

Greatest Command

Mark 12:29-31, “Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.” The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Question: What moral issue is most important to God?

Key Passages: Deut 6:4-5; 10:12; Luke 10:26-27

Tuesday afternoon, the last week of Jesus’ life, he had an afternoon full of bitter debates. In fact, every major political party accosted him with a question designed to entrap him. It was a full-throttle onslaught, in prepare for his assassination. With each question, however, Jesus’ natural genius turned the barrel around so his attackers became the target of their own question. It is a study in sheer genius.

In this lesson we deal with the final question as recorded in Mark 12:28. “One of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he [that is Jesus] answered them well, asked him, ‘Which commandment is the most important of all?’” On the surface that might seem to be a difficult question. After all, the Jewish Bible had 613 recorded commands and that does not include the myriads of oral traditions they held with nearly equal weight to Scriptures. However, there was one command that towered above all the rest. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and it is called the “*Shema*” after the first Hebrew word in the sentence translated, “listen”! This command was so famous that it featured in literally every synagogue service from then until now. It was a prayer recited daily by Jews, rolled in little scrolls and tucked into phylacteries of the Rabbis and mezuzahs hung on door posts.

To illustrate how obvious is the answer, one need only slip back a year earlier in Jesus’ life. During his itinerant preaching tour, a lawyer approached him – not a lawyer like we think of one but a professional in the Mosaic legislation. He asked a question designed to trip Jesus up: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ response was brilliant. He let the lawyer answer his own question, knowing that most lawyers would rather talk than listen. Jesus said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself,” (Luke 10:26-27).

Notice the lawyer’s answer in Luke 10 is identical to Jesus’ own answer in Mark 12:29-31. The most important command, Jesus said was this: “‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Both answers identify two commands: to love God and to love our neighbor. The reason the second command is always connected to the first is simple. One can hardly love God without love one’s neighbor. After all, you can’t really climb a stairway to heaven to give God a hug or offer him a care package. Our love of God can only be enacted through our care for our neighbor.

How Does One Love God?

Let’s look at the original command in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. “Hear [Shema], O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart [*lebab*] and with all your soul [*nephesh*] and with all your might [*moed*].” In the original Mosaic command, we were to love God

with three parts of our being: our heart, our soul, and our might. This core command is repeated throughout the book of Deuteronomy but it is typically shortened to loving God with our heart and soul. Obviously this doesn't mean that we no longer have to love God with our might. It is simply an abbreviated way of saying love God with all you got! In fact, whatever combination we use—heart, soul, mind, strength, obedience, etc., the implication is the same—total commitment to God. Anything less lacks the devotion God's character deserves.

In an interesting addition, Mark's rendition has Jesus say we would love God with four parts of our being, not three: "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**" (Mark 12:30). The word "mind" was added. Why? Well, Mark, who wrote his book in Rome is dealing with Greek thinking people not his native Hebrew neighbors. The Greeks separated the soul into two parts – the breathing part and the thinking part. Remember, the point of the saying whether it's two parts, three parts, or four parts is simply to love the Lord with all of your everything. The various portions of our being are singled out merely to describe the various ways that we can express love to God.

So let's look briefly at them one at a time. The **heart** is the center of feelings. It is more than mere emotion. It is the desires that drive your actions. The **soul** represents your energy. It is the life-force that jolts you into action. It is the twinkle in your eye, the bounce in your step, and the giddy in your giddy-up. Your **mind** is your will even more than your intellectual capacity. Anyone who has raised a two-year-old understands they have a "mind of their own"—a nearly impenetrable resolve. It's not that the kid is so sophisticated as much as s/he is stubborn. Fourth, our **strength** represents our resources not just our muscles. It is the total force of our resources including our money, our time, influence, and social connections.

Let's pause for a moment and ask a question. Are you loving God with all the resources at your disposal? For example, if you have an emotional passion for God but this doesn't translate into energy utilized for his efforts on this earth, then it is a misplaced affection. Or if you're studying the Bible thinking that you are loving God with your mind but not allowing God's word to direct the decisions of your day then you may be intelligent but you are not loyally loving your God. Or perhaps you find yourself attending church, even singing songs of praise, but you're not wielding your influence at work or leveraging your finances to promote the kingdom of God, this too is a truncated love of God.

Let's examine one more passage in the draw some conclusions. In the modern Western World, we assume that love is an emotion rather than an action. It is, therefore, easy for us to feel like we are loving God well because we have passion. However, passion without putting it into practice can never honor God as he deserves and demands. This is especially true in Jesus' ancient Israel. Love is an action (not emotion) that can only be adequately expressed through loyal obedience. Deuteronomy 10:12 makes this perfectly clear, "And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require 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." So what is the difference between fearing the Lord, walking in his ways, loving him, and serving him? Answer: Nothing! It is not possible to fear the Lord without serving the Lord. It is not possible to love God and not walk in his ways. You might think that fearing the Lord and loving him are antithetical. They are not! As a father of my own two children I never distinguished between them loving me and fearing me. It was their fear of me as well as their love of me that caused them to obey me. And it was because of their fear of me that their love for me brought them peace knowing that I was capable to care for them, protect them, and guard them from destructive behavior.

What conclusions can we draw? First, love is an action not an emotion. I suspect that those who are married understand this well. Saying the words without actions to back it up leads to a shaky, even self-destructive relationship. A husband who says, "I love you" but doesn't pay the bills, come home after work, or help with the children is a manipulative farce. If we say we love God we should show it by living the life that represents his honor and demonstrates respect for his commands.

The second conclusion builds from the first. We can't love God with part of who we are and claim that is actual love for God. If we are moved at church, we must move into our communities. We can't read the Bible voraciously and not change our habits, our hearts, or our schedules. It makes no sense to trust God with our eternity but not with our finances. Nor can we trust God to forgive us our sins and not turn around and forgive those who have sinned against us. It is senseless to thank God for the job we have but not rest on the Sabbath when he promised it would increase our productivity. We could go on, but this sufficiently makes the case.

The third conclusion has to do with the second command—to love our neighbor as ourselves. By now this should be transparent: The most tangible way of expressing our love for God is in caring for our neighbors. Jesus could not have been clearer than he was in Luke 10. The Lawyer who asked him about the greatest command tried to justify his neglect of neighbor by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Without getting distracted with the linguistic details, you should know the lawyer used the narrower definition of "neighbor". He didn't ask who were my fellow citizens but who are those in close enough proximity to merit my love. Jesus answered with a memorable story. We call it the parable of the good Samaritan.

The legal guru asked, "Who lives in close enough proximity that I'm obligated to care for them?" Notice carefully that Jesus' changed the question by the end of the story. The question is no longer "Who is my neighbor" but "Who is neighborly." With that, Jesus also redefined "neighbor". It is not someone who lives near me. Rather, it is anyone to whom we draw near. We tend to love those who are near, geographically, economically, culturally, or ethnically. Jesus' mandate is not that we like those who are like us but that we serve those who surround us. How can we love God except by caring for those God loves? When we become the tangible hands and feet of Jesus it becomes clear where our loyalties lie and God can sense that we truly love him with all we are.

Key Points:

- The greatest command is to love God with all we are and all we possess.
- To love God, fear God, honor God, and obey God are all synonymous.
- Practically speaking the only real way to love God is to care for people we come in contact with.

Action Step: Identify a random act of kindness you could commit in each of these areas: work (or school), home, and in the community.

Further Resources: Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring* (2012).