

## Mk 12:28-34 The two great commandments

*Tim Anderson 27/8/2023*

Over the past few weeks,  
we've seen a number of groups of people  
approach Jesus with hostile questions.  
The chief priests wanted to know by what authority  
he had driven the stall holders out of the temple.  
The Pharisees tried to trip him up  
with a question about whether it was right to pay tax to Caesar.  
The Sadducees tried to get him onside  
with their view that there was no resurrection to look forward to.  
And now Jesus is approached by a lone teacher of the law.  
Again he is approached with a question.  
But this is a different sort of question.  
It's a genuine question.  
Wow, that's a nice change!

12:28 "Noticing that Jesus has given them a good answer,  
he asked him."

This teacher of the law was genuinely appreciative  
of the answer that Jesus had given the Sadducees.  
He saw real insight and understanding in what Jesus had said.  
And so he approached Jesus with another question  
because he genuinely thought he might learn something.  
Now that is a rare attitude towards Jesus  
amongst the religious leaders of his day.  
But Jesus doesn't turn him away  
just because he comes from a group who had been hostile towards him.  
Jesus takes every person as an individual.  
And he can see that this guy's heart was genuine.

So what was his question?

12:28 "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

This was like the flavour of the month question for Jewish rabbis in the first century.

The Rabbis had isolated 613 commandments in the Law.

And they entertained themselves by discussing which was the most important.

You can imagine that is exactly the kind of thing that learned people would get very excited about.

Not unlike today learned people debate about which is the best Bible translation to read.

You may think that a bit less debate about which translation to read, and a bit more time reading it and thinking about how to live by it might be in order.

But let's not be too harsh with the scholars.

Sometimes these debates stem from a genuine desire to understand God.

And maybe the first century rabbis were genuine in trying to discern how to please God

by working out which is the most important commandment.

In any case, Jesus doesn't tell the teacher that he'd asked the wrong question, he answered his question.

Here is Jesus' answer.

12:29-31 "The most important one is this:

'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

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:

'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

There is no commandment greater than these."

Now there are many things to notice about Jesus' reply.

First of all, the teacher got two for the price of one.

He asked Jesus for the most important commandment and Jesus gave him the top two.

What should we make of that?

I think Jesus is telling us that these commandments go together.  
You wouldn't want one without the other.  
If Jesus had just given the teacher the most important one,  
the teacher might misunderstand what God requires of him.  
If you were only told to love God with your whole being,  
then you might take it upon yourself to isolate yourself from people.  
It would depend on your personality how you might try that.  
But some people would do nothing  
except spend time in prayer and contemplation  
and claim they were loving God with all their being.  
Other people might do nothing except study the Scriptures  
and claim that they were loving God with all their being.  
Now it's great to do both things.  
You could say that studying the Scriptures is loving God with your mind.  
And you could say that prayer and contemplation  
is loving God with your heart or soul.  
But neither Bible Study nor prayer  
would want to be the only expression of our devotion to God.  
One way we must express our love for God is to love our neighbour.  
The apostle John puts it this way in his first letter.  
1 John 4:20 "Whoever does not love their brother and sister  
whom they have seen,  
cannot love God whom they have not seen."  
Love of God and love of neighbour go together,  
and Jesus doesn't want to leave us open to the mistake of dividing them.

But if we shouldn't divide them,  
we also can't equate them.  
Some people would like to say  
that the only way to show love for God is to love your neighbour.  
That loving your neighbour and loving God are one and the same thing.  
You'll find some of these people down at the Rotary Club.  
Don't get me wrong.  
You can be a Christian and part of Rotary.

But if you do, you'll meet other Rotarians  
who tell you that they love God by caring for people  
and they don't need formal expressions of religion.

But we absolutely do need God focused love.  
There's a reason why Jesus puts love for God first  
and love of neighbour second.

Love for our neighbours flows out of our love for God.

That is to say,  
the reason that we love our neighbours  
is because we know that God loves our neighbours  
and we want to love what God loves.  
But loving God is the primary thing.

There are good hearted people  
who have genuine sacrificial concern for their neighbours  
who have rejected God.

Be sure of this.

Their love for their neighbours will not save them.

Love directed towards God is necessary to please God.

Here's another question you might fairly ask as you read Jesus' answer.  
Why do you, Tim, fiddle with the translation  
when we say this verse in our services?

So here Jesus says,

"The Lord our God: the Lord is one."

But when we do our services,

we say "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

That's a fair question.

The commandment that Jesus quotes here comes from Deut 6:4-5.

And there are about four possible ways you could put it into English.

All of them are fair ways of doing the translation.

For me, the big question is:

"Is this a statement about monotheism?"

"Or is it a statement about God requiring our undivided devotion."

In other words,  
does it mean,  
The Lord our God, the Lord is one.  
And there are absolutely no other Gods in existence.  
The Canaanite religions of Bible times and the Hindu religion of today  
are totally wrong in worshipping many gods.  
Or does it mean,  
The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,  
and because the Lord alone is God,  
then we are to offer him up our lives in his service,  
putting nothing and no one ahead of him in our priorities.  
Can you see that both of these are true?  
So we are deciding which one of two true ideas  
that the Scriptures are expressing to us.  
My belief is that the next sentence,  
"Love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your mind ..."  
makes it quite clear which idea was being intended.  
This command is not about monotheism.  
It's about offering our lives totally in God's service.  
So that's why I do the translation,  
"The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."  
Because I think that best picks up the main thrust of the passage.

Another question you might ask is,  
"Why is love the number one thing?"  
That's the thing that ties the two commandments together, isn't it?  
Love God, love your neighbour.  
They are both about love.  
But there are other important things out there.  
Worship God.  
Be just towards your neighbour.  
Obey God.  
Be forgiving towards your neighbour.  
Honour God.

Be non judgemental towards your neighbour.  
There are a bunch of things Jesus could have chosen.  
But he chose love.  
Love God and love your neighbour.

There is a lot you can say about love.  
The first thing to say is that it expresses the change  
from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.  
It was not the same to be a believer in the Old Testament.  
The Holy Spirit didn't live in the heart of every believer  
in the Old Testament.  
But under the New Covenant,  
the Spirit lives in our hearts.  
The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way.  
Jer 31:33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time declares the Lord.  
I will put my law in their minds and write it up their hearts."  
The prophet Ezekiel puts it this way.  
Ez 36:26-27 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.  
I will remove from you your heart of stone  
and give you a new heart of flesh.  
And I will put my Spirit in you  
and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."  
One of the key things about having the Holy Spirit  
according to the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel  
is that the way we relate to God's Law changes.  
Instead of rigidly applying individual stipulations  
like something out of a rule book,  
we have the law written in our hearts.  
We have a desire to please God.  
And we have some freedom in working out how to go about it.  
So as far as the commandments are concerned,  
the movement from the OT to the NT  
is a movement from following precise stipulations

to understanding what pleases God  
and trying to live that way as best we can.  
In some ways it's easier to live under the old covenant.  
What you have to do is spelled out for you exactly.  
Remember the Sabbath Day.  
Honour your father and mother.  
Don't murder.  
Don't commit adultery.  
At the end of the day,  
you may be able to tick all the boxes.  
I haven't broken any of the commands.  
But love is more challenging.  
It's a positive command not a negative command.  
Negative commands are easier to fulfil.  
So long as you haven't done it,  
then you've satisfied the command.  
But positive commands don't let us off the hook.  
If we are commanded to love with all our heart,  
the standard is actually impossibly high.  
You can never say like the rich young ruler,  
"All these I have kept since I was a boy."  
Who can say they have loved with all of their heart?  
No one if they are honest.

And yet the standard of love while it's more challenging,  
it also gives believers a greater dignity.  
It's like the move from being a child to an adult.  
As a child you are told what to do in great detail.  
And as you gain in maturity,  
you are given more freedom to make decisions about your life.  
Instead of being told, you must have this for lunch,  
you are told to choose something healthy to eat.  
We still broadly expect you to make sensible decisions.  
But you have a level of freedom under that umbrella.

So God expects the Christian to make decisions based on love.  
He doesn't specify exactly what love will look like for each person.  
For Anna Radkovic, love looks like going to Kenya to serve with Arosha.  
For us, love might look like being faithful in praying for her.  
But even there, we do have some freedom.  
If Anna in Kenya is not your thing  
because you have a particular passion for another missionary  
or another missions agency,  
then love might look like supporting them.  
It's good to bias yourself towards taking an interest  
in the things that your church has decided to be part of as a congregation.  
But no one person has space in their life for everything.  
You have freedom to choose.  
Just you need to use love to motivate your choices.

This idea that love is the key measure in the Christian life  
is not just found here.

In Romans 13, Paul says,

Rom 13:9-10

"All the commandments are summed up in this one command:  
love your neighbour as yourself.  
Love does no harm to a neighbour.  
Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law."

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 13,  
we have the famous chapter on love.

Love is patient, love is kind etc.

It gets read out at piles of Christian weddings.

But the point in 1 Corinthians

is that relationships in the church need to be governed by love,  
and then that will result in all these other qualities flowing from that.

In James, love is called the 'royal law'

because it has pride of place among the laws.



In John's first letter,  
he bases his argument  
that love is the guiding principle of the Christian life  
on the statement 'God is love'.  
If God is love, then if we have been born of God  
then we too will love.  
And so love must be at the heart of our lives.

Love is however a very flexible word.  
You can justify almost anything by calling it love.  
You think of some of the big moral questions of our day,  
and you will find that people argue both sides of them  
and use love as their justification.

Take one example.

Euthanasia.

One person will say, "I was showing love to my mum  
in allowing her to escape from the terrible pain of a terminal illness."

Another person will say,

"My mum is made in the image of God.

Love would never take the life of someone made in God's image."

God can't possibly want opposite things to happen.

Either euthanasia for a terminally ill person is Ok or it isn't.

So how do we know what it means to love God?

We need to educate ourselves about what God wants  
if we are to love God well.

Well our reading tells us to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

Really this is just a way to say,

"Love God with all of our being."

But looking at it from different directions can help us see what love is.

Loving God with all of our heart

means that God is the focus of our affection.

You might remember David dancing naked

in front of the ark of the covenant as it was taken into Jerusalem.

No one told him he had to do that.  
Nothing in the Law of Moses could have led him to that conclusion.  
But it was an expression of the love for God in his heart.  
It was affirmed in the story.  
His wife Michal despised him  
for abandoning the dignity of a king and behaving like a slave.  
And she was rendered childless.  
Love for God means that our hearts will want to praise and glorify him.  
And we won't care what people think of us when we do.  
I'm reminded of former prime minister Scott Morrison  
raising his hands during the singing of a song at his church.  
He's a politician.  
He knew that he would be ridiculed.  
But he wanted to express his love for God and did it anyway.

Loving God with all our soul.  
I'm taking it that there's an eternity focused direction to our love.  
Those who are willing to give up their earthly lives  
as an expression of their love for God are loving God with their souls.  
Across the ages many Christian people  
have been presented with that choice.  
The most confronting in recent years  
were the 20 odd orange clad Christians on the beach in Egypt.  
They were beheaded for their faith.  
But they loved God with their souls  
and went to their deaths willingly and joyfully.  
This is the ultimate way to love God with our souls.  
Hopefully we won't be called to this kind of love.  
But any decision made with eternity in mind  
is a decision to love God with our soul.  
When you pray for a friend to come to know Jesus,  
you are loving God with your soul.

Loving God with all our mind.

I said earlier that as Christians,  
we have moved from having precise rules to follow,  
like the people of God under the Law of Moses,  
to having the freedom to work out for ourselves how to serve God  
based on the principle of love.  
Freedom is a wonderful thing.  
But to use our freedom well requires hard work.  
There's a big difference between saying,  
"I'm going to do what I think is the loving thing  
based on my life experience,  
what my parents and teachers have taught me,  
and what I have absorbed from the society around me."  
and saying,  
"I'm going to do what I think is the loving thing  
based on detailed reading of God's word  
and wrestling with how Christians down the ages have understood it."  
The second one is loving God with your mind.

Loving God with our strength.  
Strength can be physical.  
When you push a mower around the church grounds  
or set up tables for Trinity Tucker,  
that's loving God using strength.  
But strength can also be emotional.  
When you sit and listen to someone pour out the grief of their heart,  
it takes strength not to be weighed down.  
Strength can be your influence.  
When a well connected Christian  
uses their networks to show love to others,  
that's loving God with your strength.  
I'm reminded of Greg Gould helping Colin Duggan  
get some justice from a bank  
by tapping a former work colleague on the shoulder.  
Different ones of us have different amounts and varieties of strength.

But we are to love God with it.

Let's summarise:

Loving God and our neighbour goes together.

We need to do both.

Love gives us freedom in how we serve God.

Freedom that the people in the OT didn't have.

But that freedom needs to be well informed about what God desires.

God desires us to love him with heart, soul, mind and strength.