

Mark 12:28-34 Top Priority, says Jesus Falls Ch. PM 8/20/2023

In our culture we have a phrase 'an elevator speech.' The phrase imagines a scenario in which you are a little worker in a big building of a big company, and one day you are getting onto an elevator. Suddenly, the big man himself, the CEO, stepped onto that same elevator with you without warning. The door closes with just you two in the elevator, and you suddenly have one minute to ask or say something to the big boss! Would you be ready to say what you want to say, or ask what you want to ask? That statement is what we call an elevator speech.

This passage has us imagine - if you were new to Christianity, like this scribe we read about here – and you had a chance to ask Jesus Himself – what is Christianity all about? The Bible has 66 books, and a lot of it is hard for me to understand. Could you summarize it, please?

This scribe was in the presence of greatness. Jesus is the greatest teacher who ever lived. Jesus was able to take all the commandments that God ever wrote down on stone tables or scrolls or parchments, and all the commands God ever spoke through all the prophets, and Jesus was able to say, here is the essence of what God said in all those places and in all those ways.

In Jewish religion, there is a famous incident. It was ancient teacher with a request from a student to a famous Jewish teacher, "Teach me the core thing about the Bible, while I am standing on one leg." He was saying, stop using so many words. Boil it all down.

There were five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Within those books, Bible scholars have identified 613 separate and distinct commandments. Okay, but instead of 613, can you just tell me - what is it all about?

Sure. The crucial key that unlocks the door of the kingdom of God is love – first, God's own love for us as sinners, and then our all-out love for God and our love for our neighbors created as God's image-bearers. God alone is worthy of our full-hearted worship and devotion and service, even our personal affection and commitment. The greatest command of all is to love God more than we love anyone else, and more than we love anything else.

Second to that is loving others. How much? As much as we love ourselves.

Let me give you a quick test to show you how much you love yourself. When you are hungry, do you feed yourself, or do you go hungry? When you are thirsty, do you drink something refreshing? When you are tired, do you get rest?

So, you get the point. You we love ourselves. Question is, do we love others like that? That brings us to the main point of this sermon, which is: **Jesus taught us the top priority, the most important command of God – to love God, love others – and then He died and rose again to cleanse us for breaking it, and to equip us to keep it more and more.**

1. One more question – this one regarding the most important command. (v.28)

In verse 28, we have the newest person coming to Jesus with a question. The previous two were antagonistic questions. This one seems to be a friendly question.

There is a cool thing here. In the larger movement of activities described in chapters 11 and 12 together, we are heading toward Passover. In the Jewish Passover celebrations, there were a series of questions that were asked in preparation for enjoying the ceremony of Passover itself.

So the pattern of the series of questions as we are heading to Passover is Mark's way of showing us Jesus. Mark is showing us that here are the questions that lead up to the true Passover, and here is Jesus, the One who can answer all the questions that the Passover celebration itself leaves unanswered. Jesus is the true priest, the true prophet, and even the sacrificial Lamb Himself.

And Jesus is the great Teacher. Jesus has something to teach this scribe, and we all get to learn from this also!

Jesus will show us that whenever we do what his scribe was doing, it leads to disaster – namely, that this scribe was attempting to measure himself by the commands of God. God would never be satisfied with us identifying the top commandment, and attempting to follow that one command in a general way. No, God would not be satisfied with anything less than our full devotion of our whole lives, for the entire duration of our lives, to the living God alone.

So, we now move on from the scribe's question to the incredible answer given by Jesus.

2. The most important answer about the most important command. (v.29-31)

Verse 29, Jesus began His answer with the famous SHEMA! The Shema is the Hebrew word for *Hear* or *listen*! The Shema was as important to worshippers in Old Testament Judaism as The Lord's Prayer is to us as worshippers in New Testament Christianity. The original context of the Shema in Deuteronomy chapter 6 was very instructive. To love God was to obey Him "*all the days of your life.*" Deuteronomy 6:2. To love God meant you commit to teaching these commandments to your children and even to your grandchildren. When? Whenever you sit, walk, lie down, and rise up throughout the day, each day. Why? Because we remember that God "*brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.*" Deuteronomy 6:12.

Verse 30, to Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength. Our whole person must cooperate in loving God, our heart, soul, mind and strength. The heart is the hub of the wheel of our existence, and from our hearts come all of our thoughts, words, and deeds. Consider Proverbs 4:23, "*Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it [that is, from your heart] flow the springs of life.*" The soul is the seat of our spirit, our liveliness, our feelings, and our

emotional activity. The mind is of course the center of our intellectual lives, but also our will and attitude, our decisions and our approach to those decisions.

In the Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:5, the reading is ‘*heart, soul, and might (or power).*’ But here in Mark 12:30 we have ‘*heart, ... soul, ... mind and strength.*’ We must not over-analyze this difference. Keep it simple. No essential difference is intended by Mark, as if Mark could improve on the classic Shema of God, given through Moses! No, Mark knows that all these passages have the same core idea – namely, that man should love God with all the ‘faculties’ with which God has endowed man. And in each category, we are called to go as far as we can.

SI – it is like an organ. We have a phrase, pull out all the stops. The organ has buttons to pull called stops. And the organ can get louder the more stops are added to the grand finale of a song. We are asked by God to use every one of them!

In verse 30, there are 4 times Jesus used the word ALL. In this generation of our culture, we have the phrase “all in.” That is a good way to say it also. The great teacher said it this way, “...*love God, ... with All your heart, all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.*”

Verse 31, the 2nd [second most important commandment] is this: love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these 2.

The scribe had asked for one command, Jesus replied with 2 commands. Why? Jesus was teaching something important...the first command to love God and the second command to love others are connected and inseparable.

We love others as an expression of our love for God. We love God and everyone made in His image. Even when God’s image has been distorted in the lives of others, we are called to love them, because we can see what they were meant to be. We are moved with compassion for how they are suffering in their own sins.

3. The surprising response, the inviting verdict, and the silencing of questions. (v.32-34)

Verse 32, The scribe basically said, ‘what a beautiful answer!’ What is surprising is the difference between this scribe, and the other previous scribes. This scribe was not against Jesus, asking questions in an antagonistic way. Rather, this scribe was warm and accepting of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus! This scribe recognized the deep truth within this teaching of Jesus. Namely, that within the commands of God, there is a priority of more important and less important. For example, loving God and loving neighbor is, as the scribe said, regarding importance, is “...*much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*”

A person could bring an animal as a burnt offering to sacrifice to God in worship, and that person could go through the motions of bringing that animal to the temple, but in that person’s heart, there could be a lack of love for God. Right?

Remember what had been happening just prior to our passage. Jesus had been speaking against what had been happening in the temple. This scribe could understand why Jesus overturned the tables, because it was all a sham! The people in the temple worship had been missing the main thing! Genuineness. Heart worship.

Verse 34, Jesus saw that the scribe had answered wisely, so Jesus ended the matter when Jesus "...said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'" *Not far from* – If this scribe would now, by God's grace, take one more step, namely, to believe in Jesus as his Savior, the scribe would have advanced forward from a starting position of being "*not far from*" and progress over to a new position of being '*inside*' the kingdom of God. Jesus was inviting the man to come in! Jesus was encouraging the scribe to enter the kingdom!

Mark 12:34b, the very last statement in our passage is "...after that no one dared to ask Him any more questions." They gave up all hope of being able to trap Jesus in His words. They gave up all attempts to discredit Jesus as a teacher of God's Word. Jesus was not going to be tricked. Jesus was not going to be trapped in His words. Jesus was not going to be stumped by their questions. Every time they asked Jesus something, His answers were profound and delightful to everyone.

They were in the presence of greatness. Those who were opposed to Jesus and had used their questions in order to attempt to expose Jesus, had ended up crushed by the sheer power of Jesus' profound teaching and the matching example of Jesus' person and his life, actions, and behavior. As a result of the series of hostile questions and Jesus' masterful answers, one of their scribes was closer to the kingdom than he was before. Jesus managed to silence His opponents by His indisputable teaching!

Conclusion:

Remember that we need a new heart in order to love God the right way.

Jesus was the greatest teacher. But He was more. He was also the Savior of those who come to realize that we cannot keep the commands. We do not need a teacher to tell us what we cannot perform, and to watch us die because we fail. Rather, we need a Savior who can bring us into the kingdom of God!

We go back to the first words of our Teacher and Savior in Mark chapter 1:15, "*The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*"

What we learn from our study passage is that it is possible for someone to grow up in the church, and never to have come to a saving knowledge of Christ.

It is possible to have studied theology and never to have become a true Christian. It is possible to have heard the grace of Christ preached to you for many years, and still be trusting in your own goodness.

What we saw in this passage is it is possible to be within an inch of the Kingdom of God, and still not be in it.

SI - if you are just outside an airplane, you are one step away from going to a whole new place. But if you do not take that one step, you will stay right where you are, and all you will have is the memory of once being close to the airplane.

The scribe was close, but he needed Jesus to give him a new heart!

Ezekiel 36:26, *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”*

1 John 4:7-12, *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”*

All other approaches were not satisfactory. Mark 11, cannot come to God through Israel, as shown by the withered fig tree. Chapter 12, cannot come to God through the temple, by being a Pharisee, a Herodian, a Sadducee, and our passage, the scribe can even see that you cannot get to God through the legal regulations, such as the burnt offerings and sacrifices.

We cannot get to God through our own obedience of loving God enough. We don't obey God, and we are supposed to do more than obey God! We are supposed to love God! Which of us loves God with our whole selves?

In the progression of the Gospel of Mark, the stage is being cleared for the final act. The only way to get to God is through Jesus Christ Himself. He alone it is who loved God the Father with all His heart, with all His soul, with all His mind, and with all his strength. Christ alone it is who loved His neighbor as Himself. Christ alone it is who loved us enough to die for us and rise again.

By the resurrection power of Christ, love God supremely and comprehensively, and throughout the whole duration of your life, and love others genuinely.

To love God rightly is to love others genuinely. To love others at all is an expression of loving God. The two great commands are tied together. The two great loves are tied together.

We need the grace of Christ, who alone can re-make us. 2 Corinthians 5:17, *“...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come.”* Old heart is passed away, the new heart has come. The old

mind, soul, and strength has passed away. The new mind, new soul, new strength has come.