

Not Far, But Not In

Mark 12:28–34 (Part Two)

If I can't do everything, what is the one thing that I can do that has enough merit, enough gravitas, enough significance, that if I put all my eggs in this basket, it will be enough to overcome other imperfections or failures somewhere else? Of the 613 laws in the Torah, which one has the highest priority and the highest payoff that it will put me ahead in the plus column? So asks the Scribe who is the third in line of questioning Jesus in the temple. We come to the second part of where we began last week in this remarkable encounter of the scribe with Jesus. What we saw last week is that Jesus told him no the greatest commandment was to love God with all of the heart and affection, all the emotional and intellectual and physical focus and strength that you have. This love for God is to be complete, comprehensive, consuming, and without reservation; it is to be prioritized above all other relationships, all other duties, all other desires, all other aspects of life. I saw that last week, surely we all became aware that not one of us has been obedient to the greatest commandment to love God in this way for any single minute in our lives. Any humble person taking serious inventory of their own life would realize, based on this one greatest command, I'm in trouble. If that's the big one, and everything else is subordinate to that, I've sinned against God and I need rescue. But as we are about to see, Jesus didn't stop there. He gave the Scribe a bonus answer. The second commandment in priority has to do with love, too. Let's jump back in where we left off last time.

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.

PRAY

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This expert in theology was looking for one thing that he could focus on. Jesus told him the greatest commandment, and before the Scribe could respond, he continued on with the second greatest commandment. The first-place command to love God above all else, and the second-place command to love your neighbor as yourself — these form the two massive pillars on which the totality of God's law is built and supported. On these depend all the law and the prophets.

Though the Scribe didn't ask about the second commandment, Jesus filled it in and linked the two together as a way of underscoring that when one sees God, knows God, and loves God, he is transformed by the love of God, becoming a conduit of that love horizontally to his neighbor. Earlier in the week I suggested that you read two passages that are instructive for us as we consider this second greatest commandment: 1 Corinthians 13, the chapter on God's **agape** love, and Luke 10:25–37, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

If you really want to know if you are loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength, consider how your heart is being shaped by his love so that you look more and more like Christ — a chip off the block — in the way you love others.

Because the concept and definition of love is so warped and detached from any objective truth, let's first make sure we understand what Jesus means when he says love. One catalogue of what love looks like is found in 1 Corinthians 13, which we read for the Call to Worship. The passage is often read at weddings and applied to husbands and wives. That's a valid application of the passage. But if we stop there, there are at least a couple of things that we miss.

One is that the love described there is not just for husband and wife, but for all Christians — every believer. The other is that the love Paul is describing for human interaction is the outworking of God's unselfish, perfect, **agape** love. This love is a fruit of the Spirit — it is not naturally rooted in human beings. It is supernatural, flowing from a heart that's been supernaturally transformed by God's love.

The only way to achieve this level of love is to have a new heart given by God himself. As the apostle John says in 1 John 4:19 — We love because he first loved us. If we have not first experienced the love of God, we will never be able to express the love of God to others. To love as required in the 2nd Greatest Commandment demands a new heart that only comes from Jesus.

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Both of the first and second greatest commandments expose our inability to keep them on our own. As we see in our study of Romans, God's commandments turn the light of holiness on our sinful hearts, exposing them as falling short of the glory of God. We learn that we need a perfect Savior to fulfill his perfect commands in us and for us. We can never love like this in our own strength.

Consider just one aspect of God's perfect love Paul says is to mark us: **Love is patient and kind**. Does that describe the way you love the person you love the most? All the time? God, out of his love for us, is patient and kind. Psalm 103, which I want us to pray through in this Thanksgiving season, echoes the divine love of God, adding mercy, graciousness, and compassion to the list. That is God's love; we are to be both transformed by, and conduits of it. And I just asked you about the person you love the most. What about the checker at the store who is moving slower than you want, or the customer service representative on the phone, or the person on social media who has a different political opinion than you? In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes it clear that all of these people are our neighbors. We are to love them through the transforming power of God and treat them and speak to them as God himself would. I am to do to others what I want them to do to me, and not do to them what I do not want done to me.

Again I ask, does any aspect one Corinthians 13 mark your every engagement with others? That's just one passage on love, but that's not all the Bible says about love. In John 15, Jesus says that the greatest standard of love is that a man lay down his life for his friend.

I pray you are convinced that on your own you have no capacity to fulfill the obligation — the **moral obligation** — of either of these commands.

Now, what is crucial in this passage is that the Scribe who started this discussion is captivated by the theological accuracy of the Lord's teaching, but is blind to the reality that he has sinfully failed to keep them, and that his sin excludes him from God's kingdom. While he admires the King, he does not realize he's not in the Kingdom. Let's look at his response to Jesus' teaching on these two pillars of the law.

V 32 — ... 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

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with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Let's learn all we can about someone not far from God's Kingdom, but not in — because what good will it do us on the Great Day to only be close. Here is a portrait of a lost religious person.

1. He knows there is a God! He is not denying that is, but readily acknowledges him.
2. He has come to the *right* God. He knows that Jesus is the teacher of God's truth. 1st century Roman is a place of a plethora of false gods and idols. He is not going to them — he is inquiring of Jesus, the Son of God. He is in the right place.
3. He is favorably disposed toward God. Where the Pharisees and Sadducees have been hostile and on mission to trap Jesus, this man is sincere and wants to know what he says.
4. He intellectually agrees with God. “You are right, teacher!”
5. He is orthodox in his understanding of the one true God — “he is one.” He knows the Shemah from Deuteronomy 6, which Jesus is quoting, and he embraces it as the word of God. He correctly interprets the passage and realizes Jesus is spot-on.
6. He even has a somewhat well-formed view of justification. He says, “to love God 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.” He is aware that failure to love God, and to love others as oneself is sinful. It requires the sacrifice, the *death* of an animal, which points to guilt and sin. But the need for sacrifice could be avoided if we had no sin — that is, if we loved God as we ought, and if we loved each other as he requires. Since loving God with every aspect of our being, and loving neighbor as oneself fulfills the law, sacrifice would not be necessary if we did them. So loving God is better than making sacrifice.

In response to this, Jesus says you are not far from the kingdom of God. **Not far, but not in.**

Things will get you close, but not into the Kingdom of God:

Acknowledging that there is a God, coming to the right God out of all the false ones, being favorably disposed toward God — having a fondness for the Lord Jesus, intellectually embracing sound theology, holding orthodox doctrinal views, interpreting scripture accurately.

Faith is the operation God ordains that moves us into Christ, and this into his kingdom. Faith!

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This scholar is brilliant in orthodoxy, but bankrupt spiritually — and he doesn't know it. **He does not know his need**. He trusts his right thinking to make peace with God. He does not know that the wrath of God is not assuaged by acing the final exam in theology, but by this Jesus who stands before him, and who is days away from dying on the cross in the place of sinners in order to bear away the wrath of those who come to him in faith for forgiveness— who will, by his perfect keeping of God's Law, credit his righteousness to those who come to him in faith, overcoming their spiritual bankruptcy so that they may enjoy his eternal riches and life.

Loved ones, lay hold of this: Our fundamental problem is not intellectual, as though if we get our minds right and give mental ascent to God's truth we will have thought our way into peace with God. Our fundamental and insurmountable problem is that we are spiritually dead because of our sin. We are dead in trespasses and sins.¹ That places us solidly in the dominion of darkness² under the reign of death.³ We must be rescued from this! We don't need an instructor; we must have a Savior. Dead men cannot make themselves undead! We cannot correctly think our way into eternal life, we must come to Christ, who made peace with God through the blood of his cross, and who makes us alive through his victorious resurrection from the dead.

Jesus has just summed up all 613 commands of the law by giving two Commandments — neither of which we have any hope of keeping apart from him giving us new hearts. The new heart that has the capacity to love God fully and love my neighbor as myself comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He gives us the capacity to live as he commands. The kingdom is made of those who have come to Jesus.

There is a false hope that can come from simply acknowledging the same things that demons acknowledge: that Jesus is the Son of God. Demons believe this and tremble, as the book of James tells us. There is a false hope that can spring from intellectual exploration of the Scriptures, but never placing the heart and soul under their authority, allowing his word to reveal your need of a Savior and drive you to cry out to Jesus for mercy. There is a similar encounter between religious leaders and Jesus in **John 5:39**, where Jesus says, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

¹ Ephesians 2:1

² Colossians 1:13

³ Romans 5:17

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This Scribe, this theologian and expert in the law is favorably disposed to Jesus, knows who he is, and knows that he speaks truth. Those things are essential, but not ultimate. What is ultimate and necessary for life is that we turn from sin and trust in Jesus. This man walks out of the pages of scripture, and we know know more about him. We do not know if he has come to faith. The only thing that we know about him is that Jesus says he is not far, but not in. If he never trusted Christ, what a horrible thing to have this warning from Jesus ring in his ears for all eternity while he pays the just punishment of his sins: You were not far, but you did not enter in.

Lay hold of the Kingdom by faith! The Kingdom of God has come through Jesus. Turn to him in faith and believe in him. Oh, what eternal grief and torment will be for those who came near in knowledge and accurate theology, but never made an end of self-effort. How that grief will compound with every recollection that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever would believe on him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6:29)
And in John 6:40 — “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

Do not remain outside of Christ in unbelief. Outside of Christ is only death. Do not come near only. Enter in. Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. Acts 16:31a

PRAY