

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

52. No Greater Commandment Than These

Mark 12:28-34

QUICK REVIEW

Mark has been giving to us the account of what Jesus did and said in Jerusalem in the last few days before He was crucified. The Gospels tell us that Jesus spent each of those last days on the Temple mount and that *all the people would come early in the morning to hear him in the temple* (Luke 21:38). The enemies of Jesus were also in the crowd — but not to listen with glad and open hearts.

Luke 20:20 (CSB) *²⁰They watched closely and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, so that they could catch him in what he said, to hand him over to the governor's rule and authority.*

The Pharisees and Herodians failed to bring down Jesus. The Sadducees took their shot and failed. Tonight, we pick up in **Mark 12:28**

Mark 12:28-31 (CSB) *²⁸One of the scribes approached.*

I think it's important to note that this guy didn't come asking a question that was a religious or political trap (as did the Pharisees and Herodians). He didn't come asking a question to trap Jesus based on speculation (as did the Sadducees). He came with a SINCERE SPIRITUAL question.

When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which command is the most important of all?"

NOTICE — The man asks Jesus *which command* (singular) *is the most important of all?* Keep in mind — After God redeemed the Israelites from bondage and death in Egypt He gave them 613 commands to govern that defined their covenant relationship with Himself.

I'm astounded by this answer! Because standing before this student of the Law is YHWH, Himself is *the almighty God Who led Israel for 40 years in the wilderness as a pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day*. Standing before this man is *the*

One who parted the Red Sea. Standing before this man is the One Who gave the Law to Moses on Sinai.

DON'T MISS THIS — God incarnate actually cites NOT one command — but TWO — because together they **summarize everything** concerning His Law!

²⁹**Jesus answered, “The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. ³¹The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.”**

The first part of His answer is a quote from **Deuteronomy 6:4-5** — known as the *Shema*.

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (CSB) ⁴“*Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ⁵Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*

Devout Jews recited this every morning and every evening.

The second is from **Leviticus 19:18**.

Leviticus 19:18 (CSB) ¹⁸*Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.*

³⁰**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.**

God incarnate tells us that as far as He is concerned — the *greatest* thing that His children can ever do is to love Him

THIS IS HUGE — God is NOT MOVED by any religious activity that does NOT flow out of love for Him.

EXAMPLE: In his letter to the Christians in Ephesus at the end of the first century

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Revelation 2:2; 4 (CSB) ²I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars.... ⁴But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first.

Have you ever tried to explain what it means to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*

William Lane lends this insight —

*Because the whole man is the object of God's covenant love, the whole man is claimed by God for himself*¹

Here's a way to look at it: Have you ever found yourself having to wait — and there's nothing for you to do (mobile phone battery died, your iPad battery died, there's no TV to watch and there's nothing available to read)? Granted, those seem to be incredibly rare moments, but there are actually mini-moments like that through the course of our days. Where does your mind naturally want to go? Where does your heart want to go? What do you dwell on? Is it God? Is it His attributes? Is it His beauty? I'm not saying that you can't think about that amazing burger you had — or how you love to walk into your home — or that you can't think about something that you need to take care of at work or for school. I am talking about what dominates your thoughts — the default space your mind wants to go. I'm talking about whatever it is that you automatically find your heart running to; you automatically set the affection of your heart on — because THAT is your real God!

Here's another way to frame it: Do you love God so much that you're okay even in the busiest moments — even in the most difficult moments **because in God** you have all you could ever desire.

DON'T MISS THIS — The obeying of ANY of the commands of God begins there! Jesus said, “*If you love Me, obey me.*” Every act of obedience is rooted in and finds its origin in love of God. Every act of disobedience has to with idolatry — loving some pleasure, some possession, some position in the place of God.

¹ Lane, W. L. (1974). *The Gospel of Mark* (p. 432). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

BUT JESUS DOESN'T STOP at [Deuteronomy 6:4-5](#). He continues with [Leviticus 19:18](#)

and (love) your neighbor as yourself.

What does that mean? Here's one guy's take on it —

"Meet the needs of your neighbor with all of the force, with all the joy, with all the speed, and with all the power with which you meet your own. Be as happy for them when their needs are met as you would be for your own, because you've put your happiness inside their happiness so that what makes you happy is what makes them happy."

Well then!!

THAT is what God is after! THAT is way more than trying to behave. THAT is way more than trying to jump through religious hoops. THAT is a life of love! Love for God because He has given us life; because He sustains us — gives us the very next breath we breathe. Love for our neighbor because they should receive from us the same kind of love we want (and expect) to receive from them.

Here's the deal — The law of God sets forth a way *of* life — but it was never intended to be the way *to* life. We *should* live that way — but we will *never* be saved that way — because all of us *fail* to live that way.

Who here can say that you always [love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind](#)? Who here can say that you always [love your neighbor as yourself](#)?

THE ANSWER OF JESUS IS SUCH A SWEEPING STATEMENT

This is NOT an either/or proposition: Love God OR love your neighbor. It is a both/and: Love God AND your neighbor. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor.

Robert Cole — *If we try to put love of neighbour first or, worse still, leave out the love for God altogether, we shall make shipwreck of our lives and fail even to love our neighbour as we should. On the other hand, if we say that we love God, and do not love our neighbour, we are hypocrites.*²

1 John 4:20 (CSB) *²⁰If anyone says, “I love God,” and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*

God's intention has always been for His people to be a contrast community in this broken world — to show the world, through the church, the way life is supposed to be lived. THAT life begins when you believe the Good News concerning Jesus Christ — the Son of God and forever King, who by His sacrificial death and bodily resurrection redeemed us from our great enemies of sin and death and reconciled us to God, making us the children of God and citizens of His forever Kingdom.

There a lot of professing Christians see their mission as one dimensional: Proclaim the message of the Gospel. Make no mistake, — we ARE all on mission — and in our mission we are to proclaim the Good News of all that God has done in sending Jesus to redeem and reconcile fallen man to Himself **because** that **Good News IS the very power of God to save (Romans 1:16)**! But as citizens of His already, but not yet Kingdom we are to live on mission as a neighbor. How we live as a neighbor — care for those in need — lends weight to the Gospel we are sent to proclaim. When our lives are consistent with the message we proclaim we actually create “relational capital” — we build bridges for Gospel conversation and we give weight to the message we proclaim!

I think it's safe to say that all of us, at one time or another and to some degree, want to **limit** the list of the people we're supposed to love. Our “neighbor” list — the list of people we want to love — is usually made up of the persons who are most like us — the persons we actually like — and the persons who actually like us. On the other hand there are people we would rather not have on that list — like those who reject the message we proclaim and the Jesus we love; those who actually believe things that are in opposition to the Scriptures and to Jesus;

² Cole, R. A. (1994). Mark. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 969). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

those who embrace or endorse or openly advance lifestyles that go against everything we believe to be true in the Scriptures.

To prove my point Just check your social media feeds over the past 15 months and you will find people who claim to love God and His word spewing the most hateful things about anyone who disagreed with their positions on COVID, race or the presidential election. They were literally saying: Nope! I won't love my neighbor if they think like that — as if to say that you can actually waste love on someone.

In [Luke 10](#) — in connection with these same two commandments — Jesus tells a very specific story to illustrate **who** our neighbor is and **what** it looks like to love our neighbor.

And in perfect Jesus form — the hero of this story was a Samaritan. The Samaritans and Jews were anything but lovable neighbors! The Samaritans and Jews had a history of hatred towards each other that dated back over four hundreds years. There came a point in the history of Israel when the nation was divided into two kingdoms. The Southern kingdom was made up of only two tribes (Benjamin and Judah). The southern kingdom was called "Judah" and the capital was the city of Jerusalem, where the temple of Solomon was located. The Northern kingdom was made up of the remaining 10 tribes of Israel. Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom. The northern kingdom fell into idolatry and in 720 BC God judged the Northern kingdom for its idolatry at the hands of the Assyrians. History tells us that the Assyrians transported practically the whole population to Media ([2Ki 17:6](#)). Only a tiny remnant was left behind. The Assyrians then brought 5 other pagan people groups into Samaria ([2Ki 17:24](#)) to ensure that the ethnic and religious identity of the Jews would be obliterated.

What quickly transpired was religious syncretism — they blended their Judaism with pagan religious practices.

The Samaritans essentially created their own version of God. They had their own version of the Bible. They had their own religious system with their own priesthood and their temple on Mount Gerazim — **all** while claiming to be descendants of Abraham. By the time of Jesus there had been over **400 years of**

hatred between the Jews and Samaritans on every possible level: Racial, Cultural, Religious.

The LAST person any Jew wanted on the list of neighbors they were supposed would to love would be *any* Samaritan. The average Jew in the day of Jesus wanted permission to not love the Samaritans.

But in perfect form Jesus makes the hero of the story the very person they would never want to call “neighbor.”

HERE’S THE POINT — Jesus wanted to make it perfectly clear that our “neighbor” — the person we’re to love — might be someone whose beliefs and values and lifestyles we find repulsive (that worked in both directions between Jews and Samaritans).

Jesus tells the story to let us know that our “neighbor” list is too short — too narrow. By making the Samaritan the hero of the story Jesus says — *“Don’t you dare try to limit this list.”*

We not only try to put a limit on **who** our neighbor is — we also try to put a limit on **when** we’re to love our neighbor.

Follow me here — We don’t mind helping when we think a person doesn’t deserve to suffer (diagnosed with cancer / injured in car accident / the victim of a crime). In the day of Jesus if a Jew saw a Samaritan suffering — they thought, “They deserve it.” If a Samaritan saw a Jew suffering, they would say, “They deserve it.”

Yet in the story Jesus crafted — it was the person the Jews did not want to love who had compassion on the man who was the victim of a crime. He not helped him but generously and sacrificially acted to help the man in his suffering.

This one is SO challenging. There have been so many times when I have looked at someone in need and thought — they brought all of that on themselves. They’ve sown to the flesh and they’ve reaped the consequences.

Jonathan Edwards was a pastor in New England in the 1740s. There were people in his congregation who were setting limits on who they should help and when they should help. He wrote this to answer those who were saying, “We don't have to help someone when they brought their trouble on themselves.” Edwards essentially said,

“But Christ loved you, pitied you, and greatly laid himself out to relieve you from all that want and misery which you brought on yourself by your own folly. Should we not love others as Christ loved us?”

There isn't one of us who DESERVE to be rescued from the devastating consequences of our sin.

We are called to proclaim a specific message **AND** love in a tangible way those people around us — even if we have nothing in common with them — even those people we might resent. We're to love those people in a way that brings relief to them — even if those people have created the mess they're in — brought suffering on themselves. We're to help bear their burden even if it means we become burdened in the process. THAT is a lot of love!

DON'T MISS THIS — There is a divine order to the two greatest commandments.

WHAT would motivate anyone to love their neighbor generously and sacrificially?

The secular version goes like this: Anyone who is truly enlightened, anyone who is truly socially conscious, anyone who is a truly progressive person will be concerned for the poor. The truly enlightened, socially conscious, progressive person will help those who are suffering; do volunteer work, give their money.

The religious version goes like this: If you're religious you HAVE to give to the poor. Virtually every religious system in the world puts an emphasis on helping the poor.

Both the secular and religious versions motivate by pride and guilt.

But in his infinite wisdom Jesus inserted into the story in Luke 10 two men who were extremely moral, extremely religious ... a priest and a Levite. They were

religious professionals. It was their job to distribute alms to the poor. But they walked around the man in need.

Jesus wants us to know that moralism, pride and guilt will never motivate us to love someone we have nothing in common with; love someone we might actually resent; love someone who resents us; love someone who has created the mess they're in, if the cost of loving them is so great that it burdens us financially — and physically. Being a social progressive might make you feel bad about having a lot when others have so little — but it can't take you where Jesus says loving our neighbor takes you. Billionaires give hundreds of millions — Millionaires give millions — but not for those who don't agree with them — not for those who oppose them. It doesn't move them to risk their own well-being for their ideological enemy. Being a religious moralist — even being a religious professional doesn't bring a person any further than the pride and guilt of the political/social progressive

THIS IS HUGE — The story of the Good Samaritan is a story of grace.

GRACE is the wrecking ball that destroys moralism and pride. Jesus wants us to know that we will never *be* a neighbor until we are radically *neighbored*.

Because of our sins we are anything but neighbors to God. Instead we're far from God, alienated from God.

Ephesians 2:1-6 (ESV) And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

Do you remember the moment when His love came flooding into your life, and suddenly you realized that God LOVED YOU with a love unlike any love you had

ever known before! And the response of your hearts was – “God, I just want to love you back.”

Jesus says — Here's how you can love me: Tell everyone how I have loved you! We are to proclaim the message of the Gospel: “Please, believe this.” Then we're to live as neighbors. With our lives we say — “I'm going to love you, whether you believe it or not.”

AGAIN — These are NOT mutually exclusive. Timothy Keller makes this great observation —

When Jesus says — “I want you to be the fearless proclaimers of the message of the gospel,” conservatives feel good and liberals get nervous. When Jesus says, “I want you to radically pour yourselves out as a neighbor for the needs of the poor,” liberals feel good and conservatives get nervous. But Jesus weaves them together.

It is ONLY in Jesus that we can fully live the Gospel. Gospel living requires a love that is beyond us. It is a love that transcends a response to a requirement. It is a love that is a response to free grace. It's only when we are transformed by the love of Jesus who has done everything for us that we **experience** the kind of love that enables us to be Gospel neighbors!

IN LIGHT OF THAT — Shouldn't spend time EVERYDAY praying

“Reveal more of yourself. Astound me with Your love more and more so that You become more desirable to me than anything else in the world.”

“Lord cause me to love you with all of my heart, soul and mind and to love my neighbors as myself.”

Mark 12:32-34 (CSB)³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him. ³³And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

This man agreed with Jesus — and for that reason he was very near the kingdom of God — but he wasn't a citizen of the Kingdom yet because the only way any one can become a citizen of the Kingdom is to acknowledge Jesus as king. It blows my mind to think that that this man was speaking with the very King Himself! I wonder, did he ever bow to Jesus as the true and forever King?

And no one dared to question him any longer.