

Title: L. O. V. E.
Date: 07/21/24
Subject: Love the Lord and other people
Scripture: Mark 12:28 – 34 (Matthew 22:34-40)

Jesus' opponents bombarded him with questions to try to trap him. Last week we saw the questions about who gave him authority. Then the Pharisees/teachers of the law came up with a question about whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. The Sadducees asked a hypothetical question about the resurrection which is really interesting because they didn't believe there was such a thing as the resurrection. Maybe that's why they were Sad You See? Not really. This brings us to the question at hand.

Read Mark 12:28-34.

Matthew's account says the Pharisees heard Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. On the one hand they wanted to congratulate Jesus because Pharisees and Sadducees fought like cats and dogs. They didn't mind the other group getting smacked down. On the other hand, they wanted to outdo the Sadducees in the interrogation of Jesus. One of them, an expert in the law, came forward. "Guys. I got this." He decided to test Jesus.

Testing is usually thought of negatively. Think in terms of those pesky math tests or the review test of all the facts and figures of history covered during the entire semester and it seemed like the teacher wanted to see how many students could fail the test.

This test seems to have a different motivation and the questioner wasn't the run-of-the-mill Pharisee. He was composed of different character. I don't sense he was trying to trick Jesus. V. 28 says he noticed Jesus had given a good answer. He wanted to see if he'd double up and give another one. I think he wanted to make sure Jesus was the real deal. It's like what President Reagan said regarding foreign policy "Trust, but verify."

Jewish rabbis were deeply concerned about knowing and keeping the commands...at least outwardly. They scoured the law to find its 613 individual statutes. They divided these into heavy/great and light/little commands. They discussed which rose to the top and which was the most important. Matthew refers to it as the greatest commandment. Most important and greatest mean the same.

Jesus anchors his answer in the historical context of Moses recapping how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and led them to the Promised Land (Deut 6:4-9). "These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life." Then he recorded the Shema which is named after the first word "hear." It became the Jewish confession of faith. Those who were pious or wanted to pass themselves off as being pious would recite it every morning. It calls attention to God as superior and is a unified whole. It's followed by instructions to have God's commands upon their hearts, to impress them on their children, create reminders of them and incorporated them in their daily lives.

Jesus gives the questioner more than what's asked. He not only gives numero uno, but also the second most important. Jesus wasn't the first person to link them. The religious leaders would do so based on Old Testament teaching. Jesus had a previous conversation with another expert in the law who tried to test Jesus: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered with a question: "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" The man responded: "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, love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:25-37). He probably thought he hit a game winning home run. Jesus told the guy he'd given the right answer but needed to put them into practice and then he'd live. The man wanted to justify himself: "And who is my neighbor?" He probably was still trying to test Jesus and thought he'd painted him into a corner. Jesus shared the story of the Good Samaritan. The man was forced to admit the neighbor was the one who had mercy. Jesus again said, "Go and do likewise." Jesus revealed to the man he had a heart of sin, sinfulness and self-righteousness. He needed to love the Lord with total devotion and people as completely as he did himself.

Jesus says in v. 31 "There is no commandment greater than these." Matthew's account says, "All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments." Saying they're a summary is a little trite. It's like saying Michael Jordan was an okay basketball player. These two commands are the heart, embodiment, and soul of God's law. All other commands build on the foundation, put meat on the bones.

The teacher agrees with Jesus in his analysis of God and the two commands are "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." He affirms what God wants is the heart and not just the outward sacrifices. To be clear, God's moral law is the subject, not the Old Testament law of rituals and ceremonies.

Jesus tells the man he's not far from the kingdom of God. I don't think Jesus was saying he was almost there...if he just made some tweaks... I think Jesus was telling the man to keep going in the way he was going.

Mark notes this was the time when people pulled the plug on asking any more questions. It wasn't worth the headache they'd receive. They'd just make Jesus more endearing to the crowd.

Let's dig a little deeper into Jesus' answer as to what is the greatest and most important commandment.

I. Love the Lord your God

We've noted this was rooted in Old Testament. More specifically - Deuteronomy, Moses' last words just prior to the Israelites entering the Promised Land. With a name like Deuteronomy, which comes from the Hebrew meaning repetition or copy of the law, it doesn't sound like a book about love. It sounds like a book of laws, regulations, rules, yawn. A person might be tempted to think of it as a documentary on human odor, malaria mosquitoes, and Limburger cheese that only a small group of scientists would find interesting. The reality is it's more like an action movie that has a recurring love theme running throughout. God gave commands about how people were to act but it was based upon his love for them.

Moses continually spoke about God's love, recalling who God is and what he had done - the Exodus from Egypt, provisions during the wilderness wanderings - and what he was planning to do. People were to know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps his covenant of love to a 1000 generations

of those who love him and keep his commands (7:7-9). Love for Lord God and obedience are coupled continuously. Love for the Lord is the first command to be obeyed. Love, serve, faithfully and carefully obey and observe - with all your heart and with all your soul always (10:12, 13; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:3, 4; 19:9; 30:6, 16-20). The reason to love the Lord, listen to him and hold fast to him is because the Lord is your life (30:20).

We don't have the same promises Israel had but we're similar in that we're looking forward to a Promised Land - an eternal one in heaven. We have the same challenge - to love the Lord, affix his words in our hearts and minds, teach them to our children and put them into practice in our lives, faithfully obeying and serving with all our heart, soul mind and strength. What God wants, what we need to do is to show him love.

The Lord gives us the incredible privilege and honor to be able to relate to him, to love him. The Lord didn't have to bestow that on us. The Lord reminded Israel he didn't set his affection on them and choose them because they were more numerous than other people or because of their righteousness. He chose them because he loved them (Deut 7:7, 8; 9:4), We need to keep in mind we didn't love God first and he's merely returning good vibes to us (1 John 4:10). God loved us first and sent Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We're to faithfully and carefully obey and observe all God's commands, requirements and decrees which are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, walk in his ways as we serve and hold fast to him. It's because he is our life.

We could work through the alphabet to find ways to love to God. We'll only briefly do the first three letters. Adoration. God is the recipient and we're the givers. The gift is "love." We return love to God by thinking about the greatness of his love expressed for us, what he's done for us. We express our appreciation to him. It's often referred to as worship or praise. Sing; pray; write letter, song or poem.

Baptism. This shows love to the Lord as we declare our intent to follow Jesus Christ. We publicly align ourselves with him as we share what he means to us. We turn away from following after what the world says is important. We declare a new direction as we give public testimony to the seriousness of our faith. For many it's a line drawn in the sand. It's an identification with Jesus and it's something that's hard to walk back from. If you're interested in being baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ, let me know so we can discuss it more.

Communicate to community. The second great command.

II. Love other people

The Bible reminds us: "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; But if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:11, 12). The natural and logical conclusion to being loved by God is so obvious, like the nose on the front of our faces. It's to love him, but the other part is also essential though more often overlooked, and in a sense, more difficult as it involves someone we can see/touch.

This command also originates in the Old Testament in the book of Leviticus where the instruction is to "not seek revenge or bear a grudge...but love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18). It's given with the reminder: "I am the Lord." It's like the Lord wanted to add some weight behind that command. Pay attention to this!

There was a group of Pharisees who made an addition to the command. They felt it implied it was okay, even compulsory, that God intended for people to hate your enemy. Jesus countered that teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43, 44). It's a call to do good to all people, to those we come in contact with including enemies. Prayer is a practical way to express love.

The command to love your neighbor gains prominence in the New Testament.

Romans 13:8-10. Read.

The importance of loving one's neighbor is indicated: v. 8 "has fulfilled the law," v. 9 "whatever other commands there may be, are summed up in this one rule" v. 10 "the fulfillment of the law."

The passage links loving a neighbor with loving one another, those who are fellow Christ followers. 17 times Christians are commanded to "love one another." That's as many times as we're commanded to love God, family members, enemies, etc.

Did you notice the Bible tells us that it's okay to have long term debt? Of one kind. It's the continuing debt to love one another. It's a debt that could and should remain outstanding. It can't be repaid.

Think about going to the bank to talk about your mortgage. You know how much you owe and the bank definitely knows, down to the penny. You propose to pay down the debt, one day at a time, at the sum of \$1.00. Once the banker stops laughing his head off, he'll say that's not agreeable. If you don't make serious efforts pay off the debt completely, other measures will be taken. The debt will be paid or else.

The debt to love others is one that can never be paid off. It's important to understand to whom we're indebted. It's not people per se. Technically, we don't owe them anything. The debt we owe is to the Lord. Repeat an earlier verse: "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another,"

Most translations have the word "ought." One has "should," a few use "must." It's an obligation. If God can love we who are inferior to him by every measurement, we who are totally unworthy - we should love those who are on our level - which is every person. If God loved people enough to send his Son to die for them, then we're to love them as well.

This love is to be to the extent of being willing to lay down our lives for our brothers because Jesus Christ laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16). It's also about meeting practical needs - help for daily living. We're to love with actions and in truth and not merely with words (1 John 3:18).

The Romans passage gives examples of love - don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't covet and whatever other commands there may be. All social responsibilities and interactions are covered. When we look at people, we shouldn't see dollar signs over their heads but IOU's.

Galatians 5:13 - 15. Read

"The entire law is summed up in a single command." There was a group of false teachers who pushed for legalistic adherence to Jewish laws as part of being a Christian. Some people agreed while others pushed back to emphasize their spiritual freedom.

The passage is a sandwich. One slice of bread is about abusing our freedom - throwing off all restraint, living however we want, indulging the sinful nature for selfish pursuits, asserting rights, using and misusing others. Instead, we're to serve one another in love. Think about how to meet the other person's needs.

The other slice of bread warns about the harm done when people aren't loving. They nitpick about how others are living their lives. They play junior Holy Spirit to point out every sin and quirk, viewing self as better than everybody else. Continual biting and devouring leads to destruction. A kind of spiritual cannibalism.

The middle of the sandwich is the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." It prevents us from putting ourselves first and killing off the others.

James 2:8, 9. Read.

"the royal law found in scripture." It's the supreme law. The context reveals there was favoritism in the church. People were catering to the rich and excluding the poor. This breaks the law. The passage follows up with other ways of breaking God's moral law – adultery, murder. A person who is guilty of breaking one law becomes a lawbreaker and is guilty of breaking the entire law.

Bicycles have chains that provide the power from the pedals to the wheel. It doesn't matter if link #1 breaks or 27 or 85. If one link breaks the whole chain is broken. That's the principle behind being a lawbreaker.

What causes a person to play favorites, commit adultery, commit murder or other sins? It boils down to selfishness - wanting to advance self. Selfishness is the opposite of love.

Keeping the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves is doing what's right. It pleases God.

A world without love would be a horrible place to be. A family without love would be a horrible place to be. A church without love would be a horrible place to be.

When Guy Doud was stressed during college finals, he did what many of us do - eat. This particular time he went to a downtown Fargo restaurant and ordered the biggest breakfast on the menu. He was enjoying it when he saw two of the grossest looking people he'd ever seen enter the diner. He was further grossed out when they sat next to him at the counter. He couldn't stand looking at them and the deformities. He knows it was wrong as a Christian but says that's the way he felt at that time.

A young woman and her daughter entered the restaurant. The old woman next to him also spotted them. "Oh. Look at that beautiful little girl. Come here, honey. Come here. Give me a kiss." Doud wanted to jump out of his seat and say, "How could you ask her to kiss that?" The little girl looked at her mommy and her mommy smiled back. The little girl walked over to the old lady, put her hands on the woman's face, leaned up and gave her a kiss. Then she stepped back and said, "Jesus loves you."

When Doud returned to his dorm, he noticed a poster his roommate had put up. It showed a drunken bum with an empty flask beside him. The caption read: "You love Jesus Christ only as much as the person you love the least."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."