Testament Law. When the Bible speaks of "Lawyers", this is the profession it is referring to.

This man listened as Jesus answered the questions of the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. In this man's opinion, Jesus **"answered them well"**. The word **"well"** means "beautiful; complete". Jesus answered them all completely and had left them "no wiggle room".

This man now asks his own question. He wants to know "Which is the first commandment of all?" By **"first"** he means, which is of first importance? This was a common area of discussion between religious Jews.

Now when we think of the commandments in the Old Testament, we might think of the 10 Commandments. But as we have seen already, the Jewish scribes and rabbis went way beyond that. They had identified 613 specific commands in the Law. 248 of these were positive commands "Do this", while 365 were negative commands, "Don't do that". These commands were then subdivided into two groups: heavy and light. The problem was, the scribes could not agree on which commands were heavy, or more binding, and which were light, or less binding.

The scribes loved to debate the Law. They were constantly trying to figure out which command was the most important and they spent considerable time trying to come up with clever, one sentence summary of the Law.

Having heard Jesus answer the Sadducees so well, this man thinks that perhaps Jesus can settle this debate for them. He wants Jesus' opinion about which was the greatest of all the commandments.

People still try to play with the Word of God. They love to argue about the Bible. They love to devise riddles and puzzles based on the Bible. They try to figure out what they can and can't get away with according to the Bible. People are always looking for a loophole. In these verses, Jesus is going to tell us how to honor the whole Law.

## II. THE QUESTION ANSWERED (v. 29-31)

Jesus responds to this man's question by first quoting from Deuteronomy chapter 6. This portion of the Old Testament is called by the Jews, the "Shema", because "shema" is the Hebrew word for "hear". So the passage begins, "Hear! O Israel." The Shema is foundational in Jewish theology. It is still quoted by all religious Jews every morning and evening. The Shema was written on small strips of paper and placed in leather boxes called "Phylacteries".

These leather boxes were worn on the forearms and on the foreheads, Matt. 23:6. This was an effort to literally fulfill the command of Deut. 6:8, where the Lord said, **"You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."** Orthodox Jews around the world still use these phylacteries.

The Shema was also written down and placed in a small round box called a "Mezuzah" and placed on all the doors in the home. This served to remind the Jews of God in their going out and coming in. Most orthodox Jews still use the Mezuzah today. This is an effort to fulfill the command of Deut 6:9, where the Lord said, **"You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."**

Jesus began His answer by quoting the Shema in the traditional way saying, **"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."**

Let's take verses 30 and 31 and our Lord's powerful answer phrase by phrase.

**You shall love** – This is "agape" love, the same kind of love with which God loves us. It is love that "is an act of the will." It is unconditional, perfect, eternal and changeless. It is utterly unselfish. It is love that gives itself away with the expectation of nothing in return. This is the kind of love that caused Jesus to go to the cross to give Himself for us, Rom. 5:8. In other words, we are to love Him like He loves us! This love is possible, but only because He loved us first, 1 John 4:19.

**The Lord** – This is the word "kurios". It speaks of "one who owns another; a master." We cannot truly love the Lord until we see Him as Lord. We do not truly love Him until we have surrendered all to Him and acknowledged that He is our Master and we are His slaves. This is a call for a life of absolute submission and surrender, Rom. 12:1; Matt. 16:24.

**Your God** – This phrase speaks of being in a saving relationship with God Almighty. He is not "your God" until you have surrendered to Him and believed the Gospel for your salvation.

Is He your God today? It is not enough for Him to be your father's God or your mother's God. He must be your God. You cannot love Him until you know Him personally.

**With all your heart** – The word "heart" refers to the core of our physical beings. The very core of your being should throb with love for the Lord. When we love Him with all our heart, loving Him in all the other areas of our lives will be no problem, Pro. 4:23.

**With all your soul** – The word “soul” refers to “the seat of the emotions and the will”. Our love for Him should be an emotional love. That is, we should not be ashamed to express our love with the emotions. Shouting, crying, testifying, etc. are all emotional manifestations of our love for the Lord.

The will should also be involved. That is, loving the Lord is a decision we make within the will. After we have experienced His love, we are capable of loving Him in return. Love for the Lord is a decision we make! We either choose to love Him with all our souls, or we choose to hold back our love from Him!

**With all your mind** – The word “mind” refers to the “intellect.” As we understand Who God is, as He revealed in His Word, we respond to that truth by focusing the power of the intellect to worship Him and to love Him.

**With all your strength** – The word “strength” speaks of “our might, our power and our abilities.” Every ability, every gift, every talent, every strength is to be mobilized to love the Lord.

The idea presented here is that we are to love God with the entirety of our beings. The Lord has given us perfect, complete love. He loves us with all He has. We are to love Him the same way. We are to use every fiber and molecule of our being for His glory. This is what it means to love Him!

The Jews quoted the Shema twice a day. They thought they were expressing their love for the Lord. For most of them it was merely an empty ritual.

This is the first commandment – Loving the Lord is the primary commandment of the Law. If we can keep this commandment, we will have no problem with the rest!

It's interesting that though this man asked for the one greatest commandment, Jesus actually gave Him two. He said " **And the second, like it, is this.**" He did so because loving others is the practical outworking of loving God. The two commandments are complimentary and are therefore really one – you can't fulfill one without the other. In fact, after giving the second part, Jesus uses the singular word “commandment” to show that they are really impossible to separate. 1 John 4:21 says, “And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

**You shall love** – Here is that word “agape” again. I am to love others with the same kind of love with which God has loved me. I am to love them unconditionally, perfectly, eternally and with purity.

**Your neighbor** – Who is my “neighbor”? Jesus answered this question in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-37. My neighbor is not just the person who is my friend. He is not just the person who looks like me or who runs in my circles. According to Jesus, my neighbor is anyone who is in need.

**As yourself** – Can we just agree that everyone in this room loves themselves! When self is hungry we find it something to eat. When self is thirsty, we find it something to drink. When self gets sick, we get self some medical treatment. When self is lonely we seek companionship. In other words, we always seek to meet the needs that pertain to self--its in our nature to love self that way.

We are to love those around us with the same kind of love. This does not mean that we love them with a mere sentimental or emotional love. No, we are to love them with a love that actively seeks their good. We are to do more than talk about love, we are to demonstrate genuine love to those who live around us,

James 2:16; 1 John 3:17-18. We love people even when we don't feel like loving them. Even when they don't deserve it.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

This kind of love is seen in the Lord Jesus, Who willingly gave Himself for us, Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 8:9.

**There is no other commandment greater than these** – Jesus was the first man to put these two commandments together to give a summary of the Law. If we loved God like He commanded us to, we would never break the first four of the Ten Commandments. If we loved our neighbor as we should, we would never break the other six commandments.

When all the veneer is ripped away, all of our problems and our sins can be traced to a lack of genuine love for God and for our fellow man. The question we face is what are we going to do about it? Are we going to continue as we are, or are we going to come before the Lord and seek His help to love like we are commanded to love?

### **III. THE QUESTION APPLIED (v. 32-34)**

When this scribe hears the Lord's answer, his response is to say, "**Well!**" This word means "beautiful". He is saying, "Yes! That is a beautiful answer! There is one God and to love Him perfectly and to love others perfectly is far more important than all the religious rituals in the world."

This scribe had come to understand that the Law of God was more than a religious system to follow. He had come to understand that the Law existed to draw man to a faith relationship with God.

This man had come to understand a truth that eludes most people. He grasped the truth that God is not reached through empty worship and external rituals. God is a Spirit and He is only approached by a heart that is filled with love for Him.

That kind of love for God is only possible because God first reaches out to us, 1 John 4:19. When His love touches us and draws us to Him, we are able to return that love and we are able to live out that love in obedience to God and in service to others.

Here is what we need to understand. This scribe grasped the truth that external religion and its rituals will never be enough to save the soul. He understood that relationship is far more important than religion. He knew that he could keep all the Law and offer all the sacrifices and still not be right with God.

Most folks never understand that truth. All over the world people will go to church and go through their rituals and think they are in a saving relationship with God. In truth, they are lost and on their way to Hell!

Religious works will not save the soul, Eph. 2:8-9. A person can go through all the things we place so much emphasis in like baptism, church membership, communion, and still die lost. It is not enough to be religious or to do religious things. For a sinner to be saved, that sinner must have vital faith relationship with Almighty God.

Jesus hears the response of this scribe and he sees that this man is one who is beginning to understand that knowing God is not about ritual, it is about relationship.

Then, Jesus looks at him and says, “**You are not far from the kingdom of God.**” Jesus is saying, “You are close, but you are not quite there!” This man was standing at the door of salvation and was looking in on the things of God, but he had yet to take the step of faith that would guarantee his salvation.

We need to understand the implications of this statement. Jesus was speaking to a decent man. Jesus was speaking to a religious man. He was speaking to a man who kept the Law to the best of his ability. Jesus was speaking to a man who probably lived a cleaner life than any person in this room today. Here is what we need to know.

Ø It is possible for a person to have a religious upbringing and still be lost.

Ø It is possible to know the truth and still be lost.

Ø It is possible to have heard the Gospel preached all your life and still be resting on your own goodness and good works.

Ø It is possible to be Gospel hardened and to seal your own damnation while sitting on a church pew.

Ø It is possible to be within an inch of Heaven and still die and go to Hell.

Does this message find any of you in that condition? You have been around the things of God, but you have never been saved. You have done all the things people told you to do, but you have never really trusted Jesus for salvation. You need to deal with that today. It is dangerous to delay for even one more minute!

If you know that you have never truly trusted Jesus to save your soul, you need to come to Him by faith today. You need to repent of your sins, believe the Gospel and be born again. It would be a shame to die and go to Hell from the church pew.

That is exactly what will happen to some otherwise decent people! They are close, but they are lost. They have looked into the door of salvation for years, but they have never stepped inside. They are only inches from Heaven, but they are still headed to Hell. Don't let that happen to you!

How is your relationship with God? If it is all it should be, you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and you love others as you love yourself. Is that true about you? Or do you need to let God change that area of your life?