

“THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Mark 12:28-34

Introduction.

We come this morning to the fourth and final trap that the Jewish religious leaders tried to set for Jesus so they could have grounds to arrest Him and kill Him.

First, the chief priests and teachers of the law and the elders questioned his authority. ***Second***, the Pharisees and Herodians tried to trap Jesus about the paying of taxes. ***Third***, that same day the Sadducees got into the act and tried to trick Jesus with a question about a woman who was married seven times, asking whose wife would she be at the resurrection. ***Finally***, after seeing everyone else crash and burn, an expert in the law baited one more trap.

It's a terrible thing to watch a scribe charged with loving and protecting and faithfully interpreting the Word of God use it as a tool to attack its author. He wasn't motivated by love for God's Word, he was motivated to protect his own status or to look good in the eyes of man.

Mark 12:28, Which commandment is the greatest?

“Jesus, of all the commandments which is the most important? Jesus, take all the commandments and reduce them down to one. Put the whole Torah in a nutshell. Which one supersedes all the others?”

Scribes were specialists at interpreting the Scriptures, arguing and debating the fine points of the 613 Jewish commandments. For centuries the best minds had plowed this ground again and again. We are so familiar with this text that we can't appreciate how big a challenge this was in the first century. In the rabbinic writings there were numerous answers to this question by famous rabbis.

Rabbi Hillel summarized the Torah saying: What you would not want done to you, do not do to your neighbor.

Rabbi Akiba reduced the Torah to: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Rabbi Simlai quoted Habakkuk 2:4: The righteous shall live by his faith.

Another rabbi quoted Proverbs: In all your ways acknowledge God, and he will make your paths straight.

Whatever Jesus answered, it would put Him in disagreement with some faction or party.

Mark 12:29-30, The first great commandment.

Without even pausing, Jesus answered immediately by citing the central creed of Judaism known as the “Shema” from Deuteronomy 6. This is the foundational text for all Jews, it’s recited every morning and every evening by faithful Jews, from Jesus’ time to the present.

It’s to the Jews what the Lord’s Prayer or the Apostles’ Creed are to us.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Love the Lord your God. Love Him with the deepest of affection and feeling. Love Him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. He has claim on every facet of our human personality, our emotions, our spirit, our intellect and our will.

We are to love God not just with our heart but from our heart; not just with our mind but from our mind. Love God with everything you have. All the rest is details, all the rest is secondary, all the rest flow from this.

Love God more than you love yourself. Love God more than anything else in all the world. Love God with all the powers of your being. You can’t love God too much or show it too often.

A wise man centuries ago said, “The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.”

The first duty of all mankind is to love God, their creator and sustainer. This isn’t just the duty of Christians, it’s the duty of all mankind. It’s why God created us, to love and worship Him.

Jesus could have said our first duty is to serve God or obey or fear or bow down to the Lord. But He said love the Lord. All the rest should flow from love.

When we love, our service is light. The care of a baby is lightened because of love. “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother.” We understand that.

But really now, how can we really love God? We are born in sin, we are unrighteous, we are far from God. We feel unworthy, we have fallen so far short. How can we love God? To love God we need God to first give us a new heart.

Ezekiel 11:19-20 I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

Scripture says that “we love him only because He first loved us” (I John 4:19). It doesn’t start with us, it starts with God loving us and accepting us in Jesus.

Scripture says that those who love most are those who are forgiven most. We can’t truly love God until we see and acknowledge our sin and the depth of it, until we have repented and found peace in the cross of Jesus. When we know our sins are forgiven, then we are reconciled to God and then His love will be in us and our love will increase toward Him.

God gives us a heart to love, so that with it we will love Him and in loving Him, begin to love others with His love.

Mark 12:31, The second great commandment.

Without skipping a beat Jesus went beyond what they asked and gave the second greatest commandment quoting from Leviticus:

Leviticus 19:18 You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

We are so familiar with these words that they don’t ring in our ears as especially revolutionary but they were. There is no evidence in any Jewish writings of these two commands being united in this way. They were both understood separately but never combined to suggest that these two summed up the Law of God.

Jesus steers Christianity away from two ditches. On the one side is the ditch of mysticism or piety or a detached love for God that doesn’t touch real life. On the other side is the ditch of humanism which focuses on acts of compassion or justice with no reference point in God and without acknowledging our deep need for God.

For Jews neighbor meant only Jews, but we know that Jesus showing His authority to interpret and add understanding to the Scripture expanded neighbor to mean not just Christians, but those in need, even those far different from us.

Our neighbor is often those closest to us and those closest to us are often those who irritate us the most. The noisy or nosey or messy neighbor, the person in the next cubicle at work, that weird aunt or crazy cousin, the inconvenient stranger. For us this week our neighbor was my sister with the flu and then a long distance phone call from an old OKC friend about a friend of his on vacation here in the NW but at St. Josephs with a burst appendix. Who will it be next week?

We love parents when we honor them.

We love spouses when we are faithful to them.

We love neighbors when we do good for them.

We love those in need when we share with them.

We love those in sin when we tell the truth to them in love.

Attend to your neighbor's good just as you attend to your own good.
He who loves his neighbor will strive to do him good, to be a blessing to him.
He who loves his neighbor will do him no harm and wish him no evil.

I John 4:20-21 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

We show that our love for God is genuine and real by how we love our neighbor.

Who here perfectly loves his neighbor? Who here excels at this commandment? Where is there a person on this earth who could plead not guilty of breaking this commandment? We naturally hate our neighbor, we are naturally selfish.

Just as we will never love God until He first gives us a new heart, so we will never love our neighbor until our hearts have been broken and changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, it's born in a heart that's born again.

Application and Conclusion.

This great text affords us much that is applicable for our spiritual benefit.

First, the hardest questions of Jesus' day brought by the most learned experts of his day, were answered by Jesus without even flinching. To give you some idea how hard the questions were, we are told that after He answered each of them the crowds were stunned with amazement and the experts were reduced to silence.

The hardest questions of our day by the staunchest atheist, questions that would leave us tongue tied, Jesus answers in a heartbeat. Nothing is too difficult for our God. Let your confidence in the wisdom of God's Word never waver for even a moment. Just because we don't know an answer or the wisest person we know doesn't know the answer, doesn't mean God will be stumped. He's eternally and perfectly wise, knowing all things, knowing the beginning from the end. Trust in God and His Word.

Second, notice how Jesus turns evil to good. Even the most malicious assaults contrived with the most evil of motives work to reveal His wisdom and give good teaching to His church for centuries to come.

We can be thankful this lawyer tried to trap Jesus with this question because it gave our Lord the opportunity to give us one of His most important and valuable teachings.

Third, the first and foremost and greatest commandment is to love God. That means to love nothing or no one more than God. Whatever you love more than God becomes an idol. God will share His glory with no one.

So if we love something or someone too much, the loving thing for a loving God to do is to remove that idol from our heart and life. God will wean our hearts from all loves that are in place of Him. And He will wean our hearts for all love for this world as He prepares us for the world to come.

Listen to what the Puritan pastor Thomas Watson writes concerning this:

“If we love a child more than God, we make a god of it. How many are guilty in this kind? They think of their children, and delight more in them than in God; they grieve more for the loss of their first-born, than for the loss of their first love. This is to make an idol of a child, and to set it in God’s room. Thus God is often provoked to take away our children. If we love the jewel more than him that gave it, God will take away the jewel, that our love may return to him again” (*Ten Commandments*, p. 58).

No, not every affliction and death is the taking away of an idol. We must be careful of making hasty judgments. But some losses are the severe mercy of God.

That phrase was coined by Sheldon Vanauken, as the title of his autobiography, *A Severe Mercy*, in which he writes of his idolizing his wife and how he put his love for her ahead of everything else. God took her at a young age through cancer and opened his eyes to his idolatry until he surrendered his life and first love to Christ.

How many make an idol of retirement and of living a life of ease and pleasure only to have the golden years not be so golden as God weans us of every fantasy of pleasure and comfort in this world.

Our love for God must be our supreme love. All other blessings in this life must be kept in their proper place.

Fourth, I got a beautiful glimpse yesterday of one of our members boldly loving God and her neighbors at the same time.

I got a Facebook message yesterday from Amber Stokes, daughter of Brian and Nelda. Amber is a sophomore at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma. When I first heard Amber was going to PLU I had some serious reservations. I know that school to be spiritually dark. But I found out yesterday that Amber is shining her light for the glory of God in that dark place.

Amber and some friends of hers have started a Pro-life club on campus and are starting to plan events to witness to truth and life and hope. She asks for prayer and I hope you will remember to pray for her.

What an example of loving God by standing up publically for her faith and for the truth; and what an example of loving her neighbors by telling the truth and holding out a better hope than the world offers. Last year three girls on her floor got pregnant, two of them kept their babies.

Amber's heart goes out to the one who didn't, who didn't know where to turn or to whom to turn.

We love God and our neighbor when we let our light shine and God is glorified.

Finally, who of us is righteous, who of us is without sin? Who of us here doesn't need daily the cleansing blood of Jesus and the grace and mercy of God to keep these commandments?

I can look back on this week and see where I have not loved God or my neighbor. I can see sinful and selfish motives. I have failed to rise to these two great commandments.

Jesus came for just such a circumstance. He came to us who love imperfectly, poorly, even sinfully to redeem us. He first loved us and forgave us so that we could receive His love and then with His love begin to love God and others.

It's only His love that can motivate us to desire to have a change of heart, to have hearts of love. His love at work in our hearts makes us capable of receiving His love and returning it to Him and sharing it with others.

Plead the blood of Jesus, come to this table broken and hungry and aware of your need for spiritual food and strength to love and obey all He commands. Let us truly repent and truly believe and truly love.