

The Greatest Commandment

Part 1 of Sermon Series: *Gifts of Love*

a sermon based on

Mark 12:28-34

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“When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not very far from the kingdom of God.’ {pause} After that no one dared to ask him any questions.” (Mk 12:34)
“You are not **very far** from the kingdom of God.” At first blush that sounds pretty good. Doesn’t it? But is it? Is it really?

In other places in Scripture, Jesus proclaims that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He even directs his disciples to preach that in Matthew 10:7. But, here, he tells the scribe that he is “not very far.” *Not very far* is still *far*, just like not very poor is still poor, or not very sick is still sick: So what did the scribe miss? Didn’t he commend Jesus and repeat back to him exactly what he said? He even added a reference to Hosea 6:6 – “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings,” when he added that these two commandments – to love God and to love neighbor – are more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices..

But did he really? Don’t get me wrong. I think that the scribe meant well. I even think that he was setting Jesus up so that he could commend him. This passage follows a few in which people are trying to trap with their questions. This one sounds sincere, and was an opportunity for Jesus to proclaim what all good rabbis should already know.

So Jesus begins with the *Shema* Deuteronomy 6:4 – the prayer that all Jews are expected to pray daily, “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mk 12:29) Then he follows it with Deuteronomy 6:5, “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.” (Mk 12:30) But even here, Jesus adds, “with all your mind.” It’s not in the Deuteronomy passage. But the scribe assumes it.

How does he respond, “You are right, Teacher (Rabbi) “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself...” (Mk 10:32-33a) But wait.

Jesus said: heart, **soul**, mind and strength. The scribe replied heart, understanding and strength. This isn’t just a paraphrase: substituting *understanding* for *mind*. He left out *soul*. If we go back to Genesis 2:7, “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being,” where it says “the man became a living being,” in Hebrew the word we hear as “living being” is the same word used for soul. Unlike all the other “living creatures” human beings are “living beings” – souls. It is essence of who we are. God is pleased when we love him with all our heart, and mind and strength. But the gift of who we are is our soul. When Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, he’s saying the greatest command is to love God not only with your feelings, your thoughts, and your actions, but with your very being. That being said, that second commandment from Leviticus 19:18, “to love your neighbor as yourself,” will then come naturally.

God made each one of us as objects of his love. Not just the saints. November 1 was All Saints Day, but November 2 was All Souls Day – a reminder that each soul is what it is only by our connection to God’s being. And so we get closer to the kingdom of God when our hearts (our intentions), and our minds (our understanding) and our strength (our actions) are right. But to claim the kingdom of heaven which comes near to us, we need to love God with our soul – our being. It’s only in that that we can even love ourselves fully – and THEN we can more fully love our neighbors. That really is God’s purpose. God is love. As it says in 1 John 4:16, “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

Isn't that why we take time each year on All Saints Day to remember those who've died, because of our love for them? Their love for us? In those moments that they loved us – we know that they abided in God, even if imperfectly. That's what we celebrate today.

But Jesus is calling us to a perfect love. To love God with every bit of our being, not instead of following the other commandments: It's sort of hard to love God with all your soul if you're following other gods or worshiping idols. It's sort of hard to love God with all your soul, if you're murdering or stealing. It's sort of hard to love God with all your soul if you're committing adultery or living unchastely in order to use another person to meet your desires – physical or otherwise. On the other hand: spiritual practices like intentional prayer and devotional time; serving others whether on a mission trip, at a food pantry, or just holding a door open for someone; or giving some money to a worthy cause; coming to church for worship are good as far as they go – that is as long as we're not just going through the motions because it's what's expected of us – either because there is a commandment or just a social expectation that this is what “good people” do.

The problem with the other commandments is that they sort of become a checklist, and we miss the ultimate point. With that commandment to love God - to devote ourselves to God – with our very being isn't as onerous as it seems. In fact, it's the only way we can really know ourselves and love our selves.

God himself loves us and loved us with his whole being – and not just when he formed us. The Lord our God became one of us in Jesus Christ. Why? Because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish (may not lose who they are) but (instead) may have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16) God held nothing back. He made his love for you a priority – so much so that he was willing to do the unthinkable – to send his Son Jesus to the cross to show us that his love knows no bounds, and not as some afterthought. “In the beginning was the Word... All things came into being through (the Word)... what came into being in him was life.” (Jn 1:1-4) This Word became flesh so that we might become the children of God that is our true being. This is the lesson of Scripture.

We see it in the beginning where Abel makes his devotion to the Lord a priority by giving the first fruits and best portions of his flocks as a sacrifice to God, while Cain gives some of what was left over when he'd had enough. We see it in the passage that we'll hear next week, when Jesus points out that although the scribes and rich folks may like to take credit (and often naming rights) because of their large gifts that they are merely going through the motions rather than trusting God with their whole being as that poor widow did with her two small coins.

The scribe in the passage today “understood.” But did he really get it? He wasn't “very far” from the kingdom of God even though God had come near and was standing in front of him. Did he choose to follow Jesus? We don't know. We only know that “no one dared to ask (Jesus) any question(s)” after this exchange. (Mk 12:34b)

Today is an opportunity – an opportunity to love God with our heart, our mind, our strength, and our soul. Today, he offers us his body and blood in the gift of Holy Communion as a reminder of how expansive his love is, but also as nourishment to prepare us so that we can love one another as we ought – and in doing so knowing ourselves. When we claim our love for God as our priority – loving him with all of our souls and holding nothing back – we discover the joy of who we really are made to be. AMEN.