



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 neighbour 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 neighbour 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.

Reflection

Today's passage comes from 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 neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.' 32 'Well said, teacher,' the man re-

plied. '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 neighbour 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.

The roll call of some of the brightest minds in Judaism continues. Only these minds have let their traditions, their culture and the sinful tendencies that trouble every human heart cloud their judgment and great learning. They're all desperately try-

ing to discredit Jesus in front of the vast and growing crowds who've come to hear him preach in the temple courts in Jerusalem. These crowds must have been delighted at the spectacle as it has unfolded. It's been the fiery Galilean prophet, the one around whom all sorts of stories have been swirling, up against the entire religious establishment in Jerusalem. He's certainly ruffled their feathers, entering Jerusalem like a king, commandeering the temple markets as if the temple were his very own house, and now upstaging some of the greatest teachers of Judaism with his wisdom.

But this spectacle has been more than simply upstaging. It's been downright scathing. Many in the crowds have visibly winced as Jesus has compared some of

the most esteemed leaders of the Jewish faith with prostitutes and traitors. In not so veiled parables he's likened them to disobedient and murderous servants who'll soon be cast into hell. The crowds must be beginning to sense that what is going on here is far more deadly than the customary rabbinic debates. This man Jesus clearly has a death wish ... or the courage of a king worth following. As we'll see it turns out to be both.

But for today, from verse 28,

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?'

They send in a lawyer, an expert in the law, the Old Testament law. Not long after these events the Pharisees would distinguish 613 commands in the Old Testament law, 248 of them positive and 365 negative, interrelated and interwoven in complex ways, which means that this lawyer knew his stuff. But he didn't just know his bible well, with his great wisdom and knowledge of the Scripture he would have also been a judge, adjudicating in disputes amongst the Jewish people, perhaps even at the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council that also doubled as the Supreme Court (with a kind of delegated authority from the Romans concerning all matters Jewish). Wise and learned, no doubt a champion of biblical interpretation amongst the Pharisees who to their credit prized such

a thing, he steps into the void left by the embarrassed Sadducees and asks Jesus a question,

‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’

Jesus replies,

‘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 neighbour as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’

I've spoken to a few people who've undertaken doctoral studies recently and one of the hardest aspects of reading countless books is synthesizing all that information in their minds. Here Jesus distils all of the Old Testament Scriptures into two commandments that hold all the others together.

Questions like this one were common amongst rabbis in Jesus' day who would regularly discuss which of the commandments were weightier or lighter in relation to each other. And Jesus' response is not entirely unexpected either. First he quotes Deuteronomy 6:5,

5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

This was the twice-daily repeated ‘Shema,’ a prayer that still serves as the centrepiece of morning and evening prayer for Jewish people even today. It was well known as the overarching obligation of every individual Jew. It speaks of a whole person love, not simply an emotional attachment but rather the giving of one’s entire person over to God.

Jesus then continues by quoting from Leviticus 19:18 which again was not entirely unexpected,

31 The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

The famous Rabbi Akiva who was born in 50 AD would subsequently refer to this

verse as a 'great principle in the Torah.' It's likely that his opinion was also expressed by rabbis in Jesus' day as well. But again this is no abstract love. Just as with the first commandment Jesus here is advocating a concrete responsibility, the giving over of one's whole person in the active service of one's neighbour.

These commands might recall for you one of the pinnacles and summary statements of the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, from Matthew 7:12,

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

But it would be a mistake to view these

two commandments, or even the so called 'Golden Rule' as rules. Loving God and neighbour with our whole person fulfils the deepest inclinations of our human hearts, which have been created from the first in God's image. To love God with everything we have and to love our neighbour as ourself is to be like God and to conform to the pattern out of which humankind is made. This is kingdom life, in its richest, wholehearted, uncompromising living in the way that God intends us to live. The way he created us to live, and to relate to him and to each other. It's only when we try to live to the contrary that things start to unravel. This is why the whole of the Old Testament hangs on love of God and love of neighbour. These two concepts bring to fulfilment all of the Law and the Prophets.

Think & Pray

Let's pause here so that you and I both can reflect in an extended way on Jesus' answer. By God's good design this is what we are made for. And in loving God with all our hearts and with all our minds and with all our strength and in loving our neighbour as ourselves we have the key to living the most fulfilling life possible in this world. Do you believe this? Why not try it? How can you pour yourself out today in love of God and in love and service of your neighbour? Who can you love today as if they were your very self? How do you think this will make them feel? How do you think you'll feel while doing it? And what would this week look like for you if it was characterised by intentional efforts to love God

with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength? Tangibly, how would worship like this cut through into your calendar, your to-do list, your time at home? How can it pervade your entire life, fill it with meaning and bathe it in glory? Such big questions deserving of some deep thought. And some prolonged prayer. Take the time today. This is what it's all about.