

## The Great Commandment<sup>1</sup>

Mark 12:28-34

**Opening: Which best describes you: rule follower, rule bender or a rule breaker?** Psychologists say that most people have an inherent bias either for or against rules. Some people are compliant and fully accept rules and systems as they are and insist on precision in following procedures. Others are rebels who like to color outside the lines and do their own thing and can't stand anyone telling them what to do. When it comes to Christianity a lot of people see it as just a set of rules to follow and rituals to do and because of that they struggle with the Bible and God. **Young Martin Luther** grew up in Roman Catholicism and in his misguided study saw Christianity as a set of rules to follow. He lived in fear and dread of God. He wrote: *Christ was depicted as a grim tyrant, a furious and stern judge who demanded much of us and imposed good works as a payment for our sins... I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God*<sup>2</sup>. Before he became a Christian, his view of God and what God wanted from him was warped because of his own fear of breaking the rules and going to hell. **Christianity is not based on a set of rules to keep but a personal relationship with God that changes how we relate to everything.**

**Context:** On Tuesday during Passion Week, Jesus is questioned by three different groups on three different topics. The Pharisees questioned Jesus politically about paying taxes to Rome. The Sadducees questioned Jesus theologically over the resurrection of the dead. Now the final confrontation will be legally over what God most wants from everyone. **Jesus says that what God wants from us is to love Him supremely and love others selflessly based on His love for you.**

### I. Love God Supremely

- **VS. 28: One of the scribes:** the experts in the law: he had overheard Jesus' responses to the Pharisees and the Sadducees and now he has a question of his own. Maybe his own personal intensive study of the law had brought him to this question. *"Which commandment is the most important of all?"*
- **Standing on one foot:** Prior to Jesus' day, there were two famous Rabbis Hallel and Shammai who were asked by a Gentile, *"teach me the Torah while I stand on one foot."* He first came to Shammai and the Rabbi picked up a stick and hit him in the head and chased him away. Then he went to Hallel, and the Rabbi said, *"that which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah, and all the rest is commentary, now go and learn it."*<sup>3</sup>
- **The Law:** there were 613 laws in the Torah: 248 were positive (do this) and 365 were negative (don't do that). The Mishnah, the tradition of the Rabbis, had another 600+ laws. What this man wanted to know is: *"What does God ask of me? What is the meaning of my life? What is the most important command? What is the highest moral good?"*
- **Jesus takes him to Deuteronomy 6:4-5:** *The Shema: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*
- **Listen and Obey:** every Jew was to recite this at least twice a day in the morning and evening. They put this on their door post (mezuzah) and pious Jews wore it on their arms or foreheads (phylacteries). **YHWH your Elohim:** there is One God who stands alone. He is exclusively and uniquely God in a category all by Himself. He has no rivals or equals.
- **What does the One True God want?** The false gods wanted sacrifice, rituals, obedience, and money. But the One True God is after LOVE. **What is Love? (Haddaway) Love: Ahavah:** dedication, devotion, affection and commitment to someone or something. It is not just a feeling but a conscious, active, ongoing decision and constant war.
- **All of your Heart<sup>4</sup>:** *Levob:* the Hebrew mindset was that the heart was the center of all of your human existence. The place where you know, understand, discern, feel emotions, and make choices motivated by the desires of your heart. *We are to devote our whole life, knowledge, understanding, future, desires, and affections in love towards God.*
- **All of your Soul:** *Nephesh:* 700x in OT: ancient Greek philosophy taught that the soul is a non-physical immortal essence of a person that is trapped in the body and is released upon death. But that is not what the Bible teaches. It meant the "whole person." It is your life force, energy, passion, and engine; what gets you up in the morning.
- **You do not have a Nephesh, but you are a Nephesh:** the soul is my whole being: to love God with all your soul is to love God with the totality of who you are as a person. *We are to offer to God our entire being out of love; we are to be more passionate about God than anything else in our lives.*

<sup>1</sup> Works Consulted: Jason Meyer, *Mark for You*. Pp. 188-190. John Mark Comer, *Standing on One Foot*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://st.network/religion/the-saint-who-hated-god.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-ed-feinstein/sermons/one-foot>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/shema-listen/>

- **All of your Strength:** *Me'od*: 300x in OT: not “strength” in muscle power but is an adverb meaning very or much: it is intensity or muchness. When Jesus quotes the Shema, he uses two words for *me'od*: “**mind**” and “**might**.” He is not adding a word but using two words to describe the meaning of the word. Both are human capacities and abilities.
- *We are to love God with every possibility, ability and capacity that we have; to love God with all of your muchness: your education, giftedness, talent, ability, background, creativity, and wealth. All that we are and all that we have.*
- **The greatest commandment is to love God more than you love anything else.** God alone is worthy of all our devotion, affection, and commitment. We are to love God with every fiber of our being and everything that we are. God has total exclusivity in and over our lives. There are to be no other secret lovers in our lives.
- **God is never satisfied with anything less than the devotion of our whole life for the whole duration of our lives:** God does not want a place in our lives, or prominence in our lives, He wants and deserves preeminence over our lives. You may think that sounds narcissistic; and it would be if anyone else made that demand other than God.
- **The greatest sin is to not love God more than anything else:** first commandment, “No other gods.” The essence of idolatry is to love, serve, fear, and obey something or someone else more than God. Idolatry is the sin underneath our sins. Anytime I sin, I am allowing some competing desire to be in the place of God in my life failing to love God first.
- **Reality is that “the heart of man is a perpetual factory of idols.”<sup>5</sup>** If given the chance, we will replace God with any and every object, person, ideal or dream. **What is that in your life? What has your heart more than God?** What do you feel like you must have to live? What do you turn to the most for joy, comfort, security, and approval? Idols are not usually bad things, but often good things that we have turned into God things. (Family, Career, Money, Fame, Sports)
- **The problem is that idols always promise they can’t keep and never answer you when you are in need:** if you worship money, it will promise you safety and security and provide you neither. Money will promise you contentment, but when you cry out because you are discontent, it will just leave you alone. An idol cannot do what God can do.
- **Our love for God ultimately comes out of God’s love for us: 1 John 4:19: *We love Him because He first loved us.*** All of the Christian life is a response to the love of God seen in the person of Jesus Christ. It is God’s love for us that is the driving force for our whole life devotion, and it is the filter by which we live our lives. When you love God with all that you are things can and will change in your life. (*Loving April changes my relationship with other women.*)

## II. Love Other Selflessly

- **VS. 31: The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself: Leviticus 19:18:** The scribe asked for one command and Jesus gave him two; the second command is complimentary and a sign that we love God is that we love others. You cannot really love God if you do not love who God loves. No one had ever put these two commands together.
- **Jesus sets the standard high:** he doesn’t just say, “love your neighbor” but love them as you love yourself. Jesus doesn’t command us to love our selves that is assumed. **All of us were born with a natural, deep, defining trait:** We love ourselves. We don’t have to be taught to do that; we have an instinct for self-preservation and fulfillment. We all want to be happy. We all want food, clothing, shelter, protection, fun, friends, and purpose. This isn’t evil.
- **Meyer:** *It’s like Jesus is telling us to take off our flesh and put it on someone else. We are to look at them and love them with all the interest we have in ourselves.* This is a command to crucify selfishness and pour our selves out for others.
- **To Jesus, these two commandments are distinguishable but inseparable:** we can’t say that we love God and hate our brother (1 John 4:20) You can’t have one without the other. The proof that you love God is that you love your neighbor. According to the Bible, if you say that you do love God and hate your brother, you are a liar.
- **The natural question then is, “who is my neighbor?”** Because the answer to that question is either going to make obeying this command harder or easier. If it’s a narrow definition of people that are near to me, that I know and have a relationship with. Because if that is the case that is much easier. We tend to love people who are most like us because they remind us of ourselves, and we love ourselves. But if we only love people who are just like us, we are missing out.
- **In Luke 10, the parable of the Good Samaritan:** Jesus defines our neighbor as anyone in the road who needs help or is in need. Anyone we come near to. There are no limitations. When Jesus was asked who are neighbor is, he gives a story of a person who sacrificially helps someone of a different race and religion.
- **Loving our neighbor is radical love for anyone of any ethnicities, classes, religions, politics, backgrounds, and beliefs.** Our neighbors are those who live by you, may be nothing like you and even your enemies. Not just loving those like us but loving those who dislike us. People who hate you, have wronged you and wounded you.

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin.

- **We are to not just love them in word but through deeds:** to do tangible things to help and love our neighbors. Being willing to go beyond kind words and warm feelings but do something that is practically helpful to the other person as we would want to be done for us. We are to love them with the same energy, joy and creativity as we love ourselves.
- **This command is VERY threatening to my selfish, sinful heart.** *Our tendency is to practice **injustice**.* To not love our neighbor because they are not as awesome as we think we are. We mistreat, use, abuse, criticize, tear people down and manipulate them for our own purposes because we love ourselves too much and love them too little.
- **How could I possibly obey that command? Answer:** The first commandment makes the second commandment possible. The first commandment takes the threat of the second commandment away. **The first commandment:** (Loving God) **is the basis of the second commandment** (Loving others). *To the degree that I obey the first commandment, will be the degree that I am able to obey the second commandment.*
- **Keller:** *If you take all your self-love and focus it on God-Love so that God satisfies your every need for hope, love, security, fulfillment, and significance; you will see your self-love transformed and satisfied. Self-love is all about finding satisfaction. If God becomes the great love of our lives and satisfaction, then loving our neighbor does not become a threat to us. I don't see loving my neighbor as a threat to my own happiness, because I am finding my happiness and satisfaction in God alone.*<sup>6</sup> (Loving God first enables me to love others best.)
- **How do I obey the First so that I can obey the second? Answer:** You can't obey the first command without first experiencing the Love of God in your life. Our love from God comes for knowing and experiencing God's love of us. **To the degree that you know that God loves you is the degree by which you love God and love other people.**
- **John 13:34-35:** *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: **just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.***
- **Example:** Patricia grew up in a very legalistic church that said, "You must follow the rules, be a good person and maybe God will accept you." Her church taught her that either you are good enough to go to heaven or you are annihilated. She became obsessed with following the rules even rose to leadership in the denomination. But inwardly she always felt that there was something missing that she was not good enough. She eventually left that church and denomination in search for the truth. Eventually, she got out of church all together. She gave up. One day, someone invited her to come to the church I pastored in Sanford. In a few weeks, she gave her life to Christ and was baptized. Right before I baptized her, she said, "The God who I once dreaded, I now love because I know that He loves me."
- **When you know that God loves you that empowers you to love Him and love anyone you encounter and love them as God has loved you.**

**Application: VS. 32-33:** The scribe heard what Jesus said and agreed: **You are right, Teacher (Brilliant)...to love God and your neighbor as oneself... is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices:** where were this man and Jesus? They were right by the Temple. What was happening there? Burnt offerings and sacrifices. The scribe said, "loving God and neighbor are more important than participating in Temple activities." He knew that what really matters most in life is loving God and others. Because you can go through the motions of rituals without any love for God or other people.

**VS. 34:** Jesus said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." No one else dared to ask any more questions (Good idea.)

Not far but not yet in the Kingdom of God. He is very close. He knows the truth about Jesus but has not yet acted on it.

Mark does not give us the rest of the story but makes it a cliff hanger. *Did the guy believe in Jesus or not?* **Mark purposely does this to invite us to respond to what Jesus says for ourselves.** If you see Christianity as a set of rules rather than a relationship of love, you will choose idolatry and injustice. But if you see Christianity as a relationship of love rather than a list of rules, you will choose the way of Jesus which is to love God supremely and others selflessly.

**One of the ways you love God supremely is by obeying Him completely. "If you love me, you will keep my commands."** **This afternoon, we are going to the beach to celebrate baptisms.** Baptism is an outward symbol of an inward change. It does not get you to heaven or wash away your sins, but it is simply a public profession that you have a relationship with Jesus. It is like putting on a wedding ring and wearing it in public showing everyone you're married. Baptism is something you are supposed to do as soon as you receive Jesus like putting a ring on is the first thing you do after saying your vows.

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller. *The Love of God*.

You say, "I don't need to be baptized because I was baptized as a baby." We respect that, but did you know that there are 27 baptisms in the book of Acts and in all 27 they believed before they were baptized. It doesn't make sense to put on the wedding ring before you're married. When your parents baptized you as a baby it was out of hope that you would one day grow up and follow Jesus. So, if you get baptized as a believer, you are ratifying what they had hoped for you.

***Baptism is not a rule that you must keep, but it is an opportunity to go public with a relationship you already have.***