

THE SCROLLS

Meeting The Messiah | Mark 12:28-34

Life Lesson

True discipleship is not measured by how much we know, how often we attend, or how faithfully we perform religious duties, but by whom—and how deeply—we love. Jesus makes clear that the heart of the Christian life is wholehearted love for God that naturally overflows into sacrificial love for others. Rituals, routines, and right beliefs matter, but they are empty when they are not fueled by love.

Examine Scripture

28 One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which command is the most important of all?” **29** Jesus answered, “The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. **31** The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.” **32** Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him. **33** And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” **34** When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to question him any longer.

If You Don't Do Anything Else

If someone asked you what it means to be a follower of Christ, how would you answer? Would you talk about attending church or Bible studies? Would you describe how a Christian ought to behave or what they should believe? Would you describe the rules you have to follow?

In our text, Jesus is asked a similar question. It is framed slightly differently, but it conveys the same sentiment. Jesus's answer shows us how to live for His glory and our good. By fulfilling the greatest commandment, we experience our highest good and greatest joy. It is not about attendance, rules, beliefs, or behaviors (although these things are extremely important); Jesus shows that it is about love: love for God and love for others.

V. 28

Here we have the third wave of questioning, seemingly intended to trap and discredit Jesus. We have already read about the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. Now, a scribe (a third party of the Sanhedrin) comes to test Jesus. It comes on the heels of the Sadducees. Yet there is something different about this questioning. The scribe does not seem motivated by ill intent. The scribe is positive toward Jesus and genuinely praises Him. In fact, the scribe seems impressed with Jesus: “When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well” (v. 28). As an expert in the Law, the scribe was genuinely impressed with Jesus before and after his question.

Seeing the wisdom of Jesus, the scribe used this moment to ask a genuine question: “Which command is the most important of all?” (v. 28). This is a fitting question, as the Jews were required to obey many laws. In fact, the scribes had identified 613 laws. Why 613? In Hebrew, the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) has 613 letters in total, so one law for each letter. Of these 613 laws, there are 248 positive laws (do this) and 365 negative laws (don't do this). So the scribes asked Jesus, “Out of these 613 laws, which one is the most important?”

Again, there may have been a trap in this question, but it seems the scribe genuinely wanted to know. It seems that the scribe is seeking

- In the margin, write “Third Questioning.”
- Underline “saw that Jesus answered them well” in (v. 28). Write “respect and curiosity” above it.
- Underline “most important commandment of all” in (v. 28). Draw a line to “The most important is . . .” in (v. 29).
- Bracket all of (vs. 29-31). In the margin, write “Deut. 6:4-5” and “Shema.”
- Write “#1” beside (vs. 29-30) and “#2” beside (v. 31).
- Underline “more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices” in (v. 33)

Personal Notes

truth and is teachable. It was common for the scribes and Pharisees to debate the “lighter” (smaller) laws and the “weightier (greater) laws. Surely this was a common question debated in the synagogues. So, the scribe was questioning Jesus, not out of ill intent but out of genuine interest in how Jesus would respond. After His masterful answers to the Pharisees and Sadducees, the scribe must have been very curious.

Vs. 29-30

As with the other questions, Jesus masterfully answers, “The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength (vs. 29-30). Jesus is not giving a new commandment; He is simply repeating the Shema: “Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength (Deut. 6:4-5). There was no more quoted or known Scripture, as faithful Jews would repeat the Shema every morning and evening. It would be inscribed on the walls of their house and even stitched to the clothes. The Shema was central in the spiritual lives of the people of Israel. Therefore, the scribe should not have been shocked when Jesus said it is “the greatest and most important command” (Matt. 22:38). But, he probably did not suspect the twist Jesus gave the commandment.

Before we look at the twist, we would be remiss if we didn’t pause to consider the Shema and why it is the greatest commandment. The first part of the Shema is vital to Judaism and Christianity; it establishes the Lord as the one, true God. It begins with covenantal language by evoking the personal and covenant name of God: the Lord. In Hebrew, it is “YHWH.” It is the tetragrammaton; it contains only the consonants of the word because the name of God was too holy to be pronounced or written fully. Therefore, the word “adonai” was substituted for “Lord.” With the true pronunciation lost, tradition began to use the consonants of “YHWH” and added the vowels of “adonai,” producing the familiar “Yahweh.” Hence, the covenant name of God was used only in important and serious moments, such as the Shema. It served as a reminder that the Lord and His people have a unique relationship, sealed by the Lord’s own promises and covenant. It is a personal relationship with the God of the universe: “The Lord our God” (v. 29).

The Shema also affirms the oneness of God: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (v. 29). In a world of polytheism and pagan worship, this declaration set Israel apart from the other nations. There is only one God, and He is the Lord. It is striking that Jesus would bring such focus to this declaration, not just to emphasize the greatest commandment but to underscore that God is one. Throughout the Gospels, especially in Mark, Jesus claims the attributes, authority, and

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name of God. If the Lord is one and there are no other gods but Him, then Jesus must be claiming to be the Lord. Though subtle, this is one of the most powerful displays of Jesus' deity.

As the Shema establishes the Lord as the only sovereign, holy God, and affirms that there is no one like Him, He alone deserves and demands our love. Therefore, we are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (vs. 29-30). The fourfold command demonstrates how we are to love God with our entire being. We are to love the Lord with all our hearts, the seat of our emotions. We are to love the Lord with all our souls, the depths of our desires. We are to love the Lord with all our minds; this refers to our thinking and understanding. Lastly, we are to love the Lord with all our strength; this refers to our energy and psyche. In other words, every part of us belongs to the complete devotion and worship of Him. If the Lord gives Himself totally in love to His people, then He expects His people to give themselves totally to Him in love. He alone deserves our undivided love, and He alone can be our greatest joy.

V. 31

Now for the twist. Jesus adds, “The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these” (v. 31). Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18. Loving others is a natural outgrowth of loving God. As the love of God transforms our hearts and we grow in our love for Him, we begin to develop a compassionate love for others.

It is interesting to see how Jesus' reply to these two commandments perfectly models the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). The first half of the Decalogue is devoted to our relationship to God: loving the Lord our God. The second half of the Decalogue is devoted to our relationship to others: loving our neighbors as ourselves. Timothy Keller writes, “When Jesus says all the laws boil down to ‘love God and neighbor’, He is saying we have not fulfilled a law by simply avoiding what the law prohibits but we must also do and be what the law is really after – namely love.” So, do you truly love God if you don't demonstrate love for others?

In Luke's Gospel, when the scribe questions Jesus about eternal life and quotes these two commands, the scribe “wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 10:29). Jesus tells the parable of The Good Samaritan to show who is the neighbor. Most people interpret this parable as showing us to care for others as the Good Samaritan cared for the man left for dead on the side of the road. However, remember the scribe's question: “Who is my neighbor?” At the end of the parable, Jesus asks, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The scribe answers, “The one who showed mercy to him”

Personal Reflection

1. When you describe your faith to others, what do you tend to emphasize most? What might that reveal about what you believe truly defines following Christ?
2. Which aspect of loving God “with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” do you find most difficult to live out consistently? Why do you think that area is a struggle for you right now?
3. Who in your life seems difficult, uncomfortable, or undeserving of your love? How might God be calling you to love that person in a tangible way?
4. In what ways might you be tempted to substitute religious routines, service, or sacrifice for wholehearted love and obedience? How does this passage challenge that tendency?
5. Jesus told the scribe he was “not far from the kingdom of God.” What steps of faith, surrender, or repentance might God be calling you to take so that nearness becomes full participation in His kingdom?

Commentaries

Exalting Jesus in Mark by Daniel Akin

MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Mark 9-16 by John MacArthur

BECNT: Mark by Robert Stein

NIV Application Commentary: Mark by David Garland

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disciples of Jesus Christ.*

(Luke 10:36-37). The Samaritan is the neighbor. So, who is the neighbor the scribe is supposed to love as himself? He is to love the Samaritan as himself. A Jew is to love a Samaritan, the very person he hated and felt was sub-human. What a gut punch! So, Jesus is not telling us to love those who are easy to love, who are like us, who can love in return, or even give us something in return for our love. Jesus is telling us to love those who are difficult to love, who we don't want to love, those we feel we can't love. If we truly love God, then we will truly love others, as unconditionally as He loves us!

V. 32-33

The scribe responds, “You are right, teacher” (v. 32). There is no evidence of malice or confusion. In fact, the scribe confirms Jesus’ answer in full agreement. The scribe even adds to it, saying these two commandments are “far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). Let the weight of this response settle in your heart. In the midst of the Temple, the center of the busyness of religious routine, ritual, and legalism, the scribe, an expert in the law, says that loving God and others is better than sacrifice.

The scribe seems to understand more than many Christians do today. Christianity is far more than rituals or routines. In fact, the rituals and routines are the easy part; they do not require much effort. However, loving God with all that we are and loving others as He loves us requires hard work. Too often, we are tempted to retreat behind the easy because the difficult, what is commanded, requires too much. May we show the same understanding as this scribe to love God and others.

V. 34

This verse shows that this interaction is not like the others. Not only is the scribe respectful and responsive to Jesus, but Jesus responds positively to him: “When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’” (v. 34). This is not because the scribe was able to recite the Shema, but because he added that it was “far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33). The scribe was beginning to understand what it meant to truly worship God. It is not found in empty rituals and routines but in a true expression of love for God and for others. Because of this growing understanding, Jesus told the scribe that “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (v. 34).

So, if loving God and loving others is the first and foremost commandment and a true measurement of your faith in Christ, then how far are you from the kingdom of God? Nearness is not enough. You must be completely in the kingdom of God by placing your faith in Jesus, loving Him supremely, and loving others unconditionally. So, is loving God your greatest joy, and loving others your greatest good?