

What's More Important?

October 31, 2021 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 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: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

It was Wednesday of Holy Week. Jesus knew he had only a few more days left before he was to go to the cross for the salvation of all humankind. And the religious leaders had turned out in droves to challenge him. They didn't just want to ask him questions because they had a sincere interest in what the answers would be. No, they asked his questions that were designed to trap him. If Jesus answered the questions wrong, they assumed, then he would be discredited in front of all those who were following him.

They had questioned Jesus as to by what authority he was doing what he was doing (Mk 11:28), is it right to pay their taxes or not (Mk 12:14-15), and who is married to whom in the resurrection (Mk 12:23). Jesus responded to each of these challenges with a wise answer that could not be argued. Then came along a different teacher of the law who did seem sincere in his question.

28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" This was actually a very good question. It wasn't just a matter of which of the Ten Commandments of Moses was the most important one.

The scribe's question, **"What commandment is the foremost of all?"** is one that had been much discussed and debated among the rabbis, as chronicled in the rabbinical writings. They eventually decided that there were 613 laws in the Pentateuch (the five

books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). They arrived at that total because there were 613 letters in the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments (in Numbers). The rabbis divided those laws into 248 positive affirmations and 365 negative prohibitions. They further divided them into heavy laws, which were absolutely binding, and light laws, which were less binding. There was nothing wrong per se with such a distinction; even Jesus made a similar division in His rebuke of the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.” The rabbis, however, were never able to arrive at a consensus as to which laws were heavy and which were light.

Here is the dilemma that all legalists face. Knowing that they could not possibly keep all 613 laws, the rabbis focused on keeping the heavy or more important ones (as they saw them). They hoped vainly that doing so would satisfy God. But even that was a crushing, unbearable burden (Acts 15:5, 10), so they constantly sought to reduce their list of heavy laws to a few key ones. Unable to keep even those few laws, they focused instead on keeping their man-made traditions (cf. Mark 7:5–13), which were less difficult to observe.¹

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The Lord’s response, as always, was perfect and absolutely accurate. When He quoted passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus that were familiar to all Jews, He affirmed His complete solidarity with Moses and with the truth of the Word of God as recorded by him.

The command Jesus named as the **foremost, Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; 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**, is the most basic, foundational Old Testament truth. Known as the Shema (from the Hebrew verb translated “hear” that begins Deut. 6:4), it is still recited daily by religious Jews and as part of the Sabbath synagogue worship.²

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’

The Shema requires that God be loved first **with all** our faculties; that is what is intended generally by these separate elements of human nature. It is more about the totality than the individual features.³

¹ MacArthur, J. (2015). [Mark 9–16](#) (p. 199). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

² MacArthur, J. (2015). [Mark 9–16](#) (p. 200). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

³ MacArthur, J. (2015). [Mark 9–16](#) (p. 201). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The **second** foundational commandment, inseparable from the first because it is a command of God requiring the obedience of love to Him, **is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (cf. Lev. 19:18). The two are linked, since “if someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). The command also includes loving one’s enemies, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:43–47). ...This command must not be twisted into a call for self-love, which is natural; such is not its intent. The Lord’s point is that we are to have the same love and care for neighbors, strangers, and enemies that we possess for ourselves.

Jesus chose these two commands because **there is no other commandment greater than them**. In Matthew 22:40 He added, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” Together, they sum up the entire Ten Commandments, the first four of which demand features related to love for God; the last six describe features of love for man.⁴

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” What is really interesting about all of this is that not only did the teacher of the law agree with Jesus, he added the phrase that those two commandments are **“more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”** In other words, having a relationship with God is more important than keeping all the rules and regulations. This would be something that the teacher of the law’s cohorts would find to be a disturbing insight. They believed that keeping the law was what pleased God, even though trying to keep 613 laws was impossible. Each person has a hard enough time trying to keep the two commandments Jesus gave, let alone 613! This teacher of the law, however, understood that one could try to keep all the laws they wanted but still not have a loving relationship with God and with one’s neighbor. Unfortunately, it generally turns out to be just the opposite. The more legalistic a person is, the more difficult they find having loving relationships to be. They are so busy trying to keep the law and quote the law to others, that they come across as judgmental rather than as loving. Perhaps you have met people like that. They are so focused on themselves being in the right, all the time, that they drive people away with their abrasiveness and lack of compassion.

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. The teacher of the law did answer wisely. He was close, but not quite, in the kingdom of God. The teacher of the law had the knowledge, but would he act on it? We

⁴ MacArthur, J. (2015). [Mark 9–16](#) (p. 203). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

have no record in Scripture where this teacher of the law left everything and followed Jesus, such as the formerly blind Bartimaeus had done.

This serves as a warning for us today. We could be well-informed about who Jesus is. We may have attended Sunday School all our lives. We may be well-versed on the Bible, even able to quote verses from it. But if we do not have a personal, loving relationship with God, a love that impacts our whole being—heart, soul, mind, and strength—then we are almost Christians and are not far from the kingdom of God. We need to be more than informed about Jesus. We need to be transformed by Jesus, the living Christ, being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Just knowing the rules and regulations leads to legalism, which relies solely on works-righteousness. It comes down to: there is nothing we can do to inherit the kingdom of God. We have to be. We have to be in a loving relationship with God. We have to be in a loving relationship with our neighbor as we love ourselves. Those are the only “have-to”s that we have to do, because they were commanded by Jesus himself. The rest is covered by God’s grace. We don’t have to do anything else except accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Seek first Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, then all other things will be added onto you.

So, the question then becomes – What are you doing to show your love of God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Is your life right now a testimony of showing love of God? Would someone who was around you, not just on Sunday morning, but the rest of week a well, be able to say that your life is a witness of your love of God?

And the second question is like it – What are you doing to show your love of neighbor as yourself? Is what you are saying and doing in mixed company – surrounded by some who are believers and some who are not believers – is it a testimony that you love them? Do you resist the temptations of the world that seems to love gossip, violence, hatred, bitterness, and anxiety in all its forms, so that your life is a witness of God’s love and compassion for them as well as for yourself? Do you love yourself? I’m not talking about a selfish, egotistical, “I’m better than everyone else” kind of way. But do you love yourself as a valued human being in the sight of God, a person who is fearfully and wonderfully made?

And, last set of questions for you take and ponder after leaving the worship service today: If you are not expressing your love of God and your love of neighbor as yourself, then what are you going to do to change that?

[The sermon concludes with a personal story about one of our members who is in need, and how are we going to be the hands and feet of Jesus for her. Then with another personal story about two young women who walked by us dressed like ladies of the night and judging them, rather than praying for them. How are we doing at living out Jesus’ greatest commandment?]