

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Mark 12:28-34

Key Verse: 12:29

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

Last week, we learned that our God is the God of the living. Our God is the Ruler of history who is advancing his salvation work right at this moment. Jesus also taught us that heaven will be different from this world. There will be no struggle with marriage or other human matters in heaven, because we will be like the angels.

In today’s passage, one of the teachers of the law comes to Jesus to ask an important question about the Bible. He was different from the other religious leaders; he had a learning mind. May God help us to have a learning mind and find out which is the greatest commandment of God!

I. LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD (28-30)

Look at verse 28. *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* Earlier the Pharisees asked Jesus a loaded question about paying taxes to Caesar to catch him in his words (12:13). Then the Sadducees came and asked him a question about marriage at the resurrection in an attempt to undermine his teaching of resurrection (12:18-27). These religious leaders had a serious spiritual problem. But the teacher in today’s passage was different. How was he different? When he heard the debate between the religious leaders and Jesus, and how Jesus gave them a good answer, this teacher wanted to learn more about the Scriptures from Jesus. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had come to Jesus with tricky questions in an attempt to trap him. They had no learning minds. They had no love of God in their hearts. But this teacher acknowledged the truth taught by Jesus. He loved the truth. He had a pure heart toward God’s word. His fellow religious leaders were preoccupied with maintaining their political status. But this teacher was seeking the truth. Indeed, it is amazing to see how this man kept his pure heart toward the word of God in that environment.

How could this teacher keep himself pure in the sight of God? He reminds us of Psalm 119:9-12: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O Lord; teach me your decrees.” As descendants of Adam, sinful men are naturally proud before God. They want to follow their sinful ways. When they follow their own ways, their thinking often becomes foolish (Ro 1:22). Do you remember the wicked tenants in the parable of the vineyard? (12:1-12) They thought that the vineyard would become theirs if they killed the owner’s only son. Many people in our society claim that the humanity will do better without God. But such people’s thinking often becomes foolish. The only way we can keep our hearts pure is to study the word of God and obey him. Psalm 119:15-16

says: “I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.” This young teacher must have struggled a lot to follow the word of God against the trend of his generation. Perhaps he even felt lonely. But in God’s eyes, he was on a solid ground. He was like a tree planted by the streams of water (Ps 1:3). Jesus was very happy when this man came to him with a sincere attitude to learn from him.

We are also greatly encouraged when we find some young students who are eager to learn spiritual truths through studying the Bible. Many students today are more interested in things that would satisfy their physical and materialistic desires than the truth. They would rather go to parties or just hang out than spend time to study the Bible or have fellowship with other believers. But there are some precious young men and women who want to know Jesus personally through their sincere Bible studies. They are truth-seekers. We experience deep joy in our hearts when we study the word of God with those who have learning minds. We can understand why Jesus was happy to see this teacher of the law who was willing to hear the word of truth.

Look at verse 28 again. The young teacher asked Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” This question shows that he was a sincere Bible student. He asked Jesus one question that points him to the essence of the Bible. He wanted to know the secret of the Bible. What prompted him to ask this question?

God gave the Ten Commandments to his people to be a holy nation. But by Jesus’ time, they had many more additional laws and regulations, and traditions of the elders. The Sabbath law alone had 39 basic categories of work that shouldn’t be done. For example, they were not supposed to walk more than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile on Sabbath (Ac 1:12). They were not supposed to carry anything heavier than two dried figs. There were brooches a woman must not pin to her dress although it was okay if they were stitched to the dress. They were guilty of harvesting if they plucked heads of grain on Sabbath, guilty of threshing if they rubbed it in their hands, and guilty of winnowing if they separated grain from chaff, and so on. We can imagine how people were buried under mountains of law and regulations in their daily life. It was difficult to see which one was really important and which one was marginally important. It was hard to meet God personally through these complicated laws. So the teacher asked Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

What was Jesus’ answer to his sincere question? Look at verse 29. “*The most important one,*” answered Jesus, “*is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’*” We can learn who God is and how we must love him from Jesus’ answer.

First, “the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” “*The most important one,*” answered Jesus, “*is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’*” Jesus says that the most important truth about the Bible is that the Lord our God is one. We must know that our God is the only true God. The Bible teaches us this truth in many ways, but let’s think about only three points today.

First of all, Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Our God is the Creator God. He is the maker of all things including our lives. We

are here because God put us here for a purpose. He created us in his own image and blessed us to be fruitful. Our God loved us from the very beginning!

Secondly, our God sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us from our sin and death. There are many religions in this world. Some people say that it does not matter which one to believe. This idea appeals to them because it sounds tolerant. But Jesus teaches us that the Lord our God, the Lord is one. He is “the only true God” (Jn 17:3). Many other religions are full of illuminations and euphoria but they cannot solve our sin problem. They claim that we humans can earn heaven or nirvana if we somehow do enough good. But we know that none of us can be perfectly good all the time. We fail to be good, time and again. Some people are better than others, but even they cannot be perfectly good. There is no one righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10). No one can earn salvation by doing good things. Our God knows this. So he sent his one and only Son Jesus to die on the cross in order to wash away our sins. Jesus is the gate through which we can enter the kingdom of God. Our true God opened the way to salvation through his Son. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). No one comes to God except through the Son of God.

Thirdly, our God is the only true God who gives us a living hope in the kingdom of God. There is nothing permanent in this world. Everything will eventually perish, spoil or fade away. No man can live forever. The human mortality rate is 100 percent. But our God gives us a living hope that will not perish or spoil. By raising Jesus from the dead, he opened the way to his eternal kingdom for us. Only our God solved the fundamental problem of mankind and has given us a true hope through his Son Jesus Christ.

Let us remember what Jesus said in verse 29. *“The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’*” Let us not turn to worthless gods or idols of our generation such as money, fame, pleasure, and the like. May God help each one of us to worship the Lord our God only!

Second, “love the Lord your God with all your heart.” Look at verse 30. *“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 created us in his own image, so that we may bear abundant fruit in him. Even when we sinned against him and wandered away from him, he did not abandon us, but sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us. God is love. We must love him.

But it is not easy to love God. Many people love their children and their dogs, but not God. Why? Because God is Spirit who is invisible, we must have a pure heart to see him and love him. How can we love God? What does it mean to love God? We must first accept his love towards us. We must experience his amazing love shown to us through his son Jesus Christ. His love is deep and wide. If we come to know his love, even a fraction of it, we can love God. But to love God is more than emotional experience. It is certainly not a lip service. True love requires action. When you truly love someone, you want to be with the person and do something that pleases the person. That’s why Jesus says in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” The Apostle John says in 1 John 2:3-6: “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a

liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."

We love God because he loved us first (1Jn 4:19). Jesus says we must love God with all our hearts. This week, let us think about how we can love our God with all our hearts, not theoretically but very practically. Let us read verse 30. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*

II. "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" (31-34)

Look at verse 31. *"The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."* The commandments, "Love God" and "Love your neighbor," sum up all the commandments. They are not some recommended options but commandments for us to obey. These commandments describe the basic principles of life and keys to our happiness.

"Love your neighbor as yourself." We usually love ourselves more than others because of our sinful nature. Our sniffing cold is more serious to us than someone else's pneumonia. It is especially difficult to love the unlovely people, such as arrogant and rebellious people who have no learning minds. How can we love them? One woman said to her pastor, "I know that God says I must love others and I try. But there is this one person I can never love even if I try. I don't even want to talk to her." We know that it seems impossible for us to love people we don't like. Still, Jesus says we must love our neighbor as ourselves. He didn't say we should love only those whom we like. This means that to love others we must overcome our feelings towards people. Love is more than feelings. We should make a willful decision to obey the word of Christ. We may not be able to have warm feelings toward everyone, but we can pray for even those whom we don't like and help them when they are in need. We can say encouraging words to them.

We can love others when we accept the love of God who sent his one and only Son Jesus. We can love others when we accept the love of Jesus who died on the cross for us. The cross of Jesus has both the horizontal and vertical bars. The vertical bar shows our love relationship with God. The horizontal bar shows our love relationship with each other. The cross of Jesus shows that loving the unlovely is hard, but if we know the love of God, we can love them.



"Love your neighbor as yourself." Then who is our neighbor? I am glad you asked the question. Actually, this is the question that another teacher of the law asked Jesus. In reply, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). In this parable, a man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him of his clothes, beat him and left him on the road half dead. Three characters appeared in this scene. The first one was a priest who looked very dignified. The priest saw the badly wounded man but pretended that he did not see anything and passed by on the other side. Next, a Levite came to the place and saw the wounded man.

He also quickly passed by the man, turning his eyes away from him. Finally, a Samaritan came to the spot. When he saw the man, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on him. He put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." In the course of helping the wounded man, the Samaritan sacrificed his valuable time and money. After telling the parable, Jesus asked, "Who is his neighbor?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

The Apostle John says in 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."

This week, let us also think about how we can love our neighbor as ourselves. What can we do to show our love for our neighbor? As we ponder this question, let us remember that to love someone means more than just doing a human favor for him or her. We can also love a person by helping him or her spiritually. It is to share the love of God by encouraging our neighbors to come to God. Who are our neighbors? There are many young people in our society who need God's love. Let us pray for them and help them with the word of truth so that they may come to Jesus and receive eternal salvation.

What was the response of the teacher of the law when he heard Jesus' teaching on the essence of the Bible? Look at verses 32-33. *"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."* This teacher was happy to hear the words of Jesus. He was happy to have his own belief confirmed through Jesus' answer. He knew through his personal Bible study that loving God and loving neighbors were more important than all other religious ceremonies they practiced. The problem was that his fellow religious leaders were focused on burnt offerings and sacrifices. He felt lonely trying to walk against the trend of his society. So he was very happy to hear the truths of God through Jesus' teachings.

When Jesus saw the young teacher loved the truth of God so much, he said to him, *"You are not far from the kingdom of God"* (34). Jesus blessed him for his sincere heart toward the word of God. He was very close to the kingdom of God. All he had to do was to accept Jesus as his personal Savior.

In today's passage, we learn that Jesus is pleased when we have pure hearts toward the truth of God. Jesus was happy to see one teacher of the law with a sincere heart towards the word of God in the midst of widespread hypocrisy among the religious leaders. In our society there seems to be many people who crave for many ideas but reject the truth of God. Yet, just as God reserved the 7,000 people with pure hearts in Elijah's time, there are many truth seekers around us in our generation. We must help them with the word of God. Most of all, may God help us to love the Lord and love our neighbors as ourselves!