



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The greatest commandment

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Mark 12:28–34

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?” ²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” ³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

I want to draw your attention to a familiar gospel passage this evening. It comes at the conclusion of a series of verbal scuffles and testing exchanges, which are set in the final week of the ministry of Jesus. All leaders at some time face serious attempts to discredit and deny their leadership ... and in this sense Jesus Christ was no different. There were a number of attempts to discredit him and this happens on various fronts:

In relation to the payment of taxes to Caesar—v.13

In questions asked about marriage at the resurrection—v.18

The concluding discussion in this passage is altogether different. It comes from a man whose daily work as a lawyer involved the careful and meticulous use of words. He was impressed by what he had heard and is interested to find out more. Jesus had made an impression upon him. It is important to recognise that his question to Jesus is the substance of a continuing conversation between religious leaders—“Which commandment is the most important one?”

- it is a question about law!
- it is a question about priorities!
- it is fundamentally a question about the authority of Jesus!

This person is interesting because:

- Mark tells us he was present for the initial discussions ... and so it doesn't come from 'left field'. It puts his question into a precise context
- Jesus confirms the genuine nature of his enquiry by saying to him that he was 'not far from the kingdom of God' (v.34b)

The law of love that Jesus commends to him causes thinking people to agree. A number of years ago, on one of the islands of The Bahamas, I gave a series of talks which were on the

ethical and moral context of our message. Then I opened by referring to John Wesley's dictum of calling upon people in terms of 'to men of reason and religion'.

I believe it is important to recognise that not everyone from the religious establishment who heard Jesus ended up in conflict with him ... and there is a response in this man's words which confirms he is warming to what Jesus had to say.

Mark portrays the scribe as an honest questioner in search of the truth. This is surprising, says Morna Hooker, 'in view of the hostile attitude of the previous questioners.'

It also worth acknowledging that we are a little taken aback because a prevailing theme in Mark seems to be the antagonism of the scribes to Jesus' ministry. Both Matthew and Luke put this incident into a 'question context' which is designed to put Jesus to the test. I find Mark's approach is most helpful and challenging.

But here was a man who was:

- open
- honest
- thoughtful.

It is essential to present the law of love to people, for it directs them to think of themselves in relation to God. It is too easy to ridicule the religious leaders – Jesus did not do that. They had worked hard in organising a pattern of religious life, which had within it 613 commandments. When you have that kind of number, some prioritisation has to take place—hence the nature of the question.

The question of priorities is an important aspect of life, especially in a day when we are presented with many calls upon our time relating to allegiance and commitment. How do you work out which matters most? How can you decide what to neglect?

The commandment that is greatest relates to God—v.v. 29–30

Notice that Jesus answered without hesitation or equivocation. A lawyer might have expected 'many words' and 'much deliberation'. There is authority in Jesus' answer which is direct and to the point. It is also extremely practical in its application to our lives.

God alone is God

He is the Lord—Jehovah—Yahweh. There is no other. We are a Monotheistic people – we believe in 'one God'. This is the true starting point ... and is over against Polytheism – the worship of many gods. This is an unalterable truth for believing people ... that we worship one God.

This One God has called us into a personal relationship with him. It is our daily experience. We are his ... and love, adoration and worship follow.

The priority of the devotional life for the Christian cannot be over-stated, but it must be inclusive ... recognising our differences and actively demonstrating to others the love of Jesus Christ.

There is unity within and from God

This can have a meaningful application when put into the context of the Trinity: we compare Ephesians 4:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5

God is not distracted from within – He is one and everything relates to the same purpose. He is the Creator and Sustainer of life; Saviour and Redeemer; Lord and Origin of life. This has huge scope.

God is to be loved

Our love of God is in response to his move toward us in love through Christ ... and, for us, a continuing loving relationship involves:

- commitment and loyalty
- trust and respect
- giving to and honouring of another
- knowing and sharing.

Just as human relationships can fracture ... our love of God can be less than we want it to be. If this happens, the problem never lies on God's part, however much we may protest. His love evokes a response of love.

Our love of God has to be seen in its transforming power. One preacher concluded, 'God loves us the way we are, but he loves us too much to leave us that way.'

Love is the marker of all human relationships that are of quality, but it is most actively shown in the love of the Lord and how we express our love to him. God has given us this ability to reach out in love towards him.

The commandment that is greatest speaks to our relationships—v.v. 30–31

Our Loving God demands that we love our neighbours as ourselves:

- love is not dormant, but is an active engagement, which involves the whole of our being
- loving God in our neighbour is far more than doing religious things:
 - John 13:34–35
 - 1 John 4:20–21
 - Romans 5:8

When a person has a genuine love for God, then it is shared with others ... but not only with people who think their way, approach life and issues from their perspective. If a group of people about the same age and outlook all get on well together, we must not necessarily confuse that with divine love for each other. God's love, at work in our hearts, bridges the differences between people and, therefore, is far more inclusive and accepting of others into our circle.

Often our greatest witness is made:

- at times of international and local crises
- as we respond to hurricane or earthquake disasters
- as we look beyond ourselves and our own purposes.

I recall a quotation that I made a note of as a young preacher and I have found myself continually going back to it. From the words of Madelaine L'Engle, the American novelist and strong Episcopalian, I read: 'If you are going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can't pick and choose whose going to be the sparrow.'

This lawyer belonged to a profession of people who studied, taught, interpreted and dealt with the practical issues of Jewish law. Much of his work would be quite laborious. I shared some time with a professor of law who specialised in Land Law and has written extensively on the subject ... some of it deadly dull!

Rabbinic stories are wonderful – I recall the story of a Rabbi who was teaching his pupils and asked how they could tell when the night had ended and the day was on its way back.

- could it be when you can see an animal at a distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?—“No!”
- could it be when you look at a tree at a distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a pear tree?—“No!”

Well, what is it that confirms it's now day?

The wise old teacher responded with words of immense wisdom: “It is when you look on the face of any woman or man and see that she or he is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night!”

Calvin Miller, who died only last year, wrote in one of his notable pieces: ‘Christians state glibly that they love the whole world, while they permit themselves animosities within their immediate world ... But loving the world at large can only be done by loving face to face the world that is not so distant.’

The law of love brings people to the 'not far'—v.34b

Only Mark records Jesus' response—and we find that he says little like this to anyone else. This man was on the threshold of the kingdom of God because his attitude was right and his heart was open:

- He focused on the right issue, which is the challenge of priorities ... if only we all did that!
- the religious leaders often focused on the wrong questions. Isn't the same true today?
- we find people who are authentic searchers after truth. This is one of the reasons why I ensure that a good deal of my time is spent engaging with those outside the traditional corridors of the church.

A professor of law began his first law lecture for a decade with the equation—3 2 and underneath a dash. He would enquire, “What is the solution?” One—Five—Six ? None of the class asked the right question—“What is the problem?”

It is only as we are convinced of the problem that we begin to seek the solution in the right kind of way. The law of love brings people to the 'not far'.

Not far ... is so near.

- imagine the attitude of this man's peers towards Jesus ... they were challenged by him
- he had come a long way in this statement of wholeness ... he had lifted love above ritual sacrifice
- genuine seeking ... precedes the real experience of trust ... just as repentance precedes forgiveness.

Do we know, and I suggest we can, those who are not far from the kingdom of God? They acknowledge the higher law of love, but still stand short.

Not far ... is so far.

- it is still not enough! We recall the primacy of grace in Ephesians 2:8. We also recall James 1:22: 'doers of the word'. It is the careful interaction between the two which takes us that vital last step
- being able to recount the fundamentals of faith is not enough to enter God's kingdom ... Salvation is not primarily about doctrines, but our encounter with God and each other
- like the rich young man, there is still something more to be and do. This is the response of our lives to God's grace.

A few years ago, an American radio station ran a contest. The station—FM 106—said, just for fun, ring us with the first words you said when you were woken by FM 106 on your clock radio.

- "Do I smell coffee burning?"
- "Darling, who put the dog out last night?"

A third call came in and the conversation went like this—"Good morning, this is FM 106. You're on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?"

A muffled Bronx accent said, "You want to know my very first words?"

"Yes."

"Shema, Israel ... Hear, O Israel, the lord our God is one. You shall love" He concluded to stunned airwaves silence.

The first words set the tone for the whole day! When spoken from a heart that loves God in Jesus Christ, they are what the kingdom is all about.

From an entirely different context, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote in the twelfth century something very helpful about life lived in relation to the love of God. There was a time when I felt people loved themselves too much – the opposite would seem to be true. The condition that Bernard came to is summed up in his four stages towards spiritual growth and maturity:

Love of self for self's sake;
Love of God for self's sake;
Love of God for God's sake;
Love of self for God's sake.

Returning to Morna Hooker's commentary, she concludes: 'Whether the Kingdom is understood to be present or future – or half and half – the point of the saying is that by his response the scribe has shown that his attitude is the right one.'

You can't make people love God, but the truth is that it is still our priority to love people in his name. Washington Irving was a notable diplomat but he wrote some splendid short stories. On this matter, he said, 'Love is never lost. If it is not reciprocated, it will flow back and soften and purify the heart.'