

Too often we approach the gospels by thinking about what Jesus was doing in his day.
That is a valid thing to do.

But we also need to think in terms of what the Holy Spirit is doing in Mark.
Mark is arranging and presenting Jesus’ teaching to *us*.
That’s why I have set up the outline in the way that I have.

Our text tonight starts by emphasizing the unity of God,
using the Shema from Deuteronomy 6.

It is called the “shema” from the word “to hear” –
“Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”
Shema Yisrael, Yhvh Elohenu, Yhvh echad.

But having reaffirmed the central monotheistic premise of the Torah,
and having reaffirmed the central ethical premise of the Torah –
love God with *all your heart* and your neighbor as yourself –
Jesus immediately points to the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead in verses 35-37,
subverting any Unitarian interpretation of the Shema,
and then subverting traditional Jewish ethics in his teaching on the widow’s mite.

In other words, Mark 12:28-44 is an extended commentary on the Shema.
What does it mean to love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your mind,
and with all your strength?

Well, first you must understand who your God is –
and then you must understand what it means to love him –
and in the process you will learn what it means to love your neighbor!

1. The Lord Is One, So Love God and Neighbor (12:28-34)

*28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another,
and seeing that he answered them well, asked him,
“Which commandment is the most important of all?”*

From the start, Mark wants us to think well of this scribe.
When lumped together, “the scribes” get hit pretty hard in the gospels,
but Mark singles out this one as a different sort.
He has heard Jesus refuse to answer “by what authority do you do these things?”
But he has gleaned from Jesus’ reference to John the Baptist
that Jesus is claiming divine authority.
He has heard the parable of the vineyard and the tenants,
and he understands that Jesus is claiming to be the Son.

He has heard how Jesus escaped the trap of the Herodians and Pharisees
 “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
 and to God the things that are God’s.”
And he has heard Jesus’ wisdom in refuting the Sadducees
 and affirming the resurrection of the dead.

He sees that Jesus has answered them *well*.
And so he does not try to trap Jesus.
He lobs a softball.

There is no easier question than the one that he asks.
This is like asking a child, “who made you?”
Or a teenager, “what is the chief end of man?”

He is not trying to stump Jesus.

29 *Jesus answered, “The most important is,
 ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
 30 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.’
31 The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’
 There is no other commandment greater than these.”*

Jesus answers with the Shema.
 Every rabbi knew this.
 Every *child* knew this.
This was engrained upon the heart of every Jew from childhood.

Moses had said back in Deuteronomy 6, “this is *the* commandment.”
 All of the ten commandments boil down to this *one*.

But the way in which Jesus combines Deuteronomy 6 with Leviticus 19
is not paralleled by anyone before him.

Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 as the “second” commandment.
 Because *the* commandment could be misunderstood
 as a call to ignore others in a misguided “obsession” with “loving” God.

I also want you to notice something here.
 Usually, it is *Jesus* who provides the “proper” interpretation.
 But here, Mark puts the “wise” saying into the mouth of the scribe.

You might say, “well that’s just because Mark is recounting what actually happened!”
 I don’t doubt that the scribe did say this.
 But when Matthew tells the story of this encounter,
 he leaves out the scribe’s commentary.

There are no doubt thousands of wise things that people said to Jesus.
This is one of the only ones that is recorded in the scriptures.

And so from one of the hated scribes,
we hear this commendation of Jesus:

32 *And the scribe said to him,*

“You are right, Teacher.

You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him.

33 *And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength,
and to love one's neighbor as oneself,*

is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

The scribe summarizes this in three categories:

Love God with all the heart – this refers to the center of who you are –
it also includes the affective.

Love God with all the understanding – this refers to how you use your mind.

Love God with all the strength – this refers to the physical stuff you *do*.

In other words, love for God must permeate *everything* about us.

I know that sometimes this can sound exhausting!

“I have to think about how to love God *all the time*?

I just want some time for *me!*”

Whenever we think of love for God as an exhausting thing
we know that we are missing something.

Love for God is not exhausting –
it is refreshing!

But love for God must always keep these three (or four) things together:
the affective, the intellectual, and the physical –
all grounded in the heart.

If your love for God is primarily an affective thing,
and you ignore loving God with your mind and strength,
then religion becomes mushy and sentimental – all about feelings and emotions.

If your love for God is primarily an intellectual thing,
and you ignore loving God with your heart and strength,
then religion becomes cold and arid – a never-ending doctrinal debate.

If your love for God is primarily a physical thing,
and you ignore loving God with your heart and mind,
then religion becomes a moralistic thing – all about service and deeds.

And quite frankly, even two out of three is still a disaster:
who would want a moralistic sentimentality?

a moralistic doctrinalism?
or an emotional doctrinalism?

After all, true love for God *must* contain all three!

And yet you can even see those who have all three, but are still missing the heart!
You can have a moralistic, sentimental, doctrinalism!

Because what lies at the heart of loving God
with the affections, with the understanding, and with the strength,
is the underlying love of God with *all* our heart;

with the entirety of *who we are*.

But, if we are going to do this –
if we are going to love God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength,
we need to go back to the first part of the Shema:

The LORD our God – the LORD is one.
There is no other besides him.

We live in a day when this affirmation is becoming difficult once again.
For centuries the Christian west has assumed its monotheism.
But today polytheism has arisen again under the guise of pluralism.

Sure, there is an underlying monism in modern society –
the claim that all religions are one –
the idea that every way is equally valid.

But if you look back at ancient polytheism,
there was an underlying monism there as well.
In the ancient world, empires might seek to impose their *rule* on other nations,
but they never sought to impose their *religion* on other nations.
You have your gods, we have our gods.
We may require you to sacrifice to our gods *as well*,
but “conversion” was never sought.

Think back through biblical history:
the Israelites were monotheists – they believed that Yahweh was the one true God –
but they never sought to establish a universal empire
(although you can see hints towards that in the prophets);

the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Persians, and the Romans –
these empires sought universal political dominance,
but they never sought to establish a universal religion.

The idea of a universal religion – a religion that made exclusive claims
and demanded exclusive adherence from *every* nation –
that had never arisen,

until Jesus said just a few verses before:
“render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,
and to God the things that are God’s” (v17).

Jesus will eschew a universal political dominance.
He does not seek an empire of this age.
But when the gospel of Christ is brought to the Gentiles
the result is a universal, exclusive religion.
A religion that is not tied to any empire – any earthly city –
but rather is the empire of the heavenly Zion –
a universal empire of the City of God.

And so when the scribe says that God is one, and there is no other beside him,
and that to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding
and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself,
is much more than all whole burnt offering and sacrifices,
Jesus sees that he answered wisely.

The contrast that the scribe makes between the ethical demand of love
and the ritual sacrificial system
is entirely consistent with the prophets,
but is somewhat unusual in Jewish thought
prior to the destruction of the temple.
Certainly Mark’s readers – many of whom would be facing decisions
about how they would relate to the temple system –
would hear this scribe urging them not to be overly concerned
about the sacrificial system.

*34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely,
he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

Why is he “not far”?
What is missing?

That is where Jesus is going next!
The scribe has understood Moses.
But will he understand Jesus?

And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Having silenced his enemies by his Word,
Jesus now goes on the offensive.

2. The Shema and the Trinity: the Son of David Is David's Lord (12:35-37)

35 *And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said,*

“How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?

36 David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet.’

37 David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?”

And the great throng heard him gladly.

Mark reminds us where we are.

We are in the temple, listening to Jesus.

Jesus has just cited the Shema – the basic confession of Israel's faith and practice.

The LORD our God, the LORD is one –

therefore love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Now Jesus expands on the first part.

You believe that the LORD is one.

Good.

But if you would understand who God is, you need to think about Psalm 110.

Many Jews believed that Psalm 110 was speaking of the Messiah –
the anointed Son of David who would restore the Kingdom.

And David says that the LORD (Yahweh) spoke to my Lord (adonai).

If “my Lord” refers to the son of David,

then that means that David refers to his son as his “lord” –

which is a very perplexing thing!

A father does not call his son his “lord.”

That just doesn't happen!

Especially when the father is the founder of a royal dynasty!

And yet David does this “in the Holy Spirit.”

Do you see what Jesus is doing?

The scribe has reaffirmed the central monotheistic affirmation of Israel's theology:

The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Jesus agrees –

but immediately gives a Trinitarian interpretation of Israel's God.

Jesus' hearers would not have understood this –

but Mark's hearers would!

We hear this and remember that our love for God

must be a love for the Triune God –

we are to love God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Which leads me to ask you a question:
do you love the Holy Trinity?

Do you love the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Or do you love a vague and amorphous “God.”

You claim to worship a Triune God.
But do you treat him like a Unitarian deity?

You cannot properly think of the three without being drawn to the one –
but neither can you think of the one without being drawn to the three!

It is not as though you can love the Father by doing one thing,
and then love the Son by doing something else,
and love the Spirit by doing a third thing;
rather, we show forth our love for the Holy Trinity
by loving him for who he is *as* the Triune God.

And if you want to know how to do this,
keep reading!

3. Putting Love into Practice: the Widow’s Mite (12:38-44)

*38 And in his teaching he said,
“Beware of the scribes,*

The way that Mark introduces this statement,
“in his teaching he said”
suggests that Mark is picking out one statement from a larger body of teaching.
In other words, Jesus said many other things,
but this one thing is most essential for us to understand.

Beware of the scribes.

In light of the last encounter with a scribe, this might seem surprising.
The last scribe we met was “not far from the kingdom of God”!

But Jesus is warning about a certain mindset – a certain attitude –
that characterizes the scribes.
And he lists four things that they “like”

*who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces
39 and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts,*

All four things have to do with social prominence.
They like to be noticed – so they walk around in festive garments –

and they like elaborate greetings in the market.
They like show, they delight in being seen, they like to look important.

If status and reputation is what you are after,
don't claim to follow Jesus,
because worldly fame and honor is *not* what Jesus is about.

Love for God demands humility.

And it also demands love for your neighbor,
contrary to the scribes,

*40 who devour widows' houses
and for a pretense make long prayers.
They will receive the greater condemnation."*

Widows are especially vulnerable.
This has *always* been true.
We tend not to think about it –
but it is still true today.

The phrase “devour widows’ houses” may seem somewhat odd,
but we say similar things: “to eat someone out of house and home.”

The prophets had regularly condemned those who take advantage of widows and orphans
and so true love for God is expressed through loving widows.

The grammar of the passage suggests that the devouring and the praying are connected.
It may well be that Jesus is referring to religious services
that the scribes performed for widows –
taking advantage of them and bilking them out of their money.

In other words, Jesus is condemning every televangelist and internet ministry under the sun
that makes its living off of widows.

I marvel at how many “ministries” out there rely on the contributions of pious and faithful saints.
But how many of them are necessary?
Or if they are really necessary, why can they not be maintained through the church?
I am not hostile to all parachurch ministries.
Some are truly valuable and do good service.
But many – many even of those that started well –
have the tendency to devour widows’ houses,
and thus bring judgment upon themselves.

This was Jesus’ public statement.

*41 And he sat down opposite the treasury
and watched the people putting money into the offering box.
Many rich people put in large sums.*

The collecting chests were in the Court of the Women –
which does not mean that it was for women only,
but rather, that it was the place where women were allowed to go!
These temple chests brought in vast sums of money for the support of the temple,
and all pious Jews would donate what they could –

for good reason!

Because this was the place where God dealt with their sin.
This was the place where earth and heaven met.
This was the place where all their hopes were focused.

*42 And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,
which make a penny.*

Two lepta; which make a *kodrantes*; a *kodrantes* (Latin *quadrans*)
was a Roman copper coin worth less than 1/100 of a *denarius*
(which was a day's wage for a laborer)

The lepta was the smallest Roman coin, with the smallest value.

*43 And he called his disciples to him and said to them,
“Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more
than all those who are contributing to the offering box.
44 For they all contributed out of their abundance,
but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had,
all she had to live on.”*

Brothers and sisters,
you need to hear this in the light of the Shema.

What does it mean to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength?
What does it mean to love the Triune God?

The disciples had been impressed with all the big gifts.

I daresay that I have been guilty of that.

But Jesus says that this widow has given more to the kingdom of God
than everyone else put together –
because she, out of her poverty, has put in everything that she had.

And in case you didn't get that,
Jesus adds, "her whole livelihood."

I don't know the story of that woman.
I don't know what happened to her.

But I do know what Jesus wants *you* to see.
He wants you to see that widow with only two pennies left.
Because of inflation we would probably call it two dollars
(after all, she could probably buy a loaf of bread for two pennies in her day!)

With one penny she could get a small loaf – enough for one more day –
or she can keep both pennies and last two more days.
But instead she goes to the temple and puts her last two pennies in the box.

And she walks away from the temple with a song in her heart,
because she loves the LORD her God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We would say that she is a fool.
She shouldn't be giving her money to the temple!
She doesn't have enough to live on!
She should be a better steward of the money God has given her!

According to the economics of this age, she is a fool.

But according to the economics of the age to come, she is blessed.
I think it likely that there are two scenarios for her future:
either she died of starvation a few days later and entered into the joy of her Lord,
or the Lord's disciples cared for her,
and she was one of those who received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost!

But either way,
the point for you and for me is twofold:
1) love for God demands that we care for widows (12:40)
2) love for God demands that widows not worry about themselves (12:44)

Yes, there is a place for things like insurance and retirement savings.
But protecting ourselves and our future is not the first thing.

What are we communicating to our children when we tell them
"I'm socking away a wad for retirement, so that you don't have to take care of me"?

One wise reformed pastor told his congregation that after they had taken care of necessities
(food and clothing)
that for every penny spent on "conveniences"
we should give a penny to the poor.

If you don't know how to do that,
let me introduce you to your best new friend: the Recession!
In good economic times it can be difficult sometimes to figure out who are the "poor"
and how to help them.
Today it's easy.
We pray for them every Sunday when we pray for the unemployed.
They need work – so hire them!

Do you need an electrician? A painter? A handyman?
Do you need someone to do a major project – a minor repair?

So that is part one – how we should think of widows –
but then there is the attitude that should characterize widows
(and indeed, all of us)
that we should devote all that we are and all that we have to the temple.

The striking thing about this is that the temple that this widow supports
is the same temple that Jesus rebukes for its being a den of robbers!

And in fact, in the very next verse, we hear this:

*And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him,
"Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings."*

In other words,
"Look, Teacher, I love the temple too!"

But Jesus replies,
*Do you see these great buildings?
There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.*

Do not set your affection on the things of earth –
even the holy things of earth.
Rather, love the LORD your God with all your heart –
Love the Lord Jesus Christ and set your minds on things above –
Be filled with Spirit and rejoice and be glad that you may enter the courts of the Lord
in his glorious temple in the city whose builder is God.

Yes, there is an intellectual component to this:
after all, Jesus has to *teach* his disciples these things!
And yes, there is a service component to this:
do not forget the poor and needy!

But love the Lord your God cannot be reduced to "serve God" and "know stuff about God."
It means to *love* him!