

Mark 12:28—34

May 12, 2019

I don't have time for many hobbies. Between the hustle and bustle of home, the privilege of leading this church, I don't have time for many hobbies. I have to choose carefully.

I have a busted up knee so sports are out.
I'm not much of a foodie so food is out.
I use email so postage stamps are out.

And so, a few years ago I turned to reading. I decided to make reading my hobby. For the past five or six years, I have meandered through some of the classics. Books that I should have read in high school. Back then I had sports so I didn't read books.

But back to today.

Now I read books and I have discovered a love for a one author in particular. John Steinbeck. I find that his writing is so good it is almost poetic. He about the human condition compellingly. I find myself reading his descriptions of emotions and nearly feeling them myself. I find myself reading his description of the Salinas Valley and seeing it for myself. I find his descriptive powers to be such that he puts words to things I thought.

Recently, I read Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. It is a rambling story of two families in Northern California that mirrors the story of Cain and Abel.

In one interchange three people are talking about what makes a good story. Lee, the do-everything companion to Adam said this,

“If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen. And I here make a rule—a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and the foreign is not interesting—only the deeply personal and familiar.” John Steinbeck

So true.

We come again to our journey with Jesus through Mark and it is so tempting to view what we are about to read as the strange and the foreign. Because after all, these words are some 2000 years old in a culture we don't understand, in a time we don't understand and among a people we don't understand.

Don't be deceived.

This story is about everyone—that is why it has lasted. It is a story about everyone in this room. And if you listen you will find that this story is not just about you, but it is deeply personal and familiar.

How?

Let's see together.

If I were to summarize the sentiment here from Mark 12, it would be like this:

PROP: God asks for more of you; yet God offers more to you.

“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?”²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’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.’³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”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 neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”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.”
Mark 12:28-34

PRAY

The Greatest
Great Answer

1. The Greatest (Mark 12:28–31)

We have been standing with Jesus in the outer court of the temple watching and listening to those who come up to challenge him.

And each time they come in like waves and crash into Jesus only to retreat again and again. So far, 4 different delegations have sauntered up to him only to be sent back in defeat.

Today, the fifth installment is distinct. The interchange we read is completely lacking in any of the previous rancor, malice or spite. It is an honest question from one of the Jewish scribes. Like us, he came heard and saw Jesus. And like many of us, he was drawn to this Nazarene. He came moved toward Jesus to ask a question,

Vs. 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?”

There are 613 commandments in the Old Testament and there was a constant debate amongst scribes as to which was the most important.

The sense of the question was more than, can you give us the most important of the 613 commandments? It was something like this, Which commandment of the OT, “supersedes everything” and is binding on all humanity?

This scribe is not just asking a question of Jesus about Judaism, he is asking a question about all humanity. Is asking question that is about everyone—even us—and we should listen.

You see it is at this point the scribe asks a question that pertains to everyone. He is standing there before Jesus asking as a representative for all humanity—what is the ONE THING you want all humanity to understand?

And as he answers imagine that he is looking directly and you and me—because he is.

Vs 29,

“Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.’”

Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6, THE most famous section of scripture for the Jew. That section is called the Shema (means to hear). The reason it was the most famous is because faithful Jews twice each day would recite the Shema.

They knew it well.

‘Hear O Israel:’

Remember and listen Israel—it is so easy to forget what matters so hear this as you speak this to yourself.

What? These are words they spoke apply to us too.

“The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

There is no other God above, below or aside from our God. He is the one. Our God is the one. We are blessed to have the one God as our God.

And this one God requires a response from each of us—

“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.”

God lays the rightful claim to every aspect of our personhood. Our heart, soul, mind and strength. We owe more than just allegiance, loyalty or even devotion.

We owe him something more fundamental. We owe him love. And further it is not just as if we should express this love with our heart, soul, mind and strength.

But from.

We don't merely use our heart, soul, mind and strength to be the conduit or means of loving God. Rather, it means we are to love God from every part of us.

Our thoughts should be of God.
Our emotions should be stirred for God.
Our will should be to please God.
Our strength should be expended for God.

We must radiate love for God from everything about ourselves.

Jesus says, THAT is most important. This is a story about all of us. That is primary not just for them, there but for us today.

That is not all.

Vs. 31,

³¹The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Do you see what Jesus did? He connected love for God and love for others. Do you understand WHY he connects love for God and love for others?

You can tell who loves God by how they love other people. That avoids mysticism. It would be super easy to say, I love God but I don't have time for other people.

False.

Every person who really loves God will love and serve and help others.

It also avoids selfishness. If you love for others is not rooted in a love for God, when you serve others you are doing something to make yourself feel better. That is not love that is a masked selfishness.

Love for the one God releases real love for all neighbors.

You see, this is a story about all of us.

Jesus is saying, there is nothing preeminent over loving God and loving others. True then, true now.

Jesus says so himself at the end of vs. 31,

“There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The scribe asked, What is the Greatest Commandment, now the scribe commends Jesus by saying, Great Answer!

2. Great Answer (Mark 12:32—34)

This nameless scribe is different than all of those who came before him. This is clear by the way that he responds to Jesus.

Vs. 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 neighbor as oneself...”

The scribe heartily agrees and what he says next is a connection that takes a little bit of an explanation. Loving God with all and others as yourself is exactly right. AND it is better than something too.

What?

is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Faithful Jews would bring animals to the temple to sacrifice. Whole burnt offerings were those kind of sacrifices that were completely consumed by fire for the Lord.

This scribe is expressing the same idea as Hosea 6 as the Lord talks to Israel and Judah—

“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim (Israel)?

What shall I do with you, O Judah
(Jerusalem)?

Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.

[5] Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.

[6] For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt
offerings.” Hosea 6:4–6

Do you see what he is saying?

The love of the people was as fleeting as the early morning desert dew. As soon as the sun rises the dew is gone. Such is their love for God.

And instead of having an abiding love FOR God AND others people give themselves to temple rituals. They take the right animal to be forgiven, not because they love God, but because that is just what they need to do.

Ritual religious activity is of no value. There were many people of that time and many people of this time who are experts at religious activity but devoid of love for God.

None of us go to a temple and offer burnt sacrifices out of bare duty—but we may pray to God, read the Bible and share the gospel just because you know you should. And not because you love God.

It is a little like this—As you know today is Mother’s Day—what if you went to your mom and said, “Happy Mother’s Day. I got you flowers, a gift card and a Hallmark card with cursive writing because it is what you and our culture expect on Mother’s Day. Here you go.”

No mother would cry tears of joy and appreciation at that. Should you give the gift? Yes. But from love, not because that is what is expected.

The scribe is saying the same thing to Jesus. Loving God with every fiber of my being is MUCH more important than the offer of sacrifices because that is the thing to do.

The scribe gets Jesus’ answer AND Jesus likes the scribe’s summary.

Vs. 34,

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.”

That is an unexpected answer.

What?

Who said anything about the kingdom of God?

The scribe had asked Jesus, what is the most important thing for all humanity to understand? Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And your neighbor as yourself.”

The scribe said, “Great answer. That is exactly right.”

And Jesus seems to change the subject entirely.

The Kingdom of God? And even more befuddling, Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” but doesn’t tell him how to take the next step and enter the kingdom of God.

That is every flavor of strange right there.

If someone asked me for directions to Chick-fil-A and I said, “You are not far.” And walked away. It would not only NOT be of any help but it would be supremely frustrating.

If I’m close—which way do I go?

His answer hung in the air and everyone around was hushed. No one dared to ask him anything. This means that everyone around was shell-shocked.

Do you see why?

Jesus responds to the scribe by saying—“You, sir, are onto something. You are on the exact right track.” You realize that pleasing God is not a matter of religious activity and ritual but of love.

But something else dawned on the scribe and the crowd that day.

How far close is.

What do I mean?

Jesus said the most important thing is to love the love your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength and YOUR neighbor as yourself.

And the scribes says—YES! Love for God and not religious ritual is what counts.

And Jesus says YOU ARE SO CLOSE.

The scribe just gave a great answer and exhibited complete understanding and Jesus says he is close. Close? Close?

At that point the scribe and all assembled realized how far close was. Do you know why? And this is about you.

Remember what Mr. Steinbeck said,

“If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen...A great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and the foreign is not interesting—only the deeply personal and familiar.”

Do you know why this is about everyone, about all of us? Do you know why this is deeply personal and familiar?

Because close is far.

They all realized that the most important thing for all humanity is IMPOSSIBLE. No more do we have to wonder what is the most important thing in all the universe. That is the good news, but the bad news is no one can do this!

Who can love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength? AND always, at every turn love your neighbor as yourself.

The crowd was hushed because close to the kingdom is still far.

Here is how this story is about all of us hearers.

Who can do this?
Who has done this?

Have you?
I haven't.

I haven't loved God with all that I am all the time without even the hint of reserve non-stop with no let up. I haven't given him all the love that my heart, soul, mind and strength can muster.

I have not ALWAYS used my every resource to love my God. My emotions have NOT been constantly moved in love toward God. My will has NOT been continually bent in love toward God. My intellect has NOT been persistently marshalled in love to God. My strength has not been spent constantly and without end in service to God in love.

Has yours?
Have you done this?

More than that, but we are also commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. I haven't thought of, served, or loved those around me the same way I have thought of, served and loved myself.

The question that NO ONE asked but was on everyone's mind was—

“WHO CAN LOVE LIKE THAT?”

Not them.
Not me.
Not you.

There are a couple work arounds that people try. One the one hand, people try and take this standard and say, “It can't be that drastic. No one can do that. Let's just do our best.” No.

On the other hand, others try and forget the standard and say, "It's impossible. No one can do that. Let's forget it." No.

"WHO CAN LOVE LIKE THAT?"

At the beginning we said,

PROP: God asks more of you and offers more to you.

Here is how this story is our story. If you are paying attention, you have just felt the intended weight of Jesus' words.

The best we can offer is NOT enough. We may be close but that is still far.

The reason we are following Jesus is so that we can take our eyes off us and put them on him.

Look at him.
Look at him.
Look at him.

Jesus is the ONE who ALWAYS WITHOUT loved God in every moment without flaw and without fail.

Jesus ALWAYS loved God his father with all his heart. There was no internal territory in our savior NOT given over to his father. He was always only filled with love for God.

Jesus ALWAYS loved God his father with all his soul. There was never any stray emotion in our savior. He was always only filled with love for God.

Jesus ALWAYS loved God his father all his mind. There was never a rouge thought in the mind of our savior. He was always only filled with love for God.

Jesus ALWAYS loved God his father with all his strength. There was never a wandering moment that he did not act and work for God. He was always only filled with love for God.

And did he love his neighbors as himself?

Oh my did he.

Did anyone ever love their neighbor like this man?

Jesus gave up more than we can imagine to die a death impossible to conceive. He came to earth to die for his neighbor.

He came to die for neighbors who did not love God with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength. He came to die for those who loved themselves with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength.

Before Jesus got to the last week of his life and before he got to Jerusalem and before he came to the temple he said it himself,

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. [34] And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.” Mark 10:33–34

The reason that the scribe was close was that he did not understand yet how Jesus fit into the picture.

But we do.

Jesus offers more than we can imagine and asks for more than we often understand.

He offers himself.

This whole interchange between the scribe and Jesus ends up drawing attention to him. He did what we could not do. It is not about measuring how much we love—but about rejoicing in his love.

And in response, it only makes sense to love him.

What can we take away from our visit with Jesus this morning? How is this story our story?

- Close is far

If you think that that what you need to do is to love God more than you do, so that you might be accepted by him, you are wrong.

Sit here for a few moments and consider how far close is. The scribe understood that love is better than sacrifice but in understanding all he did was realize how far from God he was.

But he also understood that he could never love God well enough to be in the kingdom.

Do you see that?

Your best efforts are lacking. This is where Jesus comes in. He loved God the way God deserves and the way that we should have. He did what you and I could not do.

He loved the father.
He loved his neighbor.

If there was anyone who deserved to be rewarded for the way he loved God and his neighbor it was Jesus.

And yet, he was treated like he trash, refuse, rubbish.

The God he loved with all his heart, soul, mind and strength turned rejected Jesus for the good of all mankind.

God rejected the one who loved him perfectly so that ANY who ask for help—he gives. Jesus brings both the close and the far into the kingdom.

Close is far.

- His love stands out

Do you see what stands out here? Grace. Grace unmeasured, Grace without end. Grace today, tomorrow and forever.

Jesus has taken our place. We will NOT be treated as our sins deserve. Though we do not love the way we should, we are in Christ nonetheless.

We should not treat his love as if we have earned it. Christians, if the love of God does not stand out and to some degree baffle you, you do not understand it.

He loves the unworthy.
He loves the unlovely.
He loves the wandering.

He loves.
He loves.

- Our love MUST stand out

When we grasp how much we are loved by God because of Jesus—it should move us to show unbounded love toward all our neighbors.

Does it?

Does your love for God fuel your emotions?
Does your love for God occupy your thoughts?
Does your love for God inform your actions?

Can others tell by how you live that you are love God and others? Is that your story?

PRAY

[5] May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, [6] that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 15:5–6

