

**TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH****SERIES TITLE: MARK 12:28-34 | SERMON TITLE: THE GREATEST COMMAND****DAVE WAGNER**

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Jesus is coming to the end of a series of encounters with the Jerusalem authorities. He's been challenged by the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. Now it's time for an encounter with a scribe. This encounter isn't going to be a challenge, however; it's going to be a surprisingly positive encounter. It's so positive that, in this section of stories, it feels completely out of place.

This scribe witnessed the last exchange with the Sadducees. Recognizing that Jesus gave a satisfying answer, the scribe asks Jesus a question of his own.

Now this question is not a challenge. In the context it must actually be the first sincere question in the whole series of encounters. This scribe sees that Jesus is a skilled interpreter of the Scriptures and so he takes his chance to put an important question to Jesus.

The question concerns the "First" commandment of the law; by "first" the scribe means "most important", or "primary". This scribe wants to know which is the most important command in the law.

This question assumes there is a gradation within the law, with some laws being less important and some more, among the over 600 commands of the law.

And this was actually a common question in the Judaism of Jesus' day, and before, and after. Here's a small sampling of how some other ancient rabbis, near to the time of Jesus, answered this question:

The famous Hillel summarized the law as "do not do unto others what you wouldn't have done to you." He said the rest of the law was just commentary on this one idea.

Another text said the most important idea in the law was Proverbs 3.6, lean not on your own understanding but commit your way to the Lord.

A rabbi named Simlai quoted Habakkuk 2.4: The righteous shall live by faith.

Another famous rabbi, Akiba, gets very close to Jesus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Actually, if you look around in ancient Jewish sources you're going to find Jesus' answer was neither original nor revolutionary. In fact, it's hard to understand how any other answer could be given.

Moral commands issue from various obligations. I have an obligation to take care of the environment, and so I am morally commanded to steward the earth.

I have a greater obligation to care for the welfare of people, so I am commanded to love my neighbor as myself.

I have a greater obligation to care for my own family, so I am commanded to provide for them.

If we keep climbing the obligation ladder it's obvious the last rung we'll come to will be God. Therefore, the highest obligation laid upon me concerns God. So the greatest command for me is that I love God.

And that's how Jesus answers. The greatest command in Moses' Law is to love God.

Now when Jesus answers he quotes Deuteronomy 6. The quote begins with a command to Israel to "Hear", that is, to listen and take heed, to one of the most important facts about the God of Israel. What is that fact? Just that God is One.

To put it otherwise: The Heaven above Israel is not like the Heaven above Egypt, whence Israel had just come. The Egyptians were good old fashioned polytheistic pagans; their heavens were full to bursting with all sorts of gods who accepted worship from the Egyptians.

Not so the heavens of Israel. In Israel's heaven there was only One Being to whom worship could legitimately be directed: Yahweh. Of course many other powers resided in the heavens, but in Israel it was known that all these heavenly powers bowed the knee to Yahweh, whether good or evil.

This is the doctrine of Monotheism, and it doesn't strike us anything like as hard as it would have hit people in the ancient world. We are the fortunate heirs of a sanitized heaven, having been scrubbed clean by the Gospel of Christ over the last 2,000 years. My German and English ancestors, going back far enough, were nothing better than demon worshipers. My Native American ancestors likely weren't any better.

But here I stand, knowing absolutely nothing of the demons they served, all because the Gospel had slain them all long before my great, great, great grandparents even entered the scene.

So Monotheism doesn't hit us like it should; and we should be very grateful for a cultural inheritance which makes it an assumption, not a novelty.

Well, this is the doctrine which prefaces the Great Command. And this particular Scripture quote has long been called the Shema, after the Hebrew word for "Hear!" or "Take Heed!" This "Shema" text is said to have been recited every morning and evening by pious Jews. One writer compares the Shema of Judaism to the Apostle's Creed in Christianity. That would make this text one of the most basic passages of the OT. And that means Jesus citing it as the Greatest Command is extremely reasonable.

The command itself has a descriptor attached to it. It clarifies how we are to love God.

Now I have explained this passage wrongly since the day I first explained it! That's why we study the Bible; so we can find out just how ignorant we've been!

The common explanation of this text is that Jesus is telling us the different aspects of our person with which we love God; so, love God with your heart, with your mind, etc. In this explanation our heart and mind are the instruments we use to love God. I love God with my mind by studying about him; I love him with my heart by feeling affection for him.

But this explanation is wrong. The Greek preposition in the sentence is not "with," but "from," or "out of".

This means the issue is not one of instrumentality (what I love God *with*) but rather source (where I love God *from*).

Add to this the fact that in the Bible, the various elements of the inner man seem to overlap a great deal, and all seem to generally speak of the inner person, what we probably mean when we say "spirit" or "soul". This means we should be careful about making sharp distinctions between, say, heart and mind when they come up in the Bible, though sometimes context will reveal more distinction than at other times.

So, what do we have? Just this: Jesus says the greatest command is to love God from a unified, or a whole heart. We should love God from the inside. Our love for God should arise from the deepest parts of us; of course if it does this, though it arises from deep and invisible parts, it will issue in visible activity, namely, service for God.

And we all know the alternative to loving God from the heart. There is a kind of love, it perhaps doesn't deserve the name, which has no depth but is a surface love. It is a shallow love. You might

say it is a love which is only skin deep. Being such it lacks reality and substance. It is a sham love; it is a farce. If we could see into the invisible realm of the heart there would be a void and a blank when such a love was active.

What we're talking about here is sincerity. This may be what Jesus has in mind when he speaks of having a pure heart, that is, an unmixed and undiluted heart, unified and integrated in its love for God. Simply, this is a love which is the same on the inside as it is on the outside. Call it a non-hypocritical love.

The person who lacks this "from the heart" love is divided in their loyalty to God. They are not completely devoted. Part of them is committed to do God's will but not all of them; which just means their commitment hardly deserves the name. What woman would marry a man who agreed to be "partly" committed to her? He promises to provide for the family "part" of the time.

Again, the command and its descriptor are so reasonable it's hard to understand how the rabbis could have had any debate over this issue. Of course love to God is the greatest command and of course that love should be sincere and from the whole person.

Now before we leave this commandment notice the connection between the oneness of God and the call for total devotion to him, with no part of us left out.

There is only one Creator and Savior; therefore our highest love and devotion need not be divided. We will give lesser love and devotion to lesser things, such as our family, or our country. But the highest and best love should be reserved for God, the One God, alone.

Suppose we really were obligated to many gods, as in polytheism. How on earth could we give our highest love to any of them? In that case we must divide up our love like a cherry pie and give a piece to each one. Polytheism requires divided love! I submit to you that is one of the considerations which shows polytheism to be an inferior system to monotheism.

It is reasonable that we are supremely obligated to one being alone, and it is unreasonable that we are actually, by design, supremely and equally obligated to multiple beings, since such a situation will not allow supreme obligation. Divine Oneness fits the bill; divine twoness, or manyness, do not. So much for the greatest command.

But Jesus isn't finished. He's going to give the scribe more than he bargained for. The scribe asked for one command, Jesus gives him two!

The second commandment is Leviticus 19: Love your neighbor as yourself. Just like the last command, this concerns value and obligation. The level of our obligation issues from the value of the object. God is the most valuable object so we are obligated to love him most. After God the most valuable objects in our experience are human persons. And so the second highest obligation is to love people. Why does Jesus add this?

Hard to say in this context, although the effect is to take a series of high flying theological questions and bring them down to earth; what good is theology if we can't even love people?

Well the scribe again responds by affirming Jesus' answer and calling it good. He goes on to repeat the substance of Jesus' answer and then he adds an important clarification.

The scribe says loving God is more than all ritual sacrifices. We need to understand this is a startling statement coming from a scribe. A contemporaneous, popular saying held that the world was built on the sacrificial system!

Of course it shouldn't be surprising; the OT, from early history to later prophetic books tells us that moral obedience to God is far greater than ritual observance. The OT isn't stupid; it knows where the money is, and it isn't in sacrifices.

But to hear this from a scribe of Jesus' day! We should be surprised and pleased by this new character in the story. And we find that Jesus is surprised and pleased.

Jesus tells the man he is not far from the kingdom! Stop for a moment and realize every encounter with the scribes in Mark thus far, and almost every encounter with them in the rest of the Gospels is negative! Who is this strange character?

As a whole, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests, and the scribes were hostile to Jesus throughout his ministry, especially his later ministry. Technically speaking, this scribe is one of the enemies! He is very possibly a Pharisee himself, or possibly a Sadducee. But the one thing he shouldn't be is a friend of Jesus and near to entering the kingdom!

It's a shame we don't hear more about him. What we can do is draw an important principle at this point: Disciples of Jesus come from every quarter, not just the obvious ones. You realize the Gospels favor the social outsiders? The poor, the tax collectors, the prostitutes; these people enter the kingdom before the obvious people like Pharisees and priests and scribes.

But be very careful how that fact shapes your thinking. We don't suppose Jesus rejects rich people, do we? Zaccheus was very rich, and he too was a son of Abraham. Do we think Jesus

would refuse a repentant Pharisee? You may have heard of a man named "Paul"? And the Gospels might lead us to believe Jesus wouldn't have a bible teacher, a theology professor in his community; but here is one drawing near to the kingdom of God.

Beware whom you write off. The grace of God, like lightning, could strike anywhere; poor or rich, slave or free, foolish or wise. Sometimes even enemies perceive the truth and enter the kingdom.

So those are the challenges! Jesus' enemies have officially figured out he's the wrong guy to argue with.

### **Summary**

But the heart of this text is a call for sincere love for God as the greatest command of all, with the subsidiary command for love of neighbor.