

November 3, 2024

Mark 12:28-37

“Hear, O Israel ...”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church  
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A scribe is an expert in the law - a person who had been educated in the law and was considered an interpreter of the law. He was present as Jesus was disputing with the Sadducees. Now the Sadducees were priests who served in the temple and taught the people. This is frightening because they did not believe in the resurrection. Without the resurrection faith is futile and we are still in our sins.

Anyway, this scribe heard Jesus disputing with the Sadducees and was impressed that Jesus had evaded their traps, and was pleased that he had shattered their position regarding the resurrection. So he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" It does not appear that the scribe has any evil intent to hurt Jesus in asking this question. It is an invitation for Jesus to confess. And so Jesus confesses. He says: "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."

I cannot stress enough the magnitude of how Jesus begins his response. He opens by quoting the frequently repeated Jewish confession of faith, which is known as the *Shema*: "**Hear, O Israel:** The Lord our God, the Lord is one." This is the gospel of salvation. Jesus begins with the gospel invitation for all his people to continually listen as a people who have struggled with God and have prevailed by faith. "The Lord ..." is a reference to Yahweh, who according to Exodus 34:7-8, "... is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." The Lord is our powerful God who uses his power to freely save us from sin and death.

The Lord is one. Both the Old and the New Testaments speak of the three persons of the Trinity. The Father so loved the world - you and me - that he gave his Son to die. The Son willingly became one of us to be obedient for us and pay for our sins. And the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary to save us from death and hell. It is in the context of this extraordinary gospel that Jesus then quotes the greatest commandment in two commandments, which summarizes all law as being love for God and love for neighbor. In other words, all law is about genuine loving relationship, which is fulfilled in the Father sending his Son to be the Savior of the world. John writes in his first epistle:

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world ... We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:15-17, 19).

Yes, we love because he first loved us! "... 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." In other words, you shall love the

Lord your God at the very center of your being and personality and in every breath you take and in the powers of your thinking while manifesting love in all your actions as they are related to God. And Jesus adds to the one commandment the second, which is to love others as you love yourself. That means that you are to give yourself to others, in such a way, that you desire for them to believe and remain in the Lord who powerfully saves. Jesus says: "There is no other commandment greater than these." All commandments are thus embraced in what Jesus has said.

The scribe responds to Jesus positively and adds that love for God and neighbor "is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This is very important. The scribe is not far from the saving rule of God which means that he has yet to realize and believe that Jesus is love incarnate and the fulfillment of all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. One Lutheran commentator writes:

This man was so near to the kingdom of God because he realized that God required the love that is described in Deuteronomy. If he now went on and realized further that he had not loved God and his neighbor in this perfect way he would come to recognize his sinfulness and bow in contrition before God. And he would also understand that the gospel in the words "the Lord, your God," meant that God's rule of love and grace would cleanse him from his sins. To comprehend this would be faith and thus actual entrance into the kingdom. (Lenski, *Interpretation of Mark*, pg. 542).

At this point, Mark says that after this no one dared to make any more inquiries of Jesus. That's because Jesus is cutting through with the undeniable truth of their need for a Savior, which would naturally lead one to confess Jesus. Indeed! Jesus came to fulfill the law and prophets. He came to fulfill everything. That is the greatness of God's love for us - that we would be saved. As the apostle John writes: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:10-12)."

Now it makes sense. The realization sets in that apart from the atoning sacrifice of Christ it is impossible for us to love God and neighbor as we ought. The great command, expressed in two, when it is not understood by faith in Jesus, only reveals our wicked self-love for ourselves and our inability to love God and neighbor. We are inclined to every sort of evil imaginable. So the great commandment of Jesus, expressed in two, must be understood from a different perspective, namely, from one of faith in Jesus and his love for us, which generates in us love for God and neighbor, although imperfect. We cannot fulfill the law of love by our own power or strength. Christ will have to do that. And any result in us that loves God and neighbor, demanded by the law, must flow from Jesus, as fruit naturally comes from a vine. This is the meaning of the words of the apostle John when he writes:

... whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us (1 John 3:20-24).

So we see that the fulfilment of the commandments comes only by faith in Jesus who fulfilled all commandments for us. His love will have to love us to love. Thus, whatever righteous love is found in us is from his love for us at the cross and empty tomb. And, while we realize that this righteous love that is in us from him is still crippled by our sinful flesh, it is nevertheless counted as love for the sake of Jesus. *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession* says the following (Article V, III):

... we teach that a person is justified when the conscience, terrified by the preaching of repentance, is cheered and believes that for Christ's sake it has a reconciled God ... When the heart is cheered and quickened through faith in this way, it receives the Holy Spirit. He renews us, so that we are able to keep the Law, to love God and God's Word, to be submissive to God in afflictions, to be chaste, to love our neighbor and so on. Even though these works are far from the perfection of the Law, on account of faith they please God.

So when Jesus says: “**Hear, O Israel ...**” this is what he wants you to continually hear. We have been delivered from sin and death through the loving obedience and death of Jesus - his atoning sacrifice. Whoever believes in him and the forgiveness of sins will not perish but have eternal life. Thus, the heart of the law and the commandment is to believe in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. His great love for us loves us so perfectly that we love him and one another. Though our love today is imperfect because of the ongoing existence of our sinful flesh, our love is counted as true love because of the perfect love of Christ. And, on the day of our resurrection, our love for God and one another will be perfect in both body and soul. Now that is something to continually hear from the Lord our God!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott