

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When 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.

Have you ever watched one of those old kung fu movies? There will be the lone hero against incredible odds. One at a time, each opponent that comes forward is a vanquished boom, and another one steps up, and that one is a vanquished boom, and so it goes. Boom, Boom, Boom, Boom. I never figured out why they all didn’t attack at once. Sometimes, you get the same scene in Professional Wrestling. This is the feeling I get from this part of the Gospel of Mark, which contains today’s lesson—a series of attacks on Jesus, one right after the other.

Jesus is in Jerusalem to culminate his ministry. He will defeat the powers of sin and death in the crucifixion and resurrection. But before then, a series of challenges from his opponents take place. Like in kung fu movies, the opposition comes one after another and seeks to get the best of Jesus, but they fail.

Here is a timeline:

He cleansed the temple by driving out the money changers and merchants who had set up shop on the court of the Gentiles (foreigners) and restricting their access. He declares, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations,” a reminder to us that we exist for everyone, not just those like us.

After this, the chief priests, scribes, and elders come and ask him by what authority he has done this prophetic act. He turns the tables and asks whether John the Baptist's baptism was from God. They can’t answer because they fear saying it was, for Jesus

could say, "Why did you not believe him?" The crowd will be riled up if they say no, for they regard John as a true prophet.

So meekly they say, "We do not know," and Jesus replies, "Then I will not answer you either."

Boom!

Then Jesus tells a parable against them, and they are so angry they want to arrest him. But they fear the crowd, so they depart. But they weren't done; they sent some Pharisees and Herodians to confront him. This is strange because the Pharisees and Herodians have no use for each other; the only thing that unites them is their opposition to Jesus. They want to trap Jesus, so they ask his opinion on a hot-button political issue—taxes.

Should we pay taxes to Caesar? Is it okay? Is it lawful? And Jesus turns the tables on them as well. First, he says, "Show me the coin," and they produce a denarius coin. Jesus asks whose likeness and title are on the coin, and they say "Caesar." While we might miss it, the crowd wouldn't. They are carrying a coin with Caesar's likeness inside the temple precincts, which clearly violates Jewish law. The Ten Commandments forbade coins with human likenesses. So after exposing them, Jesus says to give Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what belongs to God. And they walked away amazed.

Boom!

Then the Sadducees, a wealthy and elite group of Jewish leaders, come. Now, they don't believe in the resurrection, so they ask him a convoluted question about a woman whose husband dies, and his brother takes the woman as his wife. This was Jewish tradition. Then they say this repeated six more times. Whose wife will she be in heaven? Jesus says resurrection life is different. You are wrong because God is the God of the living, not the dead. This lets us know there is a new life awaiting after death, and it is life with God. They are silenced.

Boom!

"Another one bites the dust. And another one down and another one down, another one bites the dust," as Queen sang.

One author pointed out that, like today, there was not just one Judaism but many, as we see here, just like there are many flavors of Christianity.

His opponents have been defeated.

Then another scribe comes forward, aware that he has expertly handled all the opposition, and asks what the greatest commandment is. According to tradition, there were 616 commandments, so this was a traditional rabbinic question, not a point of conflict. Unlike those who came before, there is no attempt to trick Jesus; it is just a question asked of a great person.

And Jesus answers:

The first is "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." This is the beginning of the great Shema in Deuteronomy, the sacred Jewish prayer.

Jesus adds the second from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

Notice that both of these come from the Hebrew Bible, which should go a long way toward dispelling the notion that the Old Testament has a wrathful outlook and the New Testament is focused on love. This command to love comes from the Old Testament, which, remember, is the only Scripture Jesus had.

Back to our story:

The scribe answered emphatically, "You're right. These are more important than all sacrifices and burnt offerings." In this, he echoed Hosea 6:6, with God declaring, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Upon hearing this, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom."

While many scribes were ardent opponents of Jesus, this scribe shows that no group is monolithic. Just as there are many Judaisms, there are also many outlooks for a scribe. This scribe's beliefs coincide with those of Jesus. Jesus does not need to correct him; he responds to him directly; you are not far from the kingdom of God. He is close to Jesus' heart. Being close to Jesus means being close to God's Kingdom. As we seek to follow Jesus, we are living a kingdom lifestyle.

For the scribe and us, the kingdom is not far away. According to our faith, the kingdom of God broke into the earthly realm with the coming of Jesus and defeated sin and death with the crucifixion and resurrection. While it has begun, it has not

come in fullness and won't until God brings all of creation back home again at the end of time.

But until then, engaging with Jesus with sincerity and respect brings one closer to the kingdom, and adding love to the equation brings us as close to the kingdom as we can be on this side of heaven.

As the passage ends, no one dared ask Jesus anything. It is like a giant exclamation point. Want to know what is vital? Loving God and loving neighbor is critical; all other traditions and laws must harmonize with this.

The way we organize our lives must be in harmony with this.

We have moved to the heart of our lives and faith in this conversation. This double love commandment: Love God, Love Neighbor. These two commandments are rooted in God's heart and sealed with Jesus's life. So, for our lives of faith, loving God and loving neighbor are bound together, so it is impossible to have one without the other. Loving one's neighbor is part of what it means to love God, and without loving God, the love of one's neighbor is unsustainable, for we need a power beyond ourselves to sustain this love of others.

Jesus links these two commandments, and following him in the first letter of John, we hear it put this way:

1 John 4:19-21

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¹⁹We love^[a] because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.

But what does it mean to love? Love is such a nebulous word; it could almost mean anything: our family, our friends, our car, our home, our church, our football team, our political party. It is used in so many ways. We must remember that all the laws and commandments are to be infused with divine love—agape love, as the Greek word for this love suggests. It is sacrificial, self-giving love rooted in God's love for us. We are to attempt to love as God loves.

I want to focus on two sacred things it involves.

The first is relationships, and the second is action. As the rock group Boston sang many years ago, Love is “More than a feeling.” Faithful Christian love is more than a feeling. It is rooted in our love for and relationship with God and expressed by our loving actions toward our neighbors.

We are commanded to love our neighbor as we do ourselves, but throughout history, people have distorted this command by focusing more on themselves than others. Self-love, self-esteem, and self-worth are vital, of course, but they are also to be marshaled in the service of others, not just for our benefit.

So, what is involved with loving God?

It is a relationship nurtured by worship and prayer and manifested in our acting in love toward our neighbors. Like all loving relationships, it is vital to tend to regularly. It is not like one of those scenes from many movies: when a crisis arises, “Well, God, I know I haven’t talked with you for a long time.” No, our relationship with God, like our other meaningful relationships, must be tended to regularly.

We know that from the command to love our neighbor naturally flows the question, who is my neighbor? Since these words first appeared in Leviticus, people have been trying to define neighbor; not just define it but limit it. Much effort has been spent determining who was included and who could be excluded in the command to love our neighbor. For followers of Jesus, love cannot be limited. It applies to everyone. We are to will and work for the best interest of our neighbors.

One of Jesus’ most memorable parables deals with just this issue: the magnificent story of the Good Samaritan.

In another scene like today’s, Jesus encounters a legal expert who challenges him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asks him what the laws say, and we hear the same answer in today’s Scripture.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” But the expert wishes to justify himself before Jesus asks our question, who is my neighbor?

And Jesus’ answer is the classic parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers and left for dead at the side of the road. A priest and a Levite, religious leaders who should be the good guys in the story, cross the road to avoid him instead of stopping. We don't know why. And then along comes a Samaritan, a despised foreigner, an enemy, who stopped and took care of him, arranged lodging and care for him, and guaranteed payment on his return for any extras.

Jesus then asked the expert in the law, "Who was then neighbor to the man in need?" The expert rightly answered, "The one who showed mercy." And Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise." This doesn't answer the question of who my neighbor is. Instead, it turns the tables.

Jesus's point is not to worry about who your neighbor is, the original question, but to go out and be a good neighbor to those in need. How freeing this is! We no longer must worry about who our neighbors are; we must be good neighbors to those in need. It becomes about who we are, not who our neighbors are.

The great commandments to love are acted out as we love God in worship and prayer and by being good neighbors to everyone we are surrounded by. With this love, we are living a preview of life in God's coming kingdom.

I feel that loving God and neighbor are at the heart of our church. Our love for God sustains us in loving our neighbor. At our Halloween trick-or-treating, a young woman stopped with her child to tell us that though she wasn't religious, she loved the banner outside our church. She said she felt affirmed and welcomed by it. I want to believe that a seed may have planted a seed of faith that may grow into something more.

In a divided nation, the words on the banner are particularly important. Love your neighbor who doesn't look like you, think like you, love like you, speak like you, pray like you, or vote like you. Love your neighbor, no exceptions. And with the election coming, loving our neighbor who doesn't vote like us is vital to healing our divides.

So, there are three things: love God, love neighbors, and be the neighbor to the one in need.