



Mark 12:28-34
The Great Commandment

Summary: God wants your heart, soul, mind, and strength because He offers a comprehensive gospel.

This morning we look at one of the most important passages of Scripture in the entire Bible – a summary in fact, of everything else the Bible says. If you’re going to know just one thing about the Christian faith, this might be the best place to start.

We’ve come to the final week of Jesus’ life. He’s in Jerusalem, teaching in the Temple each day and fielding questions. Both religious fundamentalists and spiritual liberals have tried to ensnare Him. But in each case Jesus answered their questions with wisdom and insight they could not have imagined. The people asking the questions were shut-up and the crowds were impressed.

Now someone else wants to give it a go by asking Jesus, what’s the most important religious law to obey? Note with me:

Mark 12:28 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?”

So, who are these guys? The scribes are a group you come across often in the gospels, sometimes referred to as lawyers, they’re religious scholars responsible for three things: studying and interpreting the law, deciding questions about the law, and passing on the law by instructing the youth and preparing them for adulthood.

Jesus is seen as a rabbi, He’s teaching and discipling people. So, the scribes want to know: is He teaching the *right* things? Which is why, one of the scribes asks Jesus this question – what’s the most important part of our religion?

There were, by some counts, 613 unique commands in the Old Testament governing everything from what to wear, what to eat, when and how to work, when, how and where to worship, and what to do if your animal killed someone.

So, what’s the most important thing to keep in mind out of all of that? Jesus, what do You think?

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.’ This is the first commandment.

Jesus quotes here from Deuteronomy (6:4-5) – which we'll be studying after Christmas in our next session of Turn Aside. The passage He quotes is known as the *Shema* and it's still a central part of Jewish prayers and worship services. A faithful, observant Jew will say the Shema twice every day, in the morning and evening.

And then Jesus goes on to list the runner-up:

31 And the second, like *it*, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

So, you might want to make note of that because Jesus just gave you a hack for understanding the Christian faith. Love God and love others because "There is no other commandment greater than these." If you have trouble with any other part of the faith. If you struggle to understand some aspect of theology or what this one thing in Revelation is all about and you get frustrated, fall back on this – Love God and love your neighbor because according to Jesus, "There is no other commandment greater than these."

Of course, in order to love God with all your mind, you'll have to do things like learn what He means by love, and that's guaranteed to stretch and grow you more than you expected because God's love doesn't just give things a wink and a nod and pretend everything's OK. To God, love includes taking a stand against evil and sin while making personal sacrifices for the sake of others.

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.

So, what I want to do this morning is look at why is this command so important? What does it mean? And if it's so important, how do we do it?

First, why, of all the other things that God has said is this one thing so important? I mean, if God said all the other stuff, isn't it important too? Why does Jesus zero in on this one thing?

This command gets at the root of everything else

The answer is: because it gets underneath everything else and attacks the root of our spiritual problem which is our relational problem with God.

You see, the biggest problem in your life is not that you're angry or mean. It's not that you put yourself first. It's not that you eat too much or drink too much or use drugs to help you get through or zone out. It's not that you cheat or steal or lie or say mean or false things

about other people. It's not even all your sexual fantasies and use of pornography or romance novels as a replacement for real, normal, healthy interaction with a spouse. All of those things are sin. They are wrong. God wants to talk to you about them – but they're not the really big thing.

None of those are the things that Jesus calls out and highlights – *let that sink in*.

Whatever is broken in your life, the thing that bothers you the most, the thing you are most aware of needing to change, is not *all by itself* the biggest issue in your life. The biggest issue is that you are not as close to God as you could be, you are not as close to God as He wants you to be.

And that might be because that other thing is in the way – so, dealing with it, confessing it, repenting or turning away from it may be part of the answer, but not because it's the problem all by itself, no, because dealing with it may help you draw nearer to God.

All the things we just mentioned and most of the other moral and ethical rules you can think of will help you with your life here and now – they foster emotional, spiritual, and physical health, they build strong relationships, families, and communities. But you can keep all kinds of commandments, you can live a very moral, a very righteous, a very spiritual life, and if you miss loving God, you have failed for all eternity.

This commandment to make God the ultimate priority in our lives reverses the first sin when Adam and Eve knowingly, willingly, without being threatened, pressured, or pushed, turned their backs on God and went with what they thought was the best thing to do. This is a commandment to turn back toward God with everything that I am – mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually – to reorient my life around Him.

I'll tell you what it reminds me of. Over the past 20-30 years or so, something fascinating has been happening within the world of elite performance – whether we're talking about Formula One drivers, world-class football and soccer teams, or special operations units in the military – they have all begun to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach in the push to optimize performance.

And so, it's no longer just the coaching staff telling people what to do in practice or training. Today's top-level athletes and operators also have access to a psychologist, a nutritionist, a physical therapist and trainer – they'll go over not only how the player performs on the field, but what's the impact of their diet, sleep, and thought patterns off the field? How do they manage reactions to stress or failure, and what's the impact of training and recovery cycles?

As we continue to push the limits of human performance and achievement, it's no longer enough to be fast, strong, or have endurance and grit, if you're going to compete and win at the elite level, you have to be all in. And that means looking in every corner of life for places you can draw even fractional increases in strength and performance from or to find things that are holding you back or reducing performance and eliminating or overcoming them.

Here's another way to think about it – your phone has four major components: hardware, think of that as physical strength, it's the part you can touch and it carries everything else around; operating system, think of that as soul – it's what's inside that everything else runs on; apps, think of them as your mind – the part that's giving you all the information and interaction you want; and connectivity or network access, think of that as your heart – the part that connects you to others.

If you lose or diminish functionality in one of those four areas, you're going to be frustrated with your phone. Think about it – does it matter if you have the newest phone, the best hardware, but you lose your network connection or it's slow? Or, if your battery starts to fail or you shatter the screen, what good is that app that you love? You see, the point is, you need the whole thing functioning and functioning well if you're going to be happy with it.

So too in our relationship with God – He wants our heart, soul, mind, and strength to be optimized and oriented to Him. You can't just focus on one or two areas and think you're alright any more than you can go to the gym a few times a week and only work on your upper body – friends don't let friends skip leg day.

So, let's take some time to focus on each of these four components of life and ask: **What Does This Mean?**

1. First, **love God with all your heart**. The Greek word there is *cardia*, you can hear the connection to the English word cardiologist – someone who works on your heart. The heart, in Scripture, is the center of your desires, feelings, affections, and impulses – what are you drawn to, what do you care about, what gets you fired up?

Jesus said that often, when we speak, what comes out of our mouths reveals what is in our hearts - **out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matt 7:34)**. And then He compared our hearts to a tree. If you just look at a tree you may or may not be able to tell what kind it is. But if you wait until it produces fruit you'll know with confidence. So, our hearts are the tree and things that come out of us, whether words or deeds, reveal the true nature of our heart – is it good or bad?

If you want to examine yourself, ask: what are the desires of your heart? What are the things or people you think about most? What are you want most? What makes you feel empty? What do you regret? Where is your heart pointed? And what do you do if it's off target? What do you do if it keeps pulling you toward things you know you shouldn't be messing with? How do you reprogram the strong impulses that push you into things you later regret?

2. Your **soul** is the life force within you – literally, it means breath, it's the part of you that will remain when your physical body dies. It's the word *psyche* from which we get the word psychology – but it has a much broader definition than simply mental health.

Jesus said

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Matthew 6:25 “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life (psyche), what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life (psyche) more than food and the body more than clothing?”

The fact that you have a soul makes you wonder every now and then, *what happens we die?* And it’s what makes us different from plants and animals. More than anything else, it’s the soul within us that reflects the fact that we are made in the image of God.

Unfortunately, it’s a part that most people pay little attention to, but it’s where most of our deepest pain, desire, and longing originates. That’s why in the previous example I said it’s like the operating system on your phone – you don’t think about it much, you’re typically focused on the parts you can touch, you open your favorite app, or you look at how many bars you have right now – but underneath all of that it’s the operating system, the soul of your phone that pulls all those other things together to make everything work. And if there’s a glitch or a bug in there it’s going to show up and degrade your performance.

So, how is your **soul**? Are you satisfied? Content? Can you sit for 30 minutes, in quiet, by yourself? Or does the lack of stimulation scare you? Do you always have to have something to listen to, watch, or do? If so, it may be because you’re not willing to listen to the signals your soul is sending. You may be gaining the whole world, but losing your soul.

3. Then we come to the **mind**. The thoughts inside your head. What do you think about? Whether it’s daydreams or planning or desires for things or people. We have some pretty wild thoughts that go through our minds. Your brain is going all the time, replaying events, forecasting outcomes, analyzing options, or fantasizing. We can control our thoughts or let them run free but I think every single one of us has been amazed, embarrassed, or ashamed of the thoughts that have popped in our minds.

God said, all the way back in Genesis 6 that He was going to bring a flood on the world because He knew people’s thoughts and they were nothing but evil all the time. The Bible says God “**searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts (1 Chronicles 28:9; Isaiah 66:18).**” Several times the New Testament says Jesus knew the thoughts of the people He was speaking with. And what He understood wasn’t good.

As Paul would later write to Titus:

Titus 1:15 To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

So, what do you let your **mind** work on? What events or conversations do you replay? Where do you let your imagination take you? Do you love God with all your mind?

4. And finally, your **strength** – your physical presence – the way you put your thoughts, desires, and life into action. To be clear, this has absolutely nothing to do with how much

you can squat or bench press for Jesus. But what are you doing with your life? What are you producing? Who are you helping? How are you spending your days?

In the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned:

Matt 6:19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The average life span in America is around 77 years. There are 52 weeks in a year. This means from the day you're born until the day you die, you have about 4000 weeks to spend and then that's it. Oh, and you spend almost a thousand of them before you graduate from high school. Life is really, really, short when you look at it with a panoramic lens. What are you doing with yours? Where is it going? Who and what are you investing into? Where are you leaving your fingerprints?

It's a lot to think about, isn't it? But we need to, Jesus said this is the most important thing for us to know and do – **to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength**. We need to be oriented to God in a comprehensive, holistic, all-encompassing, integrated life. All that we have, are, think, and do, pointed toward, resting on, and powered by Him.

But there are two sides to this command – the down side shows how completely and entirely we are broken – that every part of us, mentally, physically and emotionally is scared and smudged, chipped and torn, worn down and hollowed out by selfishness and sin – it creeps into every corner of life and leaves us feeling restless, anxious, defensive, hungry, and thin.

The up side though glows with the promise of the gospel. Because, if this is the life that God wants from us, and He knows how broken we are, and He knows we can't fix it on our own, then *this must be life that He wants to restore, renew, rebuild and regift to us*. And when you read the Scripture, that's exactly what you discover – God is leading us into a comprehensive, holistic, all-encompassing, robust and healthy life given by, empowered by, and sustained by our connection to Him.

Look at what God promises to do, starting with your **heart** – in Ezekiel He tells the people of Israel of His plans

Ezekiel 36:26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*.

God wants to give you a new heart. And if you've already received it, He wants to remain as your cardiologist. He wants to wash you and purify you and cleanse you.

And He wants to breathe new life into your **soul**. Some of you remember the blessing found at the end of

1 Thessalonians 5:23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God wants to protect and preserve you and lead you into everlasting life. Meditate on what it means to be completely sanctified, by Jesus, and found blameless. Ask God to make this real for you today.

And to extend it to your **mind**. To cleanse your thoughts. Maybe to pull you out of the pit of sorrow and shame or fear and anxiety that you live in and hate. Maybe to start saying things that are beautiful and true to yourself instead of berating and belittling yourself in your own inner thoughts all day. Maybe to put a choker chain on those fantasies and daydreams so they don't lead you astray.

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

My friends, maybe you need to ask Jesus to wash your mind just like He washed Peter's feet. Ask God to cleanse you, and every time you feel dirty, ask Him to do it again. Do not be afraid to ask, Jesus knew Peter's feet would get dirty again too, that was the whole point. Let God cleanse, reprogram, and re-write your thinking.

And depend on Him for **strength**. Ask God for the power you need for the life you face - if you're doing it all for Him anyway, tell Him what you need.

Isaiah 40:28 Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the weak,
And to *those who have* no might He increases strength.
30 Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
31 But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew *their* strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

A new heart, an invigorated soul, a cleansed mind, renewed strength. These are things God wants to give to you. Which one do you need most today? You can have them all. You need them all.

But now, if you've been paying attention, you may have noticed that I left something out – Jesus said this was **the most important commandment**, but the second is like it – **to love your neighbor as yourself**. Well, the point is, these commandments are in order for a reason. If you focus on loving and being loved by God, it doesn't take very long to notice it's starting to have an effect on all your other relationships too.

Do you want to reduce conflict with your spouse? Work on your relationship with God – either they will change or you will. Want to reduce conflict with your boss or co-worker – focus on your relationship with God, He'll change them or move them or change you or move you. And the same with your kids, your parents, and on, and on. If you have a problem with someone on earth, invite God in and focus on Him. He wants justice, mercy, and peace for both of you.

So, let's take some time now and bring all of this before God – lay your heart, soul, mind, and strength out in front of Him. Is there anything you're holding back? He doesn't just want parts and pieces, He wants the whole thing, not because He's greedy, but because He knows the only *true* healing is *whole* healing, comprehensive, all-encompassing healing and renewal affecting every part of your life.

If you've never surrendered your life to God, I encourage you to do that, right here, right now. In your own words, just take the next minute or two to respond to what God is doing in you – let Him in and let Him take over.

If you have surrendered, you might need to go in one of three directions :

- thank Him for all that He has done for you, praise God for all the areas of your life that He has affected, or
- ask Him to rinse and renew the area where you're struggling or feeling weak, or
- go to war spiritually for someone you know – someone that needs to surrender their heart, soul, mind and/or strength to God today.

This is your time, use it to respond to the God who is reaching out to you, calling you into a comprehensive relationship with Him.

Let's pray



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 12:28-34 The Great Commandment

Summary: God wants your heart, soul, mind, and strength because He offers a comprehensive gospel.

- Which represents more of your temperament – do you tend to be driven more by your Heart, Soul, Mind, or Strength?
 - o Why do you say that?
 - o Are you happy with that or what would you like to change?
- Does this meet your criteria for being one of the most important passages in Scripture or an executive summary of the gospel and the Christian life? Why or why not? What other important passages or truth would you add?
- How important is comprehensive spiritual health? What does it look like when someone “skips leg day” and one or more aspect of their life is under-developed?
 - o Why does this kind of situation happen – why does someone grow unevenly?
- Charles Spurgeon said, “let it never be forgotten, that what the Law demands of us the gospel really produces in us. The Law tells us what we ought to be, and it is one object of the gospel to raise us to that condition.”¹ In other words, as we reflect on what God has done for us, and as He fills us with His Holy Spirit and leads us with Scripture, we are enabled to do what He demands.
 - o Why is this good news to you?
 - o Where have you experienced this?
 - o Where do you need to experience this today?
- Review 1 John 4:19-21. What is the connection between loving God and loving others?
- Pastor Jeff said that if you want to improve your relationship with someone on earth the best thing to do is to focus on your relationship with God. In your experience, does that really work? Why or why not?

¹ Spurgeon, *Miracles and Parables of Our Lord* Vol. 3, (Baker Books reprint, 2003), 210.
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