

Two Great Commandments/Two Great Loves **Mark 12:28-34**

Introduction: 1) Humans love to ask what I call “mega” or “greatest” questions. What was the greatest empire in world history? The Greek? The Roman? The USA? The greatest leader? Jesus? Mohammed? Augustus Caesar? The greatest America leader? George Washington? Abraham Lincoln? Franklin Roosevelt? Ronald Reagan?

2) Turn to sports. Greatest baseball player? Babe Ruth? Willie Mays? Ted Williams? Ty Cobb? Hank Aaron? Greatest football player? Jim Brown? Jerry Rice? Joe Montana? Walter Peyton? Greatest basketball player? Michael Jordan? Magic Johnson? Larry Bird? Wilt Chamberlain? Bill Russell? Kareem Abdul-Jabbar?

3) Movies? Gone with the Wind? Casablanca? The Godfather? Star Wars? Lord of the Rings? Raiders of the Lost Ark?

4) Interest in “mega” questions is not new. They go back even to the time of Jesus when a religious leader asked our Lord about the greatest (v. 31), “the most important” of all the commandments (v. 28). Interestingly our Lord did not give him one. He gave him two, telling him as Matt. 22:40 records, “On these two commandments depend (*NIV*, “hang”) all the Law and the Prophets.” And, both commandments are grounded in our responsibility to love: First, to love God supremely and second, to love our fellow humans genuinely.

5) We are about to discover that our response to these two commandments above all others expose our heart, lay bare our souls and reveal what matters most to us. What do you cherish? What is of supreme value in your life? We are all about to find out.

I. We are commanded to love God supremely.

12:28-30

- A scribe (11:28), a religious lawyer had come to Jesus. He had overheard our Lord's disputes with the Sanhedrin (11:27), the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13) and the Sadducees (12:18). He also saw that Jesus "answered them well" (v. 28).
- Without malice or ill will this man asked Jesus a question that was often bantered about in religious circles, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Which one would you say is the greatest? This is not as easy as it sounds. In fact the question simply continued a long running debate among the religiously minded.
- The rabbinic tradition had isolated 613 commandments in the first 5 books of the Bible, the Torah. 365 were negative and 248 were positive. Some were "light" making less demand, while others were viewed as "heavy" with severe repercussions for disobedience. Jesus himself appears to acknowledge this in Matt 5:19 where he says, "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." So this scribe asked Jesus to "declare Himself." Our Lord gladly obliges and His answer takes us to the core of what really matters in life, what is of supreme importance.

1) Love God for who He is. 12:29

- Jesus responds quick and to the point, "The most important is" (lit. "the first is")... He then quotes what Israel called the "Shema" found in Deut. 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel the Lord our God is one. 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." This confession was recited by every devout Jew morning and evening.

“It was and is as important to Judaism as is the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed to Christianity.” (Edwards, 371).

- Note the first sentence, “The Lord (*Yahweh*) our God (*Elohim*), the Lord (*Yahweh*) is one.” Here is the heart and soul of the Hebrew faith, yes, of Christianity.
 - *Yahweh* is His covenant Name given to His people.
 - *Yahweh* is our God and only our God. We have no other.
 - *Yahweh* is one. He is one in essence and existence. He alone is God and there is no other.
- This is a powerful statement of uniqueness and exclusivity. Our God is God alone and our God alone will only accept our exclusive worship, love, devotion and allegiance. Teachers of the Law and theologians could debate all they want but Jesus begins by bringing them back to the basics, the fundamental, non-negotiables of the faith.
- We should love this God because of who He is.
We should love this God because He is our God.
What kind of God is He? Here the words of a 2nd great confession of the Hebrew faith found in Exodus 34:6-7, “The Lord passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

Furthermore, the context of the “Shema” is quite instructive. To love God is to obey his commandments and statues “all the days of your life” (Deut. 6:2). To love God means you will teach these commandments to your children and grandchildren (6:2) when you sit, walk, lie down and rise up (6:7), remembering He is the God “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (6:12). To love God supremely means “You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you – for the Lord your God (*Yahweh* your *Elohim*) in your midst is a jealous God...” (6:14).

- So love God for who He is. Second:

2) Love God with all you are. 12:30

- The repetition of the word “all” (4x) is significant as it emphasized the comprehensive nature of how we are to love *Yahweh* our *Elohim*, the Lord our God. What is called for is a total response of love and devotion to our Great God. Indeed the four-fold use of heart, soul, mind and strength is not intended as a “psychological analysis of human personality”, but a call to love God wholly and completely. Kent Hughes says it so well, “It does not take much of a man to be a believer, but it takes all there is of him!” (*Mark*, vol. 2, 115).
- Still, we can note the following:
 - Heart speaks to our emotions, the real me on the inside (See Ex. 20:3).
 - Soul speaks to the spirit, the self-conscious life (See Ps. 42:1-2).
 - Mind speaks to our intelligence and thought life (See 2 Cor 10:3-5).
 - Strength speaks to our bodily powers, perhaps even the will (See Rom 12:1).
 - It is easy to see there is overlap in these categories of human personality.

Sinclair Ferguson says, “God is never satisfied with anything less than the devotion of our whole life for the whole duration of our lives” (*Mark*, 200).

- Pastor Sam Storms points out a beautiful analogy of how a man’s love for his wife gives insight into his love for his God. Drawing from his observations and formulating them in the form of a series of questions helps us, I believe, to evaluate our “love life” when it comes to rightly loving God.
 - 1) Is the Lord the all-consuming passion of my life?
 - 2) Do I have a deep, intense and abiding affection for my Lord?
 - 3) Am I loyal to my God with an exclusive love?
 - 4) Do I resist and even oppose anything or anyone that seeks to do my Lord harm?
 - 5) Am I zealous to, with grace, defend my Lord’s name and honor?
 - 6) Do I enjoy spending time with my Lord?
 - 7) Do I do things that please my Lord and increase His joy?
 - 8) Do I brag on my Lord to others?
 - 9) Do I tell my Lord that I love him?
 - 10) Do I talk with my Lord as much as I can?
- Remember: these are not things I do to get God to love me. They are things I do because I am loved by Him and because I love Him. I never lose sight of the fact that I do not love Him to get Him to love me. I love Him because He first loved me (1 John 4:10).

II. We are commanded to love others genuinely.

12:31-34

- As is so often the case, Jesus gives us more than we ask for! The religious lawyer wants to know what commandment is the most important. Jesus responds by telling him there are two that hang together, that go together. Why? Because how you respond to the first (loving God) will determine how you respond to the second (loving your neighbor). And, when you obey the 2nd it will give evidence that you have embraced the first. In other words loving God and loving my neighbor are twins never to be separated.
- Tim Keller says it so well, “Jesus shows us that love actually defines the lawful life” and “He shows us that the law actually defines the loving life.” Further Keller notes, “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” (Keller notes).

1) Such love is legitimately selfish. 12:31

- Jesus adds Leviticus 19:18 as a complement to Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Growing out of my love for God I love those who have been created by God in His image. Neighbor is not used here in a restrictive sense. All of humanity, even my enemies, are in view (see Luke 10:25-29).
- Some hear the phrase “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” and wrongly think how narcissistic. Jesus, the unselfish one, actually tells me to selfishly love myself. How do we make sense of this? First, there is a healthy kind of self love that is cognizant of the truth that we are the objects both of the “creating” and “redeeming” love of our God. To hate myself is actually an offense to God and calls into question His wisdom and goodness. Second, the love a person naturally

has for himself is now “turned out” toward others. The object of my affection and concern moves from me to others (cf. Phil 2:3-5). Third, the fact that this is a command makes clear that the primary focus is on our actions and not our feelings or emotions. Fourth, there is certainly a mysterious paradox in all this, for the same Jesus who tells us to love ourselves also tells us to deny ourselves and die to ourselves (Mark 8:34). In other words the more I truly love myself the more I will deny myself and love others. To love my neighbor as myself means I will serve the needs of others with all the energy, passion and zeal with which I serve and attempt to meet my own needs. However, only by loving my God supremely will I be able to love others, “all others,” genuinely. And, as I love others genuinely I demonstrate that I love my God supremely. No wonder Jesus said, “There is no greater commandment than these.”

- Don Carson preached a wonderful sermon at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Feb. 2012 at a large college conference that really helped us see what it means to love others genuinely. He also taught all of us a good lesson in hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. He encouraged us to examine the context in which Lev. 19:18 was located. There you discover that loving your neighbor as yourself means a lot! Among other things it means that you will 1) care for the poor (19:10), 2) not steal (19:11), 3) not lie (19:11), 4) be fair in business dealings (19:14), 5) care for the deaf (19:14), 6) care for the blind (19:14), 7) deal justly with all (19:15), 8) avoid slander (19:16), 9) not “jeopardize” (HCSB) the life of your neighbor (19:16), 10) not “hate your brother in your heart” (19:17), 11) rebuke your neighbor when necessary for his and your good (19:17), and 12) not

take revenge or bear a grudge against others (19:18). Wow! God does not leave it to our imaginations as to what He means when He tells us to love our neighbors as yourself.

2) Such love is a true sacrifice.

12:32-33

- The scribe responded with delight to our Lord's answer. First, he affirmed Jesus' creedal confession of the exclusive monotheism of the one true God (v. 32).
- Second, he affirmed the comprehensive love, devotion and worship our God is worthy to receive (33a).
- Third, he adds an insight that verse 34 reveals drew the praise and applause of Jesus (33b).

To love God supremely and our neighbor genuinely "is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." He now sees "real religion" ultimately is a matter of the heart. Religious rituals always must give way to the superiority of a right relationship with God and others. Even the most sacred of religious rituals and service do not trump my love for my God and others. Indeed they have no real meaning or significance at all unless they are expressions of our love for Jesus and others. Such spiritual insight finds its echo in the Old Testament at numerous points:

- 1 Sam 15:22: "And Samuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams."
- Prov. 21:3: "To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

- Hosea 6:6: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

3) Such love is crucial to salvation. 12:34

- Mark informs us that Jesus was pleased with the scribe’s answer (“Jesus saw he answered wisely”).
- Jesus then brought the conversation to a close by telling the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” What did Jesus mean by this? I think the answer is clear. It is not you are close so try harder! It is not work harder and you will make it! Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the man has come to see that ultimately eternal life, entering the Kingdom of God, is a matter of the heart and not ritual. It is a matter of heart devotion not hard duty. Obeying rules and regulations will never get me into the kingdom because I can never do enough or measure up to God’s perfect standard. No, I need a new me. I need a new heart. I need the grace and mercy of my God who can make me a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). I need to draw near to the One who has brought the kingdom of God near (Mark 1:15). I need to draw near to Jesus. One draws near and enters the kingdom not by religion. One draws near and enters this kingdom by a relationship with Jesus, a relationship that results in loving God supremely and others genuinely.

Conclusion:

- I believe the apostle John was especially impacted by what Jesus said on this occasion as He approached His passion and His brutal death of the cross. I think He saw in our Lord

these two commandments lived out and put on perfect display. The cross tells us that Jesus loves God supremely. It tells us He loves us genuinely.

- This is why the Holy Spirit moved John to pen the words we find in 1 John 4:7-12, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loves us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”
- To love God is to love others. To love others is to love God. Two great commandments. Two great loves.