

## Question About the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:28-34)

A teacher of the Law—probably a Pharisee—was impressed with the way Jesus handled the Sadducees (v. 28). Note the question: Which among the 613 commandments that devout Jews observed was the most important?

Jesus readily answered the Pharisee by quoting **Deuteronomy 6:5**: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” [Mark added the word “mind”]. And quoting **Leviticus 19:18**, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus summarized the two sections of the Ten Commandments, the first dealing with our vertical relationship with god, and the second dealing with our horizontal relationships with others. By stating the commandments in this way, Jesus put the focus on right relationships marked by love. This was at the heart of biblical religion. With 613 commandments, there were so many that in day-to-day life, no one person could keep them all. So the question was often discussed: 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?

Let me make note of **two** quick points. In **James 2:10**, this is the sin which James attacks: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” The **second** quick point comes from **Matthew 23:23**, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—dill, mint, and cumin. 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.

So, what was the greatest commandment? 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 religion. Jesus said in **verse 29** that “the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” He is the Lord, Jehovah, Yahweh. There is no other. Monotheism (one God) is the true belief. Polytheism (many gods) is a false belief. 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 this pasture. Therefore, we should love, adore, and worship him. 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. Which is what we are told in **1 Corinthians 8:4,**

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“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.”

And in **verse 30**, Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God.” So, you are to love God as your very own God. This is a personal relationship, not a distant relationship. God is not impersonal, far out in space somewhere, distant, and removed. God is personal, ever-so-close, and we are to be 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. Note also that Jesus adds “with all your strength.” Love is a 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. Those factors in a loving relationship involve commitment and loyalty. True love does not allow lustful behavior with others. True loves

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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 the commitment and loyalty to one person. God strikes out at the very core of man's carnal behavior and tendency to define love in terms that allow him to satisfy his lust. "You shall have no other gods" is what it says in **Exodus 20:3**.

The next factors in a loving relationship are 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 Savior and Redeemer; therefore we love him. And he is the Lord and Owner of

life; therefore we love him. 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**. And, finally a loving relationship involves knowing and sharing. The desire to know and to share, to be learning, growing, working, and serving ever so closely together. One

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thought is that man is to love God supremely as we are told in **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.”

The Lord our God has commanded us to love both Him and others. God demands that we love our neighbor as ourselves. However, the Lord does not just give a command; he also gives us the power and desire to obey it. Which is what we can read in **1 John 4:19**, “We love because he first loved us.” The teacher of the law had not asked for the second commandment, 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 – words. Love is not known without showing it.

There are several important things that need to be said about love at this point. **First**, love is an active experience, not inactive and dormant. That is what Christ is pointing out. Love to God acts. Love acts by showing and

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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 a person truly loves God, he will do things for God. Any person who loves does things for the one loved.

The **second** thing to be said about love is that God wants for us is to love our neighbor, not the doing of religious things. Doing religious things is good; but it only deals with things such as rituals, observances, ordinances, and laws. Such things are lifeless, unfeeling, and 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 neighbor is what proves our love for God. A man may say he loves God, but if he hates and acts unkindly toward his neighbor, everyone knows his religion is only profession – just words spoken. Which is what tells us in **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.”

The **third** thing to be said about love is that greatest commandment to love God flows downward into another great commandment: to love our neighbor as ourselves. The fact is inescapable. We can find this in **Romans 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 neighbors. It is the love of God for us, his death, and sacrifice, that compels us to go and love all men everywhere. This we find in scripture in **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.”

The **fourth** thing that is said about love is that we are to love self. There is a corrupt love of self that feels the world should center around oneself. This self-love wants all the attention centered around oneself, it pushes self forward, it insists on one’s own way, it demands and revels in recognition, and it shows conceit and ignores others.

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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 as ulcers, tension, and high blood pressure. The right love of self or the godly love of self comes from knowing **three** things. **First**, we should

know that we are actually the creation of God; the highest creation possible. **Second**, we should know that we are actually the object of God's love; the most supreme love possible. **Third**, we should know that we are actually the trustee of God's gifts; the greatest gifts possible.

What are some of the **lessons** we can learn from this Scripture reading? We cannot say, "I love God and that's enough." Nor can we know how best to love our neighbor without loving God with all that we are. The implication for the Shema or Jewish confession of faith having first place in the pair is that being "all in" through love for God will produce love for our neighbor that matches the love we have for ourselves. Thus, love is central to religion, it is holistic, it is a commitment, it is a priority, it is purifying, and it is the open door to the kingdom of God.

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Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, mark us as disciples of Jesus Christ. The mark is that we love like he loves. We ask that we are attracted to Jesus and to his disciples because love is compelling. To love God and love people—all who are made in the image of God—that is what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ. Please help us to reach for this level of love in our lives. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**