

# A question of priorities

Mark 12:28-34 - Littlebourne 16th January 2022

Parallel Passages: Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28

---

As we move closer to the cross, we've seen the religious authorities try and trick Jesus. Two weeks ago, we saw the Pharisees and the Herodians try and trick Jesus over questions about taxes. Last week, the Sadducees, seeing their opportunity could not trick Jesus with their questions about the resurrection. This week, another question is asked of Jesus, by another religious leader.

Matthew's account tells us he was one of the Pharisees. Matthew says (chapter 22 verse 34-35):

*But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.*

Matthew calls him a law expert or lawyer (νομικός nomikos, from nomos meaning law), Mark calls him a writer or scribe (γραμματέων grammateōn, from gramma meaning that which is drawn or written). Both the Pharisees and Sadducees had scribes or lawyers. Both had their interpreters of the law.

Matthew also says he asks this as a test, though I think combined with Mark's account we can see that this is more an examination, or a probing question - not deliberate trickery as we've seen before. Jesus doesn't treat it as malicious like the previous questions either.

## v28

*28 And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?"*

So our legal expert is impressed with Jesus' responses so far. He asks another question, of great importance.

There are 613 laws in the Torah - the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses. 248 positive laws, commandments to do something, and 365 negatives or prohibitions. The debate over what ordering was appropriate or which is most essential was a common discussion amongst the religious.

If you remember from back when we were in chapter 7, the religious authorities had over the years made many more rules than these, that sometimes they followed more closely than the rules in the Torah. With some of these rules being quite onerous, you can imagine that the discussion around which ones you could be slack about and which were truly important was very heated. The question to Jesus was one that would likely have been the subject of much of the questioners study already.

In this question, our translation says which is most important, but it's literally which is first, foremost, before others - the greek adjective used is *πρῶτος* *protos*. Jesus' response uses the same adjective.

## v29-30

*29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

Jesus starts to tell us which commandment comes before all others by reciting the 'Shema', from the Hebrew for 'hear'. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This was used as part of every Jew's morning and evening prayer.

It's from Dueteronomy 6 (verses 4-9):

*4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

Jews from the period, and many Orthodox Jews today, quite literally bind these commands on their hands and foreheads. They have phylacteries - little leather boxes that contain a written piece of this scripture, with straps so that they can fasten them on themselves. There are little boxes, called Mezuzah, placed on the doors, similarly to literally fulfill this command. I'm not sure this is quite what was intended.

We know that these were in use at the time of Jesus, as Jesus mentions these in Matthew 23 (verse 5). He's describing the Pharisees that preach but don't practice:

*They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long*

Merely having the words close is not enough - having these words written and close at hand, or recited morning and evening is not sufficient, because Jesus doesn't stop there.

## v30

*30 And you 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.'*

First of all the 613 laws is this. The command to love God.

We're told a bit about how to love God too - with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

With all your heart - what motivates us, what we desire, should be directed in love to God. Proverbs 4 verse 23:

*Keep your heart with all vigilance,  
for from it flow the springs of life.*

With all your soul - our emotions, the core of our beings should love God.

With all your mind - love for God is not mindless or empty-headed. We are to love God with our intellect, our thoughts. 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5:

*We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God,  
and take every thought captive to obey Christ*

With all your strength - love is not in word alone, but in what we do and how we conduct ourselves. Love is not confined to the spiritual or the immaterial, but it is expressed in how we use our abilities and our physical bodies.

This love for God is to be all encompassing.

## v31

*31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*

Jesus' second most important commandment is from Leviticus 19 verse 18:

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

Before Jesus, some thought that this was closer to being the core of the law. Hillel the Elder was a Jewish religious leader in the century before Christ. When asked by a prospective convert if he could explain the Torah while standing on one foot he replied: "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it."

Jesus of course takes this one step further and makes it positive - do to others what you would want them to do to you. Think of the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) - rather than the narrowly defined 'sons of your own people' that Leviticus suggests as our neighbour, Jesus expands this to others, even others that we might not agree with or get along with.

For Jesus, the whole of the law is summarised in the will of God which calls for love whole heartedly for God and neighbour. Jesus puts these laws together in a way that nobody had previously. In these two commandments - really in the first of the two, for the second flows from it - all the rest of the commandments are encompassed. Which of the ten commandments, when violated, would not be a violation of these two?

## v32-33

*32 And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 33 And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."*

First, notice this man says 'he is one', rather than saying the whole Shema. The omission of the name of God is typically Jewish, stemming from the third commandment which was often taken very seriously by not mentioning of the name of God if it could ever be helped. The mention of 'there is no other besides Him' is from Deuteronomy 4:35:

*To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him.*

He says that this double law of love is more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. This is a theme found in the Old Testament as well:

1 Samuel 15:22:

*And Samuel said,*

*“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,  
as in obeying the voice of the Lord?  
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to listen than the fat of rams.*

Hosea 6:6:

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

Proverbs 21:3:

*To do righteousness and justice  
is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.*

I think there's three things to this:

First, that it's better to not sin than to need to atone for sin afterwards. People sometimes say "it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission". Maybe sometimes it is easier, but I don't think the Bible agrees with this idea. Much better to do right, than need forgiveness.

Secondly, the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices here are those that man performs. Those that are ultimately insufficient for lasting true atonement. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the sacrifice we need, rather than these.

Third, we can take the idea of burnt offerings and sacrifices as a placeholder for any religious activity. We don't sacrifice animals today, but we do have our rituals and traditions. No ritual is more important than our love for God. Nothing we do here at church is a substitute for real love of God.

**v34**

*34 And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

Our passage ends with no one daring to ask Jesus any more questions. So completely has Jesus answered his critics in these last few weeks, that they give up - they don't dare to make their position worse by engaging further with Jesus. In fact, we won't hear from the religious authorities again until chapter 14, when they plot to kill Jesus. In next week's passage, Jesus will ask his own question, which, if they're even still listening, they won't be able to answer.

This is the only question of the series that Jesus commends and the only answer that is given to Jesus - one of agreement.

Compare this reaction from Jesus to that of the rich young ruler we saw in chapter 10, who went away sorrowful because he could not stand the teaching. He believed he had all the laws sorted out, he was self-righteous, but he loved his possessions more than God.

Here, Jesus says that this man is not far from the kingdom of God. Not far, so what is missing? It doesn't say, but maybe it's that this man understood the truth intellectually, could give the right answers, but was not yet truly surrendered to God, or truly transformed. The one thing he may have lacked might have been like Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) - to be born again.

Mere knowledge that we should love God was not enough. We ought to actually love God. Easier said than done, right.

## Conclusion

The heart of sin is to be self-centered - Luther described sin as in essence "man curved in on himself". So to be focused outward, in love to God first and fellow man second is the opposite of sin.

In formulating the core of the law as love for God, Jesus eliminates the possibility of salvation by self-righteousness. Our sinful nature, unhelped, would drag us away from God and away from love of our fellow man.

If we do not love God perfectly, what can we do? 1 John 4:7-11

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 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. 10 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. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

and verse 19:

■ *We love because he first loved us.*

Our very ability to love God is a gift that he gives us. It is only through the work of the Holy Spirit to transform us, we are able to love Him, that we are able to have our sinful nature overcome.

None of us love God perfectly as we ought - none of us can say we have fulfilled the commandment to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, or the command to love others as ourselves. But Jesus Christ followed that most important law in our place. He perfectly loves, not only loves God, the other persons of the Trinity, but loves us. John 15:13:

■ *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*

Romans 5:8:

■ *God shows his love for us in that while we still sinners, Christ died for us.*