

The Most Important Commandment

Mark 12:28–30

After a two-week break, we return to this trio of temple tests from the Jewish religious leaders. The first from the Pharisees who endeavored to trip up Jesus with question on taxes. “Can we really be faithful to God and pay taxes to Caesar, who opposes God?” That was followed by the Sadducees, the Jewish intelligentsia, who contrived a question about marriage and the resurrection. In both cases Jesus turns their arguments upside-down and uses those opportunities to teach great truths about the beauty of God’s kingdom.

Today we get to the third test, but you will notice that it is distinctly different in tone. Where the first two were hostile and calculated attempts to trap Jesus in his words, this one from a Scribe appears to be honest and sincere. While Jesus will also use this opportunity to teach the greatest commandment, the outcome of this encounter is decidedly different than the previous two.

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

Let’s first consider the questioning scribe. Scribes were the temple theologians and teachers. There were 613 commandments in the Torah, and they were the experts in interpreting those laws. This is the first time in these back-to-back attacks on the Lord that he is approached by an individual rather than a conspiring group. This scribe has obviously been nearby observing the attacks and appears sincerely captivated by the Lord’s corrective and clear response.

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So he asks his own question in v 28 — Seeing Jesus answered the Sadducees well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the **most important of all?**”

The Most Important of All

Which commandment takes priority over all others? Which commandment is first in importance?

To be clear, any violation of the least commandment God gives is a capital offense. God is holy, and the slightest sin is a treasonous attack against him. It must be righteously judged and condemned.

But is offering a slightly blemished sheep as a sacrifice the same as murder? So this expert theologian Scribe wonders, “What must I absolutely do, and inversely, what must I absolutely avoid?”

Have you ever asked a similar question? “What is the worst sin I can commit?” Murder?

Perhaps murder on a mass scale? It stands to reason, does it not, that the greatest sin would be a violation of the greatest commandment. Therefore we do well to lay hold of the greatest commandment so that we obey it and thus avoid the worst sin. If the greatest commandment is to love God, then failing to love God with every aspect of being is the greatest sin.

We are currently working through Romans 2 in Sunday School. The Apostle makes the case that we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, earning sins’ wage of death. In spite of this sober warning, the nature of the human heart is to minimize our sin and maximize the sin of others. As we look at the totality of the command to love God (which we will take apart in a minute) we must confess that not one of us has kept this greatest commandment for 60 seconds at any point in our lives. If we could grasp our failure to love God — who is altogether worthy, altogether lovely, and grants us the very breath in our lungs — if we felt deeply the offense of our failure to keep the greatest commandment, we would be driven to repentance that would impact every aspect of our lives to our eternal benefit. So, at once the Great Commandment magnifies the goodness and worthiness of God — we love him first for who he is, not just for what he does — and it exposes how desperately we need a Savior from our sin and self-righteousness.

Every expression of God’s love and grace toward us, every revelation of who he is should stir up greater awareness of our obligation to love him. The Savior’s work of redemption at the cross demonstrates the Father’s love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died. As Isaac Watts, the hymn writer contemplated the love of God demonstrated in cross of Christ, he wrote:

Were the whole realm of nature mine / That were an offering far too small

Love so amazing so divine / Demands my soul my life my all

When we see him and know him, we are evermore compelled to consummate love he deserves.

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Note, now, that **the command to love God is a command**. We are morally and legally accountable to love him. A popular saying in our day is “Follow your heart.” But the human heart is evil and desperately wicked. I don’t think you should follow the selfish lusts of an evil heart. Rather, God commands us to reign in our hearts to love him rather than our sin. Oh! how we must stir our hearts and direct our hearts and call our hearts to love the God.

What is scope of the love we are to give him? It is a love that is to **come** from every aspect of who we are: heart, soul, mind, and strength... and it is to **consume** every aspect of who we are.

We are to love him with all our heart. When the Bible speaks of our heart, it speaks of what we **love, or what we want**. It speaks of the affections and passions that drive us to do what we do.

If I can rescue the term from the decadent culture, we are **lovers** by nature. We are not first thinkers or doers. This is actually a wonderful thing, but after the fall of Genesis 3 those desires and affections are disordered and broken. Rather than pursuing and loving life and blessing, which are found in God, our sinfulness drives us up to pursue what brings death and cursing. The great commandment calls us to life and rescues us from death. We are to govern our affections and direct them to God. To love God with the heart is to deliberately choose him over every other desire and passion.

We are to love him with all our soul. Our soul is the eternal aspect of who we are as a person. It is that part of us, which is not only stamped with the image of God, but communes with God as a person. God is not just some moral force or presence. God is a person. Who God is, **YHWH**, is the foundation of the original statement of the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The translation of **LORD** in both instances is the sacred name of God when he revealed himself to Moses. To love God with our soul, is to both know God, and to be known by him personally. We are not deists. We are not numbers. We are souls for whom Christ has died specifically, and we are specifically to know him and love him as his image bearers in sweet communion with him.

We are to love him with our minds and our strength. We are to use our intellect and understanding to think of worthy ways to love God in what we do. Our intellect and bodies are instruments to be used to love him. We are to study and know our God that we might think rightly

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about who he is. That will certainly involve the study of God's Word, which is his self-revelation. But it's more than that.

As my body ages, I find myself having to be more thoughtful about how to be productive and efficient in loving and obeying God — which, by the way, Jesus ties together: loving and obeying God are two sides of the same coin. Loving God with my mind may involve thinking and planning how to do with the scripture commands. It may involve something creative, as it did for me in years past in writing music. How can I capture the beauty or magnificence or holiness of God in the way notes and lyrics are put together? It may involve attention to exercise, or greater care in what I eat or put in the body, or a wise sleep schedule so that I can optimally function work to serve him well physically.

Love is to **come** from every aspect of who I am, and it is to **consume** every aspect of who I am. You notice the repeated refrain of all, all, all, all. Our devotion for God is to be complete, comprehensive, and without reservation. He is worthy of this! As God has loved and redeemed the whole man, the whole man is be consumed with loving God.

To fail to love God with all our being is to fail to know him and understand what he has done. He has nothing of us in the dominion of darkness. He has left nothing corrupt. He wastes nothing. He redeems everything. Then everything is his. I am not my own; I am bought with a price.

Question: If your love for God is less than all, is your knowledge of God adequate? In other words, fully knowing who God is means fully grasping that he has bought us outright. I am to love him outright. If I want my love for him to grow, my understanding of him must grow.

Consider the beauty of eternity with Christ. Because his love for his saints is boundless and eternal, so will be our capacity to grow in knowledge of God, and love for him for all eternity and without bounds. There will never be a time where there is not more to know of God, and more to love of God. This is the glorious hope of eternal life. Communion with God will never grow stale. Is this not what the apostle Paul is aiming at in Philippians 3 when he writes: "That I may know him in the fellowship of his suffering, becoming like him in his death, and obtaining to the resurrection of the dead.

As a practical application point, the Lord tells us, we are to "Seek first the Kingdom of God." I doubt there are any here who would say "I never seek the kingdom of God." It is our bent, however, to

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either lower the priority of God or fool ourselves into thinking that we can simultaneously seek God's kingdom first and our kingdom first. In other words, we can have a plurality of priorities. But plurality negates priority. All of our love and affection is to be God's. When all of me is given to God, when my devotion to him is complete, comprehensive, and unreserved, when I am seeking in first place the kingdom of God, everything else I need is added to me. That's the Lord's promise in Matthew 6. Loving God first is not severing human relationships or withdrawing from work in the world. Loving God first, without a plurality of priorities, provides everything else. Thus, I can fulfill what Jesus puts in second priority: my neighbor, which we will get to next week.

Why do we not love God with all of our being? Obviously because we are sinners. We love our sin, we love ourselves more than anything, especially God. And this points to the root of our deadly problem: what we love exposes the deadly disorientation to God and rebellion against him. He is the author of life; He is our Creator who designed us for himself. He gives us life, and only in him do we live and move and have our being. Yet our hearts turn away from the One whose love grants us our very existence. Let us see two culprits in our failure to keep the greatest commandment.

First, we need new hearts. We must have the spiritually-dead heart of stone taken out. It only leads us to death. We must be given a new heart through Christ's converting work. If God does not give us a new heart, we will continue to love what enslaves us in the reign of death. We must be born again. In light of that, let all who despise God understand that failure to love him only ends in a horrible death and cursing. Turn to Christ and plead for a heart that loves him. Look to Jesus and live!

Secondly, let those whose who have received a new heart be stirred to greater grief over sin.

Sin is choosing against the God, who loves us, who gave himself for us, and is the only Being who is worthy of love in himself. Hate your sin and love your God. There is not one of us who is worthy of love in and of ourselves but for the fact that we bear the image of the one who is worthy of love. We are by nature selfish people who serve our own passions. Let us consider the Lamb who loves us, and before the foundation of the world, gave himself up, being slain in order that we may know God, behold his beauty, and love him as he is worthy enough. In doing this we have life. Let us turn today from committing the worst of all sins which is failing to love our God.

PRAY