

# The Real Jesus | The One about the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12:28-44)

November 27, 2022 | Matthew McNutt

**[Title Slide]** At 16 chapters, Mark is the shortest of the Gospels. And of that, the last six chapters zero in on Jesus' final days of His public ministry, the Passion week, culminating in His crucifixion. We're right in the middle of all that. Jesus had entered Jerusalem triumphantly, made a whip, cleaned out the temple, and confronted the religious leaders of the day. Last week we saw the first two of three questions posed by these leaders, the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and Scribes. The first two questions were meant to be traps, verbal ambushes that they thought would either position Jesus as an insurrectionist that the Romans would arrest or would force Him to discredit Himself in front of His Jewish audience. Either way, they thought they had found a way to end His influence.

Instead, His answers were brilliant, leaving no room for accusation from either group. Not only that, He asserted His authority over theirs, saying, **"Your mistake is that you don't know the Scriptures, and you don't know the power of God."** (Mark 12:24, NLT)

In fact, Jesus' words leading into our passage today were, **"You have made a serious error."** (Mark 12:27b, NLT)

This had to have gone over really well with these leaders. It was Passover week; a time when Jewish people made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate. The city was popping, and in front of everyone Jesus had called them ignorant of scripture, told them they didn't know God's power, and accused them of making a serious error. Is it any surprise they shifting gears from trying to discredit Him to trying to have Him killed?

Which makes what happens next really fascinating to me:

**Mark 12:28 (NLT) One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"**

Do you see the change in tone? The majority of these religious leaders were infuriated with Jesus; the previous questions were verbal chess games that were meant to destroy Jesus. But even in the midst of that, not every religious leader doubled down on their anger. This leader seems to have been impressed, or even moved, and unlike his peers, he seems to have asked a genuine question.<sup>1</sup> This teacher saw wisdom in Jesus previous answers and wanted to hear His opinion on the commandments.

A bit of context; we tend to think of just the ten commandments when we hear the word commandment. **Charlton Heston standing over the nation, slamming down those tablets.** Which had to be awkward when he went back to God to ask for another copy.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, *Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), 545.

There were actually 613 commandments in the Hebrew scriptures, and a big topic of debate was which was the most important – so that that key commandment could be used in part to interpret the rest, but also to guide decisions should you face a scenario where you had to choose between two commandments which to follow.<sup>2</sup> Knowing their ranking would guide that decision.

So, unlike the traps asked before, this question was a very real question that people debated and wanted to know the answer to.

*Mark 12:29-31 (NLT)* <sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. <sup>30</sup> And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

Jesus quotes two passages here; the first is **Deuteronomy 6:4-5 [slide with this portion highlighted]**, the closest thing to a Jewish confession of faith.<sup>3</sup> This Old Testament passage about loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, and strength, called “the Shema”, was something they would pray each morning. It contains the core of Jewish faith; that there is only one God, and we are called to love God with all that we are. Warren Carter writes in his commentary that **“The command requires a person’s whole existence be oriented to knowing and doing God’s purposes.”**

It makes sense that Jesus would point to this command as the most important. But then He combines it with another command from Leviticus 19:18, **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** As far as can be found in scripture and evidence outside of scripture, Jesus is the only one to pair these two commands, let alone pair them as the most important.<sup>4</sup>

We know from other passages that Jesus considers everyone to be our neighbor – it is a high calling. And the context of Leviticus 19 from where this command comes, describes what loving the neighbor involves; it’s not just about being nice – it is an active love.<sup>5</sup> It is a love that provides for the poor and the immigrants, it respects parents, it doesn’t steal, lie, or manipulate deals with others, it doesn’t take advantage of employees, or ignore those with disabilities. It doesn’t play favorites, slander, or take revenge. When God commands us to love our neighbor, it includes all of these justice-based commands. We could do an entire sermon on the call to social justice that Jesus’ command to love our neighbor as ourselves involves.

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), Kindle location 4970.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Kindle location 4977.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Huat Tan, *Mark: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 168.

<sup>5</sup> Carter, *Mark*, 546.

I love what Dr. Kim Huat Tan writes in her commentary on Mark; **“Love for God is actualized in love for neighbor.”**<sup>6</sup>

Our love for neighbor reveals our love for God. Jesus puts it this way in **John 13:35: “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”** And it makes sense that the converse is also true; our lack of love for others, for the hungry, for the immigrant, for those who work for us, for our family – our lack of love for them reveals a lack of love for God. Jesus sees the two vitally linked.

**Mark 12:32-33 (NLT) <sup>32</sup> The teacher of religious law replied, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. <sup>33</sup> And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”**

Now we’ve seen everything. The one time in the Gospels where a teacher of religious law, a scribe, agreed with Jesus.<sup>7</sup> And he seems to really get it; he expands what Jesus’ says by pointing out that loving God and loving others is more important than any religious rites and traditions. This scribe understood what God meant in Hosea 6:6 when He said,

**Hosea 6:6 (NLT) I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings.**

Jesus responds with the only time in Mark’s gospel where He commends a scribe:<sup>8</sup>

**Mark 12:34 (NLT) <sup>34</sup> Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.**

Remember, while this one leader may have been open to hearing Jesus, the others were there to trap Him, but all they had done was made Him look that much more impressive. They didn’t dare make it worse by giving Jesus more opportunities to shine.

But as we’re about to see, Jesus was not finished teaching what it means to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Later that day, as Jesus was teaching at the temple, He goes on to point out two examples, one that demonstrates a lack of love, the other that shows a total commitment to God.

**Mark 12:38-39 (NLT) <sup>38</sup> Jesus also taught: “Beware of these teachers of religious law! For they like to parade around in flowing robes and receive respectful greetings as they**

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<sup>6</sup> Tan, *Mark*, 168.

<sup>7</sup> Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Kindle location 4977.

<sup>8</sup> Tan, *Mark*, 169.

*walk in the marketplaces.* <sup>39</sup> *And how they love the seats of honor in the synagogues and the head table at banquets.*

They had been taught to respect the religious leaders, yet Jesus calls out these same leaders. Why? Because they claimed to be closest to God, to know Him and love Him. But what did they really love? They loved their appearance, their reputation, their status. They loved looking good in front of their fellow believers. They loved the position. They loved the perks; they got to wear clothing that gave them perceived importance. They loved people standing when they arrived, that people thought it was special to have them around. They felt like they deserved these special seats and places of prominence.

**They didn't love God. They loved what being associated with God got them.**

Their first thought wasn't of God, it was what others would see.

Jesus is calling out our tendency to be preoccupied with the meaningless. Are you more concerned with what others think? Is it important for people to think you have it all under control? That you know the answers? Jon Acuff, the author, used to joke that he wanted a t-shirt that says "I tithe online" to wear to church, and it's funny, because we get that there is a part of us that wants others to be able to see us giving. Are you more concerned with getting the perfect photo of you serving so others can know?

None of this is loving God. It's loving what being associated with God gets me.

We vilify these religious leaders of 2000 years ago, but what I find terrifying over and over is that I usually have more in common with them than I do Christ.

But Jesus isn't done:

*Mark 12:40 (NLT) <sup>40</sup> Yet they shamelessly cheat widows out of their property and then pretend to be pious by making long prayers in public. Because of this, they will be more severely punished."*

Jesus gets even deeper into what these people truly loved. We're not sure how they cheated widows out of their property; but in a culture where being a widow was a desperate position of no power and little access to resources, it was considered truly despicable to take advantage of them. Whether it was these men mismanaging the widow's property as trustees, taking their houses for unpaid debts, or somehow otherwise exploiting them, they had created a religion that made the poor even poorer.<sup>9</sup> And hid it with pious language and theatrical prayers. They were more concerned with enriching themselves and sounding spiritual than they were in actually knowing God.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 163.

And isn't that the great American temptation? To enrich ourselves at any cost? To build up status and wealth because "I worked hard, I deserve it?" Look out for number one. Everything in our culture sends the message that these religious leaders got it right.

Shouldn't it be problematic that we are more upset about inflation and gas prices than we are the number of children that still need foster homes in our state? The poverty and homelessness that is rampant in our own community?

If Dr. Tan is right, that "love for God is actualized in love for neighbor," can you say that you have love for God?

Jesus used another example to drive home his point of what love for God truly is:

*Mark 12:41-42 (NLT) <sup>41</sup> Jesus sat down near the collection box in the Temple and watched as the crowds dropped in their money. Many rich people put in large amounts. <sup>42</sup> Then a poor widow came and dropped in two small coins.*

There were thirteen trumpet-shaped metal receptacles along the wall in which people would place their offering.<sup>10</sup> The wealthy would make a scene of their gift, letting the coins clang and make lots of noise – they wanted everyone around them to know how generous they were.

And then there was a poor widow, most likely unnoticed by anyone other than Jesus. When Mark wrote this in Greek, he specified the coin, a *lepton*, which was worth less than a hundredth of a denarius, a day's wage.<sup>11</sup> It was literally the lowest value coin of the day. It was negligible.

*Mark 12:43-44 (NLT) <sup>43</sup> Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others who are making contributions. <sup>44</sup> For they gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she, poor as she is, has given everything she had to live on."*

Once again, Jesus subverts expectations. The assumption was that the wealthy were the ones who were blessed, the ones who God must love the most, the ones who were guaranteed heaven. But Jesus elevates this poor widow over all of them, this nameless woman who we have now studied for two thousand years and counting. Why? Because the wealthy gave out of their wealth; it didn't cost them. There was no sacrifice in the level they were giving. But the woman, her love for God compelled her to give everything.

The Greek in this final sentence, where it says, "has given everything she had to live on," could also be translated "has given her whole life."<sup>12</sup> Which I believe is a better

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<sup>10</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 442.

<sup>11</sup> Tan, *Mark*, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, *Mark*, 555.

translation because it makes the point Jesus is driving at through these passages today: we are called to love God with all that we are.

What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? It means to give God your whole life. Loving God is giving God your whole life.

Your family, your career, your home, your children, your finances, your future, your security. This woman put it all on the line for God. She didn't just give up her resources, she gave God her next meal, what little security she had.

What needs to happen for you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Where do you need to grow in this? What is your next step? Is your love for God actualized in loving others?

If loving God is giving God your whole life, what do you need to give Him? A few weeks ago, Pastor Nate challenged us to write down on the connection cards what we were going to give to God. Have you followed through? If you haven't, I would challenge you to take that step today. And if you did, what is the next step? What is the next thing to give God? Until we can be like this woman, giving God our whole lives?

I want to close with Romans 12:1-2 from the Message translation. Paul tackles this question of what it means to give our whole lives to God:

*Romans 12:1-2 (The Message) So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

**Let's pray.**