

“The Greatest Commandment”

Mark 12:28-34
February 25, 2007

The question posed to Jesus in our text this morning is different in tone than the encounters we have had in previous weeks: it is not a particularly hostile question.

Read with me Mark 12:28-34

I. Setting

Jesus is in the temple. He has been peppered with questions by the authorities who want to stop him from creating problems, who want him to stop doing whatever it is that he is doing. He has been challenged by the Temple authorities: the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. He has been challenged by the powers that be: the Herodians and the Pharisees. He has been challenged by the wannabe's, the Sadducees.

Now, a member of the Temple authority, a scribe, has witnessed this series of challenges and recognizes Jesus is something different and authentic. The question he asks is something debated among the leaders: what is of the first importance? It is a live issue; it is not merely a softball question. It is the academic's equivalent of, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus answers the question of “first importance” by citing the “shema,” Deuteronomy 6:4, , “Hear O Israel that the Lord our God is one.” The first specific command is found in that passage, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus added the “with all your mind.” The second command he cites is from Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” These two commands were part of a daily prayer for Jews and, as such, it would not have been a surprise for Jesus to have linked them. His conclusion, “There is no other commandment greater than these,” affirms his consistency with Old Testament priorities; the first command sums up the first tablet given to Moses, the second command sums up the second tablet.

From the standpoint of the gospel of Mark, there are a couple of things we need to note. First, it is astounding that the scribe agrees with Jesus that the great command is more important than the Temple authority structure and sacrifices. This is a huge concession from a scribe. Mark is pointing out to the Jewish believers in Rome that Jesus is an authority bigger and more powerful than the Temple.

Second, Mark also is pointing out even those who would most likely oppose Jesus recognized his authority and consistency with Scripture. The scribe's comment about “there is truth in what you say,” is the functional equivalent of “amen.” The scribe affirms the truth of Jesus' statements.

Third, it may seem somewhat confusing for Jesus to tell the scribe he is “not far from the Kingdom of Heaven.” Yet, Jesus is being consistent with his preaching from the beginning of his ministry – remember from chapter 1? “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is near; repent

and believe the gospel.” What the scribe has yet to do is repent and believe the gospel. The scribe has all the facts, now he needs the conviction and heart.

II. Love God

So what does it mean to “love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength?”

First, loving God with all your heart means putting your heart into loving God.

This is passion for God. This is commitment to God. This is a desire to be intimate with God.

It also is something you cannot do on your own. The ability to love God is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a power that comes from God. It does not come naturally; it is something we have to continually seek, request, and expect from God.

Again, loving God is not something that comes naturally or without effort. In order to love God with all of our heart, we have to ask God to equip us to love him with all of our heart.

The thought of intimacy with God is scary. Many of us like having God *as a friend*. We call him up when we need him or if we have something we want to talk about. We can go long periods of time without him and hope that we can catch up on the occasional weekend when we get together on Sunday morning. If something were to go really wrong, we would want God there; but, outside of that, it would be nice if God were close and handy when we need him but far enough that he would not impinge on our day-to-day lives too much.

We all know that loving someone with all our heart does not work that way. We do not keep close friends by holding them at arm’s length, nor do we grow in intimacy with others whom we only occasionally invite into our lives.

When I was called to serve as pastor here at Chula Vista Presbyterian, I remembered some advice Jim Rauch gave me as he was starting out in ministry. He said the job of the pastor is to “preach the word and love the people.” Love the people. Love the people.

I need to be careful about how I say this: loving you people is a lot of work. (It’s not you – it’s me.) It is not something I can do from a distance, nor is it something I can do only occasionally. It is not something I can do in my own strength. It is only something I am able to do because I have asked God for the blessing and power to love you. I have intentionally asked God to give me the power to love you.

I do love you, too. I care about what happens to you. I care about your joys, your sorrows, your successes, your failures, your ups, your downs, your goings away, and your comings. I want to see you grow, I want to see us grow. I want to walk with you as God grows us in maturity, in power, in holiness, in numbers. My ability to love you is limited only by my human limitations; but even in those limitations, I see how much greater God loves you because I see the ways he provides for you despite my limitations.

Loving God is the same thing. We are able to love God only via the power he has given us to love him. Have you recently asked God to give you the power to love him?

The power to love God makes us uncomfortable because it might make us look foolish in the eyes of our neighbors. We are Presbyterians, for God's sake; we're not enthusiasts or emotionalists! Ah, but how that control has hindered our spiritual growth. We have tempered the ability to experience the fullness of loving God with all of our hearts. We have limited ourselves to our own expectations rather than throwing ourselves headlong into the joy.

Second, loving God with all your soul means putting your soul into loving God.

Loving God with all of your soul means making choices with your life that honor God first. In other words, worship God with your life.

Worship is the normal pre-disposition of the human condition; we worship something. Unfortunately, we are often wonderful at making idols for ourselves -- money, power, control, entertainment, children, and many, many other things -- and we serve those things with our soul rather than serving God.

Worship is a way of life more than a specific program. Worship is more than the choir, more than the music, more than the prayers; it includes all that, yes, but it involves *you* much more.

Worship means **praising God**. Set time aside each day simply to praise God for being God. In this Lenten season, take time to remember the walk that Jesus walked.

Worship means **singing to God**. For the people in the front pews, they may wonder if I know what worship means at all if this is a standard – however, the point is singing comes from the very foundation of our soul. Look at it this way, when the children sing, we are not moved because of their technical expertise and virtuosity; instead, we are moved because they are singing. So it is with God: he is not as interested in our ability to carry a tune; he is pleased because we are presenting ourselves before him.

Worship means **submitting yourself to God**. Presenting yourself before God – offering yourself, everything you have been given, your time your talent your treasure – saying, “God use me as your servant, as an instrument of your grace” is loving God with all your soul.

If you love God with all your soul, there are two things you need to know:

1. God is a God of power and might. He can and he will bless you with experiences, with opportunities, with resources, and with challenges that you could not imagine. This is not a prosperity promise in terms of human material success; rather, it is a divine promise of inheriting the kingdom of God and growing in communion with God.

2. You will not grow unimpeded. We cannot grow on our own, it is God who grows us in our ability to love him with all of our soul. We get tired, we get distracted, we get put off when we try to love God with all of our soul simply on the basis of our own strength. Further, Scripture makes clear that the evil one will attack. We will talk more about this in the future, but for now, note that Paul talks about putting on the whole armor of God in order to withstand the wiles of the Devil.

Loving God with all your soul means honoring God with all the choices in your life.

Third, loving God with all your mind means putting your mind to loving God.

Loving God with all of you mind means being disciplined in your thoughts.

There is an old computer saying, “Garbage in, garbage out.” How you choose to fill your mind will reveal to you what it is you love with your mind. Given open time, what do you choose to do?

Discipline is involved here. Discipleship means being disciplined in following Jesus! Disciplining your mind requires intention and persistence. Are you reading your Bible? Are you asking God to open your eyes, your heart, your mind to what Scripture reveals about him?

Bible study is something many people like to talk *about doing* more than they actually *like doing* them. Here, the church has not been very helpful. We have made Bible study a burden and confusing. We have reversed our Reformed heritage – it began with trying to get the Bible into the people’s hands; now, we have told them they don’t know enough to read it. I hear this all the time: “there are too many thee’s and thou’s, and I don’t know what they are talking about.” Defeated before we even begin.

Loving God with all your mind does not mean that you must learn the Bible *on your own*. Bible study is not a competition, it is a group project. You can learn it *with* others. Many people go for years in silence because they are afraid how little they know and they do not want their friends to know how little they know. Friends, we all know too little. But some of you may be thinking, “Yes, but, Pastor, you have no idea how little I know.” You would be surprised. Me, too.

One of the wisest seminary professors I had told the class, “There will always be someone in the congregation who knows the Bible better than you do. Guaranteed.” Here’s the point: we are to work together to grow in our knowledge. It is what we are supposed to be doing here – equipping people with the tools they need to grow into the people God intended them to be.

How will we know if we are growing and maturing? Note what is different in you. A friend of mine tells the story of how much he liked the movie “American Graffiti” when he was in college. He remembers his stomach hurting from laughing and enjoying it from start to finish. He rented it some twenty years later and the debauchery, language, and crudity made him cringe. It was no longer funny. Same movie, same guy; very different maturity in the LORD.

This is not to suggest that we become dullards – just the opposite. There is excitement and energy and enthusiasm and amazement when your eyes are open to seeing what God is doing. Having eyes open requires some training; that means loving God with all of your mind.

Loving God with all your strength means using all your strength in the activity of loving God.

I have said that you are not capable of achieving all that God intended for you in your own strength. Even so, just because you are not able to fully love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind in your own strength does not mean that you should not put your best energy towards loving God as completely as you can. You cannot throw your hands up and say to God, “This is all your responsibility.” God has given you life for you to live, but God wants all of you, too.

How do I mean this?

Well, how do you prepare to come to worship on Sunday morning. Are you bringing God your best or are you bringing him what you have left after doing all the other things you have to do? God wants our best.

Bringing God our best is a choice. When I was younger, it meant learning not to go out on Saturday night if I wanted to bring my best to God on Sunday morning. It meant learning to prioritize giving thanks to God by setting aside my tithe to church first before paying other bills. It meant not using coarse language to impress others; it meant keeping quiet to hear others.

Another way of looking at this is the preparation necessary to engage in mission activity. Whether doing something local or planning to go away, there is a lot of planning and energy needed to get things moving. Preparing is necessary for worship, too. Do you come to church to “get something out of service” or to give yourself to God in the service?

I also have found this to be true: when I love God with all of my strength, I do not get weary. God sustains me and fills me to the point of overflowing.

Loving God with all your strength means trusting God to be your strength.

III. Love Neighbor as yourself

Jesus’ answer to the scribe specifically references the “golden rule” in Leviticus 19, which is based on the second tablet of the Ten Commandments given to Moses, “Honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, do not covet.” It is a more positive statement than the “do not’s.”

We are only going to touch on this briefly. Even though loving neighbor as yourself is second, it is still of the first importance. It is a *natural and necessary* outgrowth of our loving God.

When you love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, God opens your eyes to see others as he sees them. You are able to discern better what is happening around you: physically, spiritually, emotionally, and communally. As you see like God sees, then you are able to love as God loves.

Although we are to put our best effort into this, once again we are in the position of realizing that we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves solely in our own strength. We need God's help. It sounds embarrassing, but have you asked God to help you love someone else? This is different than asking God to make them love-able, it is asking that God change you.

IV. Conclusion

Jesus' answer to the scribes' question about what is most important? Know God, love God, love one another. That is the recipe for citizenship in the kingdom of God.

“When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.