Mark Lesson 42 (2023)

**THE SUPREME COMMAND OF GOD**

*(Subtitle: Embracing God’s Greatest Commandments)*

Mark 12:28-34

Key Verse: 12:30-31

“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.’”

This morning, we will explore the timeless message that resonates throughout the ages – the Greatest Commandments of God. In today’s passage, we see an encounter between Jesus, the Son of God, and one of the Jewish Bible teachers, a dialogue concerning the essence of God’s commandments. Jesus told the rabbi that the greatest commandment of God is to love God wholeheartedly and love our neighbors as ourselves. These two commandments stand as pillars, forming the fabric of our faith in Jesus and directing us toward a life pleasing to God with a clear purpose, fulfillment, and happiness. This morning, let us navigate the passage and find out what it means to love God wholeheartedly and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Look at verse 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?’” The man who came to Jesus with the question was one of the teachers of the law, a rabbi. Did he come to test Jesus like others who came to trap him with their subtle questions? Mark does not say clearly, even though Matthew described that he came to test Jesus (Mt. 22:35) Yet it seems that this man came to Jesus with a sincere motive.

There is an impression that some of the open-minded and conscientious Jews in Jesus’ time were deeply aware of chronic dilemmas in their dysfunctional religious practices. This group of people was called *“Reformed Jews”* as opposed to *“Traditional Jews*.” This man might have been one of the open-minded Jews. He was present when Jesus and Sadducees were talking in the previous event. Noticing that Jesus’ answer to them was brilliant, he was inspired to ask him another question. His question for Jesus was, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” It’s fair to say that this man might have wanted to check Jesus out the level of understanding of the law of God.

How did Jesus respond to his question? Look at verses 29-31. “‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your hearts 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.’” Jesus didn’t hesitate to answer his question. His answer was clear and wise, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Before telling which commandment was the greatest, Jesus spoke, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This phrase is the quotation from Deuteronomy 6:4, which Matthew didn’t include in his account. But Mark did for his non-Jewish audiences. The phrase, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” is called ***“Shema Yisrael”*** or ***“the Shema***,” which means **“Hear.”** The devout Jews in Jesus’ time recited it aloud twice a day, in the morning and evening (Pic#1). “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God; the Lord is one.” It’s the central affirmation of the Jewish faith, reminding them of the oneness of God and their unique love relationship with God as God’s covenant people. God gave them the Ten Commandments as basic guidelines in the hope that they would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for the rest of the world (Exo. 6:5).

However, the Jewish religion in Jesus’ time focused more on observing religious rules and regulations, consisting of over 600 commands, specifically 365 positive and 248 negative commands. People could feel burdened, confused, and frustrated while trying to keep all these rules and regulations. Judaism in Jesus’ time needed serious transformation. The man questioned whether Jesus knew the central principle of God’s law.

What was Jesus’ answer? Look at verses 30 and 31 again. “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.” In these verses, Jesus condensed the essence of God’s commandments into two: loving God wholeheartedly and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

*Quick quiz: Based on these commandments, can you answer the central principle of God’s love in one word?* *The Central Principle of God’s Law is* ***LOVE.*** If we summarize all of God’s laws in one word, it’s LOVE. (To love God and love others.) Now, let’s look at the significance of these two commandments and see how they impact us.

***First, loving God wholeheartedly (30).*** To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is an invitation to wholehearted devotion to Him. It means that our love for God should not be half-hearted. We should love God with our whole person, which includes heart, soul, mind, and strength (body). (Pic#2, Pic#3) Our heart represents our emotions, desires, and affections. Our soul represents our innermost being, our mind represents our intellect or thought capacity, and our strength represents our actions and energies.

Loving God wholeheartedly seems still unclear. Let us be more realistic. Sometimes, we don’t feel like loving him wholeheartedly. We must admit that we cannot always love him wholeheartedly, and it’s okay to have ups and downs in our love for him. We are free to love and not to love. If we have no freedom, it’s not true love. God gave us liberty. Loving God wholeheartedly is not a list of many activities but a genuine expression of our love and devotion. It’s also an ongoing journey of deepening our love relationships with God our Father throughout our lifetime.

***Second, loving our neighbors as ourselves (31).*** Equally important is the command to love our neighbors. Jesus said, “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Here, we see Jesus’ basic assumption of our self-love. Jesus assumes that every person has a fundamental love for themselves. We demonstrate this love by taking care of various needs as faithful stewards. Jesus wouldn’t call us selfish if we love ourselves. Self-love is not wrong or sinful. Self-love is healthy and different from being selfish. If we love only ourselves, it’s being selfish.

So, how can we love our neighbors as we love ourselves? Does it mean that we should spend the same amount of time or money to meet the needs of others? Maybe not. That would be ideal but impossible and unrealistic. However, it does mean we should treat others like we treat ourselves.

The Good Samaritan, whom Jesus talked about in Luke’s Gospel, is an excellent example of loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Samaritan man didn’t pass by a wounded man in need but showed his mercy by caring for him despite their differences. (Lk. 10:25-37) The Jews in Jesus’ time regarded only fellow Jews or those who converted to Judaism as their neighbors. But our neighbors include family, friends, coworkers, strangers, and even those we disagree with. This love goes beyond race and differences and involves empathy, respect, forgiveness, and selflessness. The bottom line is that love should be genuine, with no strings attached (Pic#4).

It’s interesting to see that even though the man asked Jesus for one commandment, Jesus gave him two. Jesus’ response combines the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbors into a single, central principle. By doing so, he highlights the inseparable connection between the two commandments. In other words, we cannot fully love God if we fail to love our neighbors, harboring hatred or indifference toward them. And conversely, our love for others is rooted in our love for God.

The two commandments are interwoven, representing the foundation of the Law and the Prophets. That’s why Jesus said, “There is no commandment greater than these.” (31) It reminds us of what James 2:8-9 states, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” Why is ***“loving our neighbor as ourselves”*** called the royal law? It’s called the royal law because of its foremost importance in guiding all human behavior and relationships.

Look at verses 32-33. “‘Well said, teacher,’ the man replied. ‘You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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.’” Mark is the only one who recorded the man's response among all gospel narratives. The author Mark indeed wanted to emphasize the importance of Jesus’ teaching. The man believed that Jesus’ answer was accurate and true. His agreement with Jesus reflects his understanding that God intended his people to have an authentic love relationship with him and others rather than following religious rules and traditions. Indeed, this was not typical of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in Jesus’ time.

What was Jesus’ response to his answer? Look at verse 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.” Upon hearing the man’s response, Jesus recognized his deep understanding of the commandments. Jesus must have been delighted to see this kind of sincere Bible student in Israel. Then, he told the man, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

It’s nice to hear from the prominent teacher, *“You are almost there. Keep moving.”* But what did Jesus mean when he said this man was not far from the kingdom of God? Well, since Jesus didn’t provide further explanations for his comment, we wouldn’t know exactly what he meant when he said this. We can assume several things through our sanctified imagination.

It could mean that man’s comprehension of the heart of God’s commandments aligned him with the core principles of God’s kingdom. It could also mean that the man’s heart and mind were moving in the right direction – towards God’s kingdom. Most of all, when said that he was not far from the kingdom of God, it could be an invitation for this man to go beyond his current intellectual understanding and fully embrace the kingdom of God by living out the great commandment in his daily life. Here, we learn a valuable lesson. We are reminded that understanding biblical truths or theological concepts is necessary but not good enough.

Why not? It’s because the kingdom of God is not just intellectual knowledge. Instead, it is meant to be experienced and lived out through wholehearted love for God and fellow human beings. In other words, we cannot experience the kingdom of God through an intellectual understanding of God’s will. We can experience God’s kingdom only through our obedience to God’s will and commands. So, when Jesus told him that he was not far from the kingdom of God, he was inviting him to live a life of love that seeks to honor God in every aspect of his life and to embrace all those around him.

Likewise, we are also invited to experience God’s kingdom by aligning our lives with the principle of God’s kingdom and following the example of Jesus. So, how can we love God wholeheartedly and love others as ourselves? Of course, we need to be empowered by the power of God’s love. Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (Jn. 13:34-35) Indeed, we can love one another when we remember how God loved us.

But we also must discipline ourselves in loving others. In the last stage of his life and ministry, Apostle Paul confessed that when he was immature, he talked like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. What he meant is that he was immature in dealing with difficult people. He might have had biases and prejudices, got angry with them, and did not forgive them. But when he had matured, he could put the ways of childhood behind him. How? Of course, because he was filled with God’s love and grace. But I believe it’s also because he learned to love others through self-discipline. It sounds a little strange. But it’s true. Love requires constant practice and discipline.

Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” It’s a beautiful poem of love. But to love someone is not easy at all. Can we be patient and kind without self-discipline? Even though we might fail to love others, we should never give up. We must discipline ourselves to love others as ourselves. Then someday, we will become an expert in loving others.

Let me close my sermon. Loving God with all our being and loving others as ourselves are not merely suggestions but God’s supreme command. Sometimes, we are so caught up with less important things that we don’t have time to love. When I was younger, I was so busy with mission work that I didn’t have time for my growing children. I let my mother and my wife take care of them. Even though I appeared to love God, I wasn’t fully following God’s command of love. If I were to go back to my past, I would have done it differently. But it’s not too late. Someone said, *“The best use of life is love. The best way to love is time. And the best time to love is now.”* Love is always right. Love makes our life meaningful and worth living in all human circumstances. No matter what circumstances we may be in, it’s time to love. May the love of God unite us and make us beacons of his love, illuminating the darkness around us. May we be living testimonies of the power of love that change the world.