

# The Best Thing You Could Ever Do

Jesus' Last Days (Mark): Part 11  
Mark 12:28-31 (Mt.22:34-40) 3/27/2021

Hook: Of all the good deeds you've done, which is the best? What's the best deed anyone could ever do?

Introduction.....	1
The Best Thing You Could Ever Do.....	2
Review .....	2
An Excellent Question.....	2
Priorities in the Law .....	3
An Ultimate Answer .....	3
Doctrine then Duty.....	3
The Oneness of God.....	3
Loving God Defined .....	4
Your God .....	4
Heart.....	5
Soul.....	5
Why Is the First Command "Love God" Rather than "Glorify God"? .....	6
Mind.....	6
Strength.....	7
Internal vs External .....	7
Sins of the Heart.....	7
Hypocrisy .....	7
Judgmentalism.....	7
Love Your Neighbor .....	8
As Yourself .....	9
Conclusion .....	9
Refocusing on God.....	9
Summary.....	11

**Mark 12:28** 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 neighbor 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 neighbor 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.

## Introduction

## The Best Thing You Could Ever Do

Which is more important—putting your tithes into the offering plate, or showing mercy to someone in desperate straits? Answer: mercy.

**Matthew 23:23 ... You give a tenth ... But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness.**

He went on to say they should do both—they should tithe and show mercy—but not all acts of righteousness are equal. Some good deeds are weightier than others. Mercy is more important than tithing because tithing is symbolic, whereas mercy is a direct moral act. When Jesus gave that answer, he taught us that there are gradations of good. It's good to tithe; it's even better to show mercy. It's good to show mercy to one person; it's even better to show mercy to ten people. It's good to help an old lady across the street; it's even better to save someone's life. It's good to save someone's life; it's even better to save their life by laying down your life in their place. That's a super good deed.

What's the best deed of all? When you think of all the amazing things people do— a soldier diving on a hand grenade to save his buddies, a woman devoting her life to raising godly children, a preacher faithfully proclaiming the gospel to millions of people, a missionary devoting his life to translate the Bible for an unreached people— of all the good deeds, which one is the best possible deed that a human being could ever do? Thankfully, someone asked Jesus that question, so we're going to find out the answer today.

As you know, this passage is very dear to me. I preached a 13-part series on this passage before. I'm not going to repeat all that now because it's all available online. As tempting as it is to delve back into all that, I want to finish Mark before the Second Coming, so today I'll just focus how this passage fits into Mark's message.

## Review

Jesus has been dominating the Temple ever since he arrived in Jerusalem in the days just prior to his death. He started by driving everyone out and trashing their tables which resulted in a series of encounters between him and the Temple authorities. Each time, all their efforts to humiliate and discredit Jesus ended up discrediting themselves, and showcasing Jesus' superior wisdom and authority. But this final question ends up being a completely different kind of encounter than the others. For one thing, instead of being motivated by a desire to discredit Jesus, this scribe asked his question because he was impressed with Jesus.

## An Excellent Question

**Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of the law<sup>1</sup> came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them [the Sadducees] a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which<sup>2</sup> is the most important?”**

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<sup>1</sup> Other translations say “scribe,” but by the time the NT was written, the noun ‘scribe’ had changed from its original meaning of a copyist of the law to a biblical scholar who was an interpreter of the law and an expounder of tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Lit: “Which commandment is first of all?” (ποία ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη πάντων). The problem is, the word “of all” (panton) is neuter in gender. If it refers to the word “commandment,” which is feminine, we would expect it to also be feminine. NIGNTC: If ποῖος here carried its classical sense ‘what kind of’, the question would relate to a category of commandment rather than expecting one specific text to be quoted. But by NT times this sense had been eroded, and ποῖος is commonly used as an alternative to τίς. Jesus' reply takes it in that sense, as surely the feminine singular πρώτη requires. After ἐντολή the masculine/neuter form πάντων is surprising, and has led to the suggestion that it does not mean ‘all (other) commandments’ but simply means ‘everything’, which would then result in ‘a widening of the boundary of the question from that of the Law to that of morality in general’. But while the idea of one commandment being the ‘first’ in a ranking of commandments is natural

This guy wins the prize for asking the greatest question ever. Once Jesus answers it, then we'll know what the best thing a human being could ever do is.

## Priorities in the Law

The scribes often debated questions like this, and rightly so. It's important to know which things are more important than other things—even in the Bible. Sometimes people get way off track because they take one thing in the Bible and get so fixated on that, that they neglect more important things. People like that will destroy relationships or even whole churches because they disagree with the Bible translation they use. They get out of balance because they don't understand the relative importance of things. Take something that is important and elevate it above something more important, and you've just turned a good thing into an evil thing.

## An Ultimate Answer

So, what does Jesus say is the most important of all God's laws? It's interesting—before answering the question, Jesus finds it necessary to tell us something about God's nature.

## Doctrine then Duty

**29 “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.**

This is a pattern in Scripture. First doctrine, then duty. You've heard the saying, “Live and learn,” but a better approach is to first learn, then live. Truth first, then action—especially truth about God.

## The Oneness of God

So what is this bit of information about God we need to understand before we can carry out the greatest good deed possible? That God is one. He's unique. He's the only God out there. Now that we know that, we're ready for the command.

**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.<sup>3</sup>**

It's because if there are multiple gods, you can't give all your allegiance to any one of them. When you're sailing, you need the sea god on your side, but at harvest time you need favor from the god of the harvest. Our culture doesn't worship sea gods or harvest gods, but we are every bit as prone as any other generation to elevate created things and make them ultimate. It might be patriotism or family or education or money or career or pleasure—there's no end to the line of competitors for God's throne. But if there's only one God, devotion to him must be undivided.<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry: “He has the sole right to us, and therefore ought to have the sole possession of us.”

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enough, *πρώτη πάντων* is not a natural way to say ‘more important than anything else’. BDF 164 (1), describe *πάντων* here as ‘a frozen masc.-neut. form’, by which they presumably mean that it derives its gender from the use of a stereotyped idiom *πρώτη πάντων* rather than from the gender of the noun *ἐντολή*. At any rate it seems clear that Jesus is being asked to identify a ‘first commandment’.

<sup>3</sup> This command to love God is repeated over and over and over all throughout Deuteronomy (6:5, 7:9,12, 10:12, 11:1,13,22, 13:3, 19:9, 30:6,16,20). There are also numerous references to loving God in the New Testament (1 Cor.2:9, 8:3, 16:22).

<sup>4</sup> There are so many commands in the Bible, in order to make sense of it all there has to be some center—some unifying central imperative that everything connects to. Then if you get one that's obscure or hard to interpret, you can always go back and make sure your interpretation is in line with the greatest commandment.

The atheist Aldous Huxley said even though he didn't believe in God, he admitted that any time a culture moves away from monotheism it inevitably devolves into a destructive polytheism. And he said it's destructive because if you have multiple

## Loving God Defined

Do you think most Christians really believe that the greatest thing a human being could ever do is love God? Greater than curing cancer, greater than establishing world peace, greater than winning the lost—of all the amazing things human beings have accomplished, the greatest of all is to love God. If you want your life to count, if you want to make a difference, you want your existence to matter, it's all a function of how much you love God.

But what does loving God mean? We need to define it because there's always so much nonsense out there about *agape* love not involving emotion. That's an idea that comes from philosophy, not the Bible. On the other hand, we understand that true love is far more than mere emotion, right? A mother who is dead tired gets up in the middle of the night out of commitment, not because she had some emotional impulse to just spring out of bed and go handle a dirty diaper.

So then what is the definition of love? The simplest definition I can give is this: love is a tender regard for a person that activates appropriate emotions toward that person and seeks that person's highest good. There are three key parts to that definition. First, love is a tender regard. That has to do with how much you value the person. And it's a tender regard that does two things:

- 1) activates appropriate emotions toward that person
- 2) seeks that person's happiness and highest good

So what if you don't feel attracted to the person in a given moment? Love will still seek their highest good, and the stronger the love, the more it will activate whatever emotion is fitting for the situation. If the person you love is suffering, what emotions get activated? Pity and compassion, right? Or maybe anger toward whomever is causing the pain. If the person you love is happy, that activates feelings of happiness in you. What if the person you love rejects you? That activates feelings of sorrow and heartbreak. If the person you love chooses others ahead of you, that might activate feelings of rejection or jealousy.

And when those feelings are activated, they assist you in the first part, which is seeking the person's highest good. So you hear the baby crying, that activates feelings of compassion, and that helps you drag yourself out of bed and do what is in the child's best interests.

If the feelings aren't being activated like they should, then you know something is wrong with your love. Just like when your car won't start you know something's wrong with your car. What about loving God? What emotions does love activate toward God? Pity? No. God's never in trouble. Anger? No. God never does anything wrong. Feelings of rejection? No. God doesn't reject people who love him. The emotion love for God activates is delight.

When you love someone and you're confronted with that person's good qualities, it makes you happy. And when you're not experiencing those qualities, you wish you were. So loving God means you desire nearness with him, and when you experience that nearness, you enjoy it.

That's the basic overview—there are other emotions too. Love will activate feelings like hope, confidence and trust, gratitude, etc. But you get the idea.

## Your God

God picked a word for the greatest commandment that has more to do with relationship than duty: love. The greatest commandment is a relational command. Notice it doesn't say, "Love the Lord with all

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different gods all summoning absolute loyalty it results in a divided, fragmented culture.

You can certainly see that in our culture. Allegiance to God drops out of cultural vogue, and the culture rips itself apart because everyone has different ultimate allegiances. For some people the ultimate, most important thing is climate change. For others the ultimate thing is skin color. For others, it's God.

A culture can have strong disagreement and debate on those issues, but when they get elevated to religious levels—the ultimate good—having multiple different ultimate things will rip a society apart, which is exactly what we're witnessing in our country.

your heart..." It's not "Love the Lord"; it's "Love the Lord *your* God." And after our last study about what it means for God to be *your* God, that has a world of meaning, doesn't it? (I have to say, our study last time might be the one study in all these years we've been studying Mark that helped me the most. That concept of "God of" or "your God.") It's a love relationship, not just a pledge of allegiance. And that's why it requires your whole being.

**30 Love the Lord your God<sup>5</sup> with<sup>6</sup> all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.<sup>7</sup>**

Let's take a quick look at each of those.<sup>7</sup>

## Heart

Your heart is the headquarters of your being. It's the command center of your life, where decisions are made and plans are hatched and direction is set. The heart is where we decide for or against God. Your soul is part of you, your mind is part of you, your body is part of you, but your heart—that *is* you. Your heart is the part of you that makes you, you and not someone else. You could lose your arm and still be just as much you as you were before. Your mind can change, but you're still just as much you as you were before your change of mind. I could even lose my family and everything in this world I hold dear, and I would still be me. But if I love God with all my heart, that goes so deep that if you took it away it would cause my very identity to disintegrate. So what Jesus is saying is this: when you get past all the layers down to the most essential core of your being, love for God must reside there, in your very identity.

## Soul

The Hebrew word for "soul" means "appetite." Your soul is the part of your inner man that craves things. It's the seat of all your desires and longings. And it's the part of you that feels anguish when those desires aren't met.

**Mark 14:34 "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."**

That part of you that desires things and feels empty or full when you get them or don't get them—love God with that part of you. Train all your desires—desires for food, rest, recreation, companionship, respect, money, success—train yourself to make all of those a desire to have an experience with God. So when you get those things, you receive them from God's hand and you use them to teach you what God is like. Lift up your soul to God—lift up all your desiring, craving and longing to God.

That's how I define heart and soul—maybe you would define them a little differently. But no matter what the nuances of your definitions, all scholars agree that the point of the phrase "with all your heart and all your soul" is to include your whole inner man. And if it's your whole inner man, wouldn't that have to include your emotions? Whether you would locate them in the heart or the soul or wherever—surely they are in there *somewhere*. Something inside you feels emotions, and whatever that thing is, you must also love God with that.

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<sup>5</sup> Other New Testament references to loving God: Luke 11:42; John 5:42; 14:31; Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9; 8:3; Jas 1:12; 2:5; 1 John 2:5, 15; 4:20; 5:2–3; Jude 21; Rev 2:4. John 14:15, 24; 21:15–17; 1 Cor 16:22; Eph 6:24; 1 Pet 1:8.

<sup>6</sup> There are two possibilities for how the word translated "with" (Greek *ek*) is used here: either source ("from your heart" or means "with your heart"). Edwards argues for source because the heart is seen earlier in Mark as the source of sin. Either way, it's hard to see the difference. If the heart is the source of the love, but it's a command, then we must do something. We must cause this love to arise out of our hearts. I can't see any significance difference between doing that, and using my heart as a tool to love God.

<sup>7</sup> Some commentators suggest that Jesus didn't intend that we consider the meaning of each one, but rather intended them to be understood as a whole. But the fact that Jesus placed the word "and" between each of the terms is an indication that he did want us to stop and consider each individually.

Could we imagine that God would say, “You must love me with absolutely every bit of your being—except your emotions. You don’t have to love me with those.” Maybe God would say that, right? After all, the emotions are such an inconsequential part of your inner man, right? I mean, your feelings don’t play any significant role in your life, do they? None of your words or actions have ever been motivated by how you felt, right? Wrong. Hardly anything affects our lives more than our emotions. Your feelings are a huge part of who you are. Why would we assume God wants all of you except that part?

I would argue that not only are they included, in many ways they are the goal of the Christian life. In so many areas, feelings are the final goal. Would you rather have information about joy, or feel joy? Would you rather have a great definition of passion, or actually feel passion? We need definitions and information, but only as a means to the end of feeling. That’s something the cerebral types need to hear, because sometimes people can get to where they are content to just be able to define everything. They can wax eloquent about hope or delight or love for hours, but you ask them, “Have you ever felt any of that?” and they stare at you like a cow at a new gate.

## Why Is the First Command “Love God” Rather than “Glorify God”?

Have you ever wondered why the greatest command isn’t “Glorify God”? God’s glory is the most important reality there is, so why isn’t the greatest commandment to glorify God? It’s because nothing glorifies God more than loving him. Which would honor my wife more, if I say, “I’m going to spend time with you because it’s my duty as your husband,” or “I’m going to spend time with you just because I love being with you”? The second one honors her far more because when being with her makes me happy, my happiness is the echo of her excellence. How delightful she is is reflected in how much I enjoy being with her. And it’s the same with God. Sacrifice, worship, service, obedience, praise—those things all bring God greater glory when they flow out of desire than when they are functions of mere duty. So if the most important reality is God’s glory, the most important command has to be love God.

## Mind

Okay, so **with all your heart and with all your soul** covers everything, but then Jesus adds the word, “mind.” The word “heart” already includes the seat of your thinking (“as a man thinks in his heart...”). Thinking is already included, but evidently Jesus wanted to lay special emphasis on the importance of our thoughts in loving God, so he underlines that part by adding the word *mind*.

**1 Corinthians 14:15 I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.**

God doesn’t want thoughtless, mindless worship. Bruce Lee was famous for saying, “Don’t think; feel.” God says, “No. How about you think *and* feel? I want you to love me with *all* of you—heart, soul, and mind.”

This part is so important because we’re always thinking. Most of the time you’re not feeling strong emotions, but every moment of every day you’re thinking about something. Your mind is always moving in some direction, and God commands that it be moving in the direction of loving him. We need to think thoughts that are likely to result in increased delight in God. That’s why God gave you a brain.

What do you do when you really love someone? You enjoy that person in your imagination. You think about them, you recall things they said and did that you really liked, you replay them over and over. You use your brainpower to think up ways to make them happy. You think of ways you might have hurt them, and ways to make it right. The more you love someone, the greater the percentage of your thoughts they take up. God commands us to love him with all our minds.

## Strength

Finally, love God with all your strength. This word refers to ability—or capability. Love God with all your doing—all your actions. Love begins on the inside but it never ends there. Unexpressed love isn't love. You use your mind to think of ways to express love to God, and you use your strength to do those things. Your soul desires nearness to God, but you need your strength to actually get up and put one foot in front of another and go to a place where you can be alone with God for an extended time. Your soul might hunger for God's Word, but only your strength can pick up a Bible and read it. You hunger and thirst for spiritual sustenance from God, and you use your strength to perform the most strenuous action you perform all day—lift that remote and click off the TV and pull up a sermon or worship music on your phone to listen to. Everything our hearts, souls, and minds do to love God finds its expression through our strength.

And God requires we love him with *all* our strength. Everything we ever do should be to either *express* love for God or *seek* greater love for God. Love for God must dominate your feelings, drive your decisions, direct your thinking, and define your actions.

## Internal vs External

### Sins of the Heart

Do you see now why Jesus said things like if you lust, you're guilty of adultery; and if you're angry, that's the same as murder? We always focus so much on actions, but actions are only the very end of the process. If the greatest commandment is to love God with everything inside me, how can I pat myself on the back for committing the sin on the inside but refraining on the outside? If God's command is that the most essential core to my feelings and desires and attitudes and thoughts and all the rest is to be pursuing love for God above all, but instead of doing that, I go the way of lust or anger or pride or self-love, so the whole inside of me is running in the opposite direction of God, but then I stop just short of carrying out the physical action, that's not much of a victory. If I'm all proud of myself and say, "Well, at least I didn't do this or say that." "At least" is right. It really is least. What I did was still 95% sin—if not 100.

### Hypocrisy

This is why Jesus hated hypocrisy so much—righteousness that's only on the outside. Whenever you do some good deed, ask yourself, "How deep inside me does this good go?" You imagine God looking at you doing some good deed and saying, "That's beautiful." But then he looks deeper, beyond the action, at your motives for doing it. Does he still say, "Those are beautiful"? Then he looks deeper, at your attitudes and desires and the emotions that are activated. How deep does he have to look before it stops looking so beautiful? However deep it goes, think about how you could push it deeper because it's not too much to ask for God to say, "If you're going to love me, I want that to go all the way to the core."

### Judgmentalism

**So this principle helps us with the problem of externalism and hypocrisy. And it also helps us with the problem of judgmentalism. You look at someone who has committed terrible external sins against people and you think, "I'm not like that. I never committed a felony. I never committed adultery. All these horrible things that person did to hurt me—I've never done that to anyone." Maybe you haven't. But have you loved God with all your mind? Is the command center of your being driving toward love for God?**

**How can we be judgmental toward other when we realize that the most important issue that determines whether you are good or evil is what is or isn't happening at the core of your being?**

**Because I can see how much I fail to love God at the core of my being, but I can't see the core of anyone else's being. So the person who should seem like the most astonishingly sinful person I know is me, because I can see all the places inside me that fail to love God. I can't see that in anyone else.**

**So when you find yourself thinking you're better than other people, you know for sure that you're measuring with the wrong yardstick and you've probably reversed the first and second commandment.**

## **Love Your Neighbor**

The scribe only asked for the #1 commandment, but to just give that without giving #2 also would be misleading, so Jesus throws this in:

**31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."**

Jesus doesn't want anyone to misunderstand and think they can somehow fulfill their responsibility locked up in the privacy of their own room, so elevates love for neighbor right up there close to love for God so we understand you can't love God without also loving people.

**1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar.**

We must also love people, which means we must have tender-hearted regard for them that drives us to serve their best interests and seek their joy in the Lord, and that activates appropriate emotions toward them.

And Jesus keeps it practical. He doesn't say, "Love the whole, wide world as yourself." Just your neighbor. Who is my neighbor? We learn from the Good Samaritan parable that your neighbor is defined as anyone whose needs you can see and whose needs you can meet.

So Jesus elevates love for neighbor by joining it with love for God. However, in another sense he is demoting love for people because he makes it very clear—these two commands are not tied for #1. Love God is #1, love people is #2. You love your neighbor as yourself, but you love God more than you love yourself. Love for God means you deny yourself. Love for God is primary, but the world always wants to push love for people up to that #1 spot. They think loving people is the most important thing because they think humanity is more important than God.

Just listen to them talk about "victimless" crimes. "This doesn't hurt anybody, so how could it be wrong?" If all it does is dishonor God, if all it does is dethrone the Almighty, but it doesn't hurt any human beings, then how could it be evil? If it is a sin, it's a peccadillo at worst. Taking God's name in vain—so what? But punching someone in the nose or stealing their stuff or lying to them or killing them—that kind of stuff is serious because it's done against human beings.

Thinking that way isn't a little mistake. It's full-blown idolatry because it puts humanity in the place of God. And that idolatrous attitude has wormed its way into the Church. There is a whole branch of Christianity known as liberation theology that elevates what they call social justice to the highest place. Helping poor, oppressed people is the only thing that matters to them.

That was the attitude the disciples are going to have in ch.14 when the woman pours expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and they say, "Why this waste?" They thought it was a waste to just dump it on the ground when it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Why waste it by honoring the Son of God with it instead of doing some real good with it by helping the poor? And Jesus said, "Wrong. What she did is beautiful." Adoration of Jesus is greater than feeding the hungry. We need to keep #1, #1. Put anything else in that place—even something as noble and good as loving your neighbor—by doing that you violate the first commandment.

Listen to David's prayer of repentance after getting a married woman pregnant and then ordering the murder her husband to cover it up.

**Psalm 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.**



You read that and say, “Wait a minute—didn’t you also sin against the guy you murdered after stealing his wife?” Not to mention Bathsheba and the baby who died because of it, and the whole nation of Israel. And David understood all that, but he also understood that the only reason all those other sins were sins was because they were failures to love God. So in the big picture it was really just one, giant sin against God (with a whole lot of tentacles).

But the tendency to forget this isn’t just a problem with the liberation theologians. Don’t you and I fall into this? What gets us more upset—abortion, or someone taking God’s name in vain? Giving sex change hormones to little children, or failure to give God the glory for creating the world? How often do we act like harming human beings is more serious than blaspheming God?

The first command is the first command because it’s the command we break when we break any other command. It’s first because breaking it is the only reason why breaking the others is bad. Abortion isn’t wrong because of the sanctity of human life. It’s wrong because of the sanctity of God. There is nothing inherently immoral about a human life ending. It’s only immoral if that life ends as a result of someone disobeying God. The only reason any kind of child abuse is wrong is because it displeases God. The reason murder is so much worse than killing an animal is only because man bears God’s image. And according to James 3:9, that’s also why it’s wrong to speak harsh words against someone—because that person is in God’s likeness. If you love God first, then you will love people. When you put the first commandment first, everything else finds its right place. Love for God creates a disposition to fulfill every other duty. But when love for God falls out of first place, everything else falls apart.

## **As Yourself**

So first we love God, and because we love him, we love those he loves, namely, our neighbor. If you love your neighbor for any other reason, your love for them will fall short. Love for God is the only motive high enough to enable us to love our neighbors in times when they are the least deserving of love.

And the standard is to do that as you love yourself. Leave it to our narcissistic culture to try to turn that into a command to love ourselves. But it’s not a command to love yourself; it’s an assumption that you already do love yourself. No matter how down on yourself you might be, still, you want things to work out well for yourself, and you should want that for your neighbor as well.

And once again, if the number 1 command slips from its place, this becomes impossible. If I’m living for money, I can’t love my neighbor as myself because that would mean giving him all my money. Loving my neighbor as myself doesn’t work unless my love for myself is all about seeking nearness to God. If that’s my highest pursuit in life, I can throw my best efforts behind helping my neighbor find nearness to God, and I don’t have the sacrifice my highest good while working for his highest good.

## **Conclusion**

### **Refocusing on God**

In the next message I’ll look at this scribe’s remarkable response, and then Jesus’ reaction to that. For now, let’s wrap up our thoughts by considering what each of Jesus’ answers have in common. Have you noticed a theme? The first question was about politics: “What about taxes and Caesar?” And what was the bottom line of Jesus’ answer? Give to God what is God’s. Give to God that which bears God’s image (namely, you) and the Caesar issue will take care of itself.

Next question came out of left field: “What about marriage in the afterlife when you’ve had 7 husbands?” Bottom line of Jesus’ answer: God is the God of the living. Understand what “God of” means, and that will solve all your intellectual objections to the idea of resurrection.

Third question: “What about the law? Which rule supersedes all the others?” Answer: Love God. When someone asked Rabi Hillel this same question, his answer was a version of the golden rule (Don’t treat people in ways you don’t want to be treated). Jesus says, “No, that’s #2. For #1, start with God.”

Do you see the pattern? Question about taxes? Give to God. Question about marriage? Understand what “God of” means. Question about the law? Love God Three questions on completely different topics, all three answers on the same topic: God.

Remember, this is all taking place amidst the debris of Jesus’ assault on the Temple. And do you remember why he did that? He said it was because God’s house was to be a house of prayer. It was supposed to be a place conducive to drawing near to God, and what they had made it was a catastrophic violation of that purpose. So Jesus busts the place up, dressed down the men in charge, preached about how the Temple is supposed to be a place of prayer, and then when they peppered him with questions, his answers were, relationship with God, relationship with God, relationship with God.

In the days right before his death, Jesus wanted to reorient all our thinking upward. And as obvious as this might sound, I think it’s a message that needs to be heard today, because every generation tends to get lost in the weeds of the Bible and forget about this one obscure character in the Bible by the name of God. There are millions of Christian books out there—and thousands of new ones published every month—why is it so hard to find a book about what God is like?<sup>8</sup>

You would think, if our whole existence is all about loving God, that almost every Christian book would be about God. You’d think there would be book after book and sermon after sermon about God’s nature. And you’d think they would go beyond the obvious handful of things we learned about God in Sunday school when we were kids. And you’d think 9 out of 10 Christian “how to” books would be about how to love God more.

But that’s not how it is. Preparing this message, I went to some of my favorite preachers’ websites and couldn’t find a single sermon on loving God. Some of them have topic lists with pages of different topics, and loving others is always one of them, but not loving God. Jesus couldn’t have been more clear that this is the most important thing, and yet there is a constant struggle for us to keep it #1. Even for us, practical atheism is a constant temptation every single day—to live as if there were no God. And so just before Jesus died, he had this big Q&A in the Temple, and his answer to every question was “God”—something about how we are to think about God.

“

Holy, holy” seraphs’ cry  
and call to all who hear  
Cover feet and face before  
the one whom all must fear  
His glory fills the earth and  
flashes brighter than the sun  
To him belongs the highest praise  
his equal, no not one  
More worthy he to be the one  
whom every creature seeks  
Than any treasure earth may boast  
the heavens, land, or sea  
But if deserving of our praise  
and honor and our fear  
Our faithful prayers, repentant sobs  
and every mournful tear  
Then what of that, the greatest of  
the gifts we can bestow

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<sup>8</sup> There are a handful of books out there with the title “THE Attributes of God,” as if the dozen or so attributes in every theology book were the only ones. Systematic theology has picked out a tiny number of attributes, and books about those are mostly a list of proof texts and some dry, boring comments about them. What about all the hundreds and hundreds of other attributes?

Our hearts, the love that steers our lives  
and pulls the soul in tow?  
If worthy of obedience  
and duty and of praise  
How much more must we with joy  
our longings to him raise?  
His claim on us extends beyond  
just that which people see  
All is his, our hearts and souls  
not just our hands and feet

## Summary

The scribes asks an excellent question (we need to know which are the most important things). Jesus begins with a statement about God because knowing truth about him is necessary for obeying his commands. Love is high regard that inspires commitment and activates appropriate emotions. We must do that with the heart (core of our being), soul (seat of desires), mind (special emphasis on the thoughts), and strength (capability). The world elevates neighbor love to #1 because they believe people are more important than God. You can't love neighbor as self if your focus for yourself is money or any earthly thing. But if it's the pursuit of God, then you can. Jesus answers very different questions with the same answer—focusing on God.

Matthew 22:34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

37 Jesus replied: " Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. 43 He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, 44 " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' 45 If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" 46 No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Mark 12:28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. 29 Not knowing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," Jesus answered, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

"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 mind and with all your strength, to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from that day on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Luke 20:41 Then Jesus said to them, "How is it that they say the Christ is the son of David? 42 David himself declares in the Book of Psalms: " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand 43 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." ' 44 David calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"

45 While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, 46 "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."