

THE QUESTION ABOUT THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT MARK 12:28–34

Introduction

Jesus had met His third group of challengers, the Sadducees. He had silenced and routed them. The Pharisees, the strict religionists of that day, heard about Jesus' conquering His challengers again. In their minds, His threat to their security remained. All three attempts to discredit Him had failed. Somehow, they felt they must discredit Him before the people in order to break His hold on them. There was the very dangerous possibility that the people might follow through with their proclaiming Him to be the Messiah, that they might rise up against the Roman authorities. The responsibility for such action, of course, would lie at their feet as Jewish leaders; and they would be replaced as the ruling body of the Sanhedrin, losing their position, authority, esteem and wealth.

They met together to plan and plot against Jesus again (see Mat 22:34). This time they took a different approach. Earlier they had challenged Him as a body of questioners. Now they chose only one member from among their body to attack Jesus. He was a Teacher of the law [Scribe] who was most brilliant and versed in the law.

Jesus used the occasion to teach man the greatest provision and duty of human life: love. Love will provide for every need man has; therefore, love is the greatest duty of man.

- I. A Teacher of the law approached Jesus (v. 28).
- II. The greatest commandment (vv. 29-31).
- III. The great vastness of this law (vv. 32-34).

I. *Mark 12:28 The Supreme Commandments*

This man was a teacher of the law (Mat 22:35). Apparently his heart had been touched by Jesus. There were two indications of this. First, Mark tells us that the man was present when Jesus was "debating" with the Sadducees (Mark 12:28), and he noticed "that Jesus had given them a good answer." Second, at the conclusion of his own discussion with Jesus, Jesus said to the man, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34).

Something about Jesus struck a chord within this man. His heart had been touched and stirred rather deeply. True, he was being put forward by the official body to challenge Jesus. But personally there was something about Jesus when Jesus was answering the Sadducees — the spirit, the wisdom, the self-confidence, the authority — that had stirred the lawyer's heart to wonder and to want to learn more about Jesus.

Note the question: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Through the years, Jewish teachers had set up six hundred commandments. There were so many commandments that in day-to-day life no person could keep them all. So the question was often discussed: Which commandments must be absolutely obeyed? Which ones

are important and which ones are not? Can the failure to obey some be condoned or not? Which commandments are heavy and which are light? If a person keeps the greatest of the precepts, can he be excused for his failure to keep the others (see Mt. 19:16f)? Note two quick points.

1. This is the sin which James attacks.

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

2. Christ teaches that some laws are all inclusive and broader than others.

Mat 23:23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

What the Pharisees were trying to do was this. Various groups believed the greatest commandment to be different things such as circumcision, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. They hoped that by stating His opinion, Jesus would disturb the people who held a position different from His. He would thereby lose their following. There was the strong possibility that a man giving his judgment would seem to be lessening the weight of other very important commandments.

II. *Mark 12:29–31 The Greatest Commandment of God*

What was the greatest commandment in the law? Note that Jesus answered without hesitation or equivocation. He answered with all the authority of God Himself, and what He said was an eye-opener to people steeped in man-made religions.

1. Know that “the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (See *God, Nature*, Rom 3:29-30.)
 - a. He is the Lord. Jehovah, Yahweh. There is no other. Monotheism (one God) is the true belief. Polytheism (many gods) is a false belief.
 - b. He is our God. This is a personal relationship between a worshipper and his God. It is a daily experience. We are related to Him; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture. Therefore, we should love, adore, and worship Him.
 - c. He is One. He is the focus and concentration of our life, attention, worship, love, and praise. He is the only Subject of our devotion. There is no reason, no excuse for distraction by any other subject. He is the One, the only Subject.

1 Cor 8:4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.

Eph 4:6 One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

1 Tim 2:5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 John 5:7 *For there are three that testify:*

2 Sam 7:22 *“How great you are, O Sovereign Lord! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears.”*

Psa 86:10 *For you are great and do marvellous deeds; you alone are God.*

Isa 43:10-11 *“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour.”*

Isa 44:6 *This is what the Lord says — Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”*

Isa 45:18 *For this is what the Lord says — he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited — he says: “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”*

2. The Lord our God is to be loved. “Love the Lord your God.” Love God as your very own God. This is a personal relationship, not a distant relationship. God is not impersonal, far out in space someplace, distant and removed. God is personal, ever so close, and we are to be personally involved with God on a face-to-face basis. The command is to “love the Lord your God.” Loving God is alive and active, not dead and inactive. We are, therefore, to maintain a personal relationship with God that is alive and active.

Note that Jesus says to love God with all your being. Jesus breaks our being down into three parts: the heart, the soul, and the mind (see *Heart, Soul, Mind*, Mat 22:37).

Note also that Jesus adds “with all your strength.” Love is man’s chief duty. Man is responsible to maintain a loving relationship with God. Very practically, loving God involves the very same factors that loving a person involves (see Eph 5:22-33).

- a. A loving relationship involves *commitment and loyalty*. True love does not allow lustful behaviour with others. True love does not covet and does not care for a worldly, carnal definition that allows fleshly acts and sensual relationships with others. True love is commitment and loyalty to one person. It is very significant that the very first commandment God gives deals with commitment and loyalty with one person. God strikes out at the very core of man’s carnal behaviour and tendency to define love in terms that allow him to satisfy his lust. “You shall have no other gods” (Exo 20:3).
- b. A loving relationship involves *trust and respect* for the person loved. It is loving the person for who he is. We love God because of Himself, because He is who He is.
 - ⇒ He is the Creator and Sustainer of life; therefore we love Him.
 - ⇒ He is the Saviour and Redeemer; therefore we love Him.
 - ⇒ He is the Lord and Owner of life; therefore we love Him.

- c. A loving relationship involves the *giving and surrendering* of oneself. The drive is to give oneself, to surrender oneself to the other, not to get.
- d. A loving relationship involves *knowing and sharing*. The desire is to know and to share, to be learning, growing, working, and serving ever so closely together.

Thought 1. Man is to love God supremely.

Jude 1:21 *Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.*

2 Th 3:5 *May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.*

Deut 10:12 *And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

Deut 11:1 *Love the Lord your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always.*

Josh 22:5 *But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the Lord gave you: to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.*

Psa 31:23 *Love the Lord, all his saints! The Lord preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full.*

- 3. The Lord our God demands that we love our neighbours as ourselves. Because of the length of this discussion, it is handled in a separate note (see *Love, Brotherhood*, Mark 12:31)

MATHEW 22:37 HEART

*Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." **Mathew 22:37-38***

The heart is the seat of man's affection and will (devotion). The heart attaches and focuses our will and devotion. The heart causes us to give either good things or bad things. The heart causes us to devote ourselves to either good or bad. Therefore, Christ says we are to love God "with all our heart." We are to focus our heart, our affection, and our will (devotion) upon God. We are to love God supremely.

Mat 6:21 *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Mat 12:34-35 *"You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." (see Mat. 15:18-19) □*

MATHEW 22:37 SOUL (PSUCHE)

The soul is the seat of man's breath and life or consciousness. The soul is the life of a man, the consciousness, the breath, the essence, the being of a man. The soul is the animal life of a man. The soul is the breath and consciousness that distinguishes man and other animals from vegetation.

The world of vegetation lives and man and animals live, but there is a difference in their living. Man and animals are breathing and conscious beings. The essence of their being is breath and consciousness. They are living souls. This is clearly pointed out in the Hebrew language of Gen 1:20: "Let the waters teem with 'living souls' [nephesh]." The "living souls" that God created were different from the vegetation He had just created. The "living souls" were creatures (fish) that breathed and possessed consciousness.

Christ said we are to love God "with all our soul," that is, with all our life, our breath, our consciousness. We are to love God with all the breath and consciousness, all the life and awareness, we have. □

MATHEW 22:37 MIND

The mind is the seat of reasoning and understanding. God has given intellectual powers to man. Man thinks, reasons, and understands. Christ says that our minds and thoughts are to be centred upon God. We are to love God "with all our mind."

Rom 12:2 *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Eph 4:24 *And to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Phil 4:8 *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.*

Col 3:10 *And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator:*

2 Cor 10:5 *We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. □*

III. *Mark 12:32–34 The Greatness of the Law of Love*

The great vastness of this law is threefold.

1. The law of love is so great it causes thinking and honest men to agree. This teacher of the law was a thinking man, and he was open and honest. Imagine the bitter hatred of this man's peers against Jesus, yet he was open and honest enough to listen to Jesus and face the truth of what Jesus said. (How many are as open and honest today?)
2. The law of love exceeds all offerings and sacrifices. The man had been wrapped up in offerings and sacrifices all his life. His life as a teacher of the law (Scribe) was literally dedicated to and possessed by a religion that was steeped in offerings and sacrifices.

He had come a long way in making this statement (vv. 32-33). He was beginning to see that life and religion were not ritual and ceremony and rules and regulations. Life is love — loving God with all of one's being and loving one's neighbour as oneself.

3. The law of love is so great it almost assures salvation to those who understand it. Jesus said so: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Thought 1. How many people really think and are at the same time open and honest? Some do think through the deeper issues of life, but there are fewer who are open and honest.

Thought 2. How many are not "far from the kingdom of God?" Some are not far away, but note: they are still away. They are not in the kingdom. ■

ROMANS 03:29–30

NATURE OF GOD, UNIVERSAL FATHER, IMPARTIAL

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Romans 03:29–30

Faith reveals only one God who deals with all equally.

1. God created everyone; therefore, He is the God of all. There is not one God of the Jew (religionist) and another God of the Gentile. There are not different gods of the races and nations of the world, not a different god of Africa and a different god of India, and a different god for Arabs, and a different god for Americans and on and on. Imagine the foolishness of such an idea! Yet how common the idea is! There is only one God who created the universe and only one God who is the God of all mankind.

- a. There is only one God who created all things: “One God, the Father from whom all things came and for whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6).
- b. There is only one God who has made all men alike: “From one man he made every nation of men” (Acts 17:26).
- c. There is only one God “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Mat 23:9 “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.”

Eph 4:6 One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Heb 12:9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Mal 2:10 Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

2. God is the only God; therefore, all are justified in the same way — by faith. God does not play favourites and show partiality. God does not make it more difficult for some to be saved. God is God; that is, He is perfectly just and equitable in all His dealings.
 - a. There “is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (Rom 3:30).
 - b. “There is [only] one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5).

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism.”

Acts 15:9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Rom 10:12-13 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Rom 2:11 For God does not show favouritism.

The point is this. When a man trusts God to save him and to count him righteous in Christ, that man’s faith proves...

- that God is, that there is only one true and living God.
- that God treats all men equally; that he, the sinner, is saved just like all other believers. □

MARK 12: 31 LOVE OF BROTHERHOOD

“The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:31

The Lord our God demands that we love our neighbours as ourselves. This is actually a second commandment. Jesus said so. The teacher of the law had not asked for it, but the first commandment is abstract; it cannot be seen or understood standing by itself. There has to be a *demonstration, an act, something done* for love to be seen and understood. A profession of love without demonstration is empty. It is only profession. Love is not known without showing it.

Several important things need to be said about love at this point.

1. Love is an active experience, not inactive and dormant. That is what Christ was pointing out. Love for God *acts*. Love acts by showing and demonstrating itself. It is inaccurate and foolish for a man to say, “I love God”; and then be inactive, dormant, doing nothing for God. If he truly loves God, he will *do things* for God. Any person who loves does things for the one loved.
2. The primary thing God wants from us is to love our neighbour, *not the doing of religious things*. Doing religious things is good; but it only deals with things such as rituals, observances, ordinances, laws. Such things are lifeless, unfeeling, unresponsive. They are immaterial. They are not helped by our doing them. Only we are helped. They make us feel good and religious, which is beneficial to our growth, but religious things are not what demonstrate our love for God. Loving our neighbour is what proves our love for God. A man may say he loves God, but if he hates and acts unkindly toward his neighbour, everyone knows his religion is only profession.

John 13:34-35 *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

1 John 4:20-21 *If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

3. The great commandment to love God flows downward into another great commandment: to love our neighbour as ourselves. The fact is inescapable.

Rom 5:8 *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

When a man really sees the love of God, he cannot help but love God and share the love of God with his neighbours. It is the love of Christ for us, His death and sacrifice, that compels us to go and love all men everywhere.

1 John 4:19, 21 *We love because he first loved us. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*

2 Cor 5:14, 15 *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

4. We are to love self.

a. There is a corrupt love of self that feels the world should centre around oneself. This self-love...

- wants all attention centred around oneself
- pushes self forward
- insists on one's own way
- demands and revels in recognition
- shows conceit and ignores others

b. However, there is a godly love for self that is natural and pleasing to God. It is a love that stirs a strong self-image, confidence and assurance, and even helps in preventing some diseases and illnesses such as ulcers, tension and high blood pressure. The right love of self or the godly love of self comes from knowing three things.

=> That one is actually the creation of God: the highest creation possible.

=> That one is actually the object of God's love: the most supreme love possible.

=> That one is actually the trustee of God's gifts: the greatest gifts possible.

c. The godly love of self has three traits that are clearly seen.

=> It considers others better than itself. It does consider self ever so highly as God's glorious creation, but it considers others more highly.

Phil 2:3 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*

=> It looks on the interests of others. It does look on one's own interests as a trustee of God's gifts, but it also looks on the interests of others.

Phil 2:4 *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

=> It walks humbly before others.

Mat 23:11-12 *“The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”*

1 Pet 5:5 *...All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

5. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Note three very specific things about this second great commandment.
 - a. To love our neighbour is a command, not an option. If the commandment is not obeyed, God is displeased and we stand guilty of having broken the law of God.
 - b. To love our neighbour arouses the question: Who is our neighbour? Jesus answered the question Himself in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. A good neighbour is “the one who shows mercy on any who need mercy,” even if the needy person is socially despised (Luke 10:25-37, esp. 36-37). Everyone in the world needs mercy; therefore, our neighbour is everyone in the world, no matter his status, condition, or circumstance. Every man is to be considered ever so highly and helped no matter who he is. No man is to be injured or wronged. Every man is always to be considered better than oneself (Phil 2:3).
 - c. To love our neighbour is a very practical command. It involves some very practical acts that are spelled out in Scripture (see 1 Cor 13:4-7).
 - => *Love is patient (endures).*
 - => *Love is kind.*
 - => *Love does not envy.*
 - => *Love does not boast (does not brag, vaunt itself)*
 - => *Love is not proud (arrogant).*
 - => *Love is not rude (unbecoming, rude, indecent, unmannered).*
 - => *Love is not self-seeking (is not selfish, insisting on a person’s own rights and way).*
 - => *Love is not easily angered (not touchy, fretful, resentful).*
 - => *Love keeps no record of wrongs (harbours no evil or immoral thoughts, takes no account of a wrong done it).*
 - => *Love does not delight in evil (not in wrong, sin, injustice); but rejoices with the truth (what is right, just, righteous).*
 - => *Love always protects.*
 - => *Love always trusts (exercises faith in everything; is ready to believe the best in everyone).*
 - => *Love always hopes (keeps up hope in everything, under all circumstances).*
 - => *Love always perseveres (keeps a person from weakening; gives the power to endure). □*