

Mark 12:28-34 One of the experts in the law approached after he heard their discussion. When he saw that Jesus had answered them well, he asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?”²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one.’³⁰ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”³² The expert in the law said to him, “Well said, teacher. You have spoken correctly on the basis of the truth that he is one, and there is no other besides him.”³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than all whole 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.” After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

I haven't done scientific research, but I would be willing to bet that there have been more songs written about love than about any other subject. That makes sense because the feeling of being in love and being loved is one of the most powerful positive emotions that we feel in life. There are also few things more painful than love that has gone bad.

One song contains the lyrics, “Learning to love yourself / It is the greatest love of all.” In the context of the song it makes some sense. The point is that if you are going your own way and charting your own course, you can't expect to have droves of people supporting you. You have to rely on yourself. Out of context, that seems to be the most self-centered thing anyone could ever say.

The thing is that people will be writing love songs until the end of time, but none of them will come close to the kind of love that is talked about in our three lessons for today. That's because in order to know this kind of love you must first know and believe in the one true God. What he has done for the world shows what love truly is. True Love comes from God, it loves God, and loves our neighbor.

The events of Mark chapter 12 take place on Tuesday of Holy Week. On the previous Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey. On Friday he would go to the cross to suffer and die for the sins of the whole world. On Sunday he would rise from the dead to prove that his sacrifice had been accepted and death had been conquered. Despite everything he was facing Jesus wasn't hiding in a corner somewhere. He is taking this one last opportunity to teach people.

The Sadducees came up with a situation that they thought proved that the very concept of the resurrection from the dead was foolish. Jesus showed that the dead do rise because God called himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He isn't the God of the dead, but of the living. The Pharisees tried to trap him by questioning whether or not they should pay taxes. Jesus ended that debate by saying, **“Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.”**

Now this man came up with a question too. He wanted to know what the greatest commandment is. That seems like a silly question until you remember that the Pharisees made up 613 laws on top of God's Law. With so many laws obviously some have to be more important than others. All 613 can't be equally important. That's where legalism gets you. Instead of trusting in God completely, you get mired down in arguments.

Jesus quoted in part from the first lesson for today. He didn't actually start with the Law, but with the Gospel. He quoted the Shema, which became a confession of faith for the Israelites, something that they would say every morning and every evening, **“Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one.”** It is called the Shema because that is the Hebrew word for the word “Hear.” שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד

The word “hear” is not simply saying, “Let these sound waves bounce off your eardrums.” This was a message that the Israelites were to hear and take to heart. It is a beautiful summary of who God is what what he has done for them. It uses the name “the LORD” which shows him as the God of the Promise, the Savior-God. The name “God” shows that he has the power to insure that all of his promises come true.

That verse shows the difference between the one true God and any other thing that has ever been or will ever be worshiped as god. When Moses originally said those words, the people were about to enter the Promised Land. They would encounter all kinds of different gods. There were gods of the harvest, gods of the hills, gods of the valleys, one for every occasion, but there is only one true God.

This is the God who loved us first. He chose the Israelites to be his special people when they weren't even a people yet. There was just one man, Abraham. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He had put up with their rebellion for the past 40 years. Now he was leading them into the land he had promised to give to them, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land where the Savior would be born.

God chose us to be his people when we were spiritually dead in our sins. He made us alive through Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit has worked through the Word and Sacraments to convince us that Jesus is our Savior too. He provides for every one of our earthly and spiritual needs. He lives and rules over everything in creation for our good. He is preparing the place where we will spend eternity with him. That's the true God.

True Love comes from God and it loves God.

I think that sometimes people view God's Law as this huge, mysterious, incomprehensible system of laws that no one except for professors at the Seminary can hope to grasp. Well, when you do what the Pharisees did and make up those 613 extra laws, then yes, no normal human being can keep track of all of that. Even here one of the so-called "experts" in the law didn't have a good handle on it.

Jesus sums up the whole law in two beautiful, simple sentences. This shouldn't have been news to anyone, because God had revealed this many centuries earlier through Moses. The first commandment is this, ³⁰**"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."** That sums up the first three of the Ten Commandments.

We need to review that word "love." It seems like such a simple concept, but on our own no one can grasp how the Bible uses that Word. The English concept of love is particularly worthless. I can say that I love God, I love my wife, I love my children, I love the Detroit Lions, and I love a good supreme pizza. All of those are legitimate uses of the word "love" in English, but none of them mean the same thing. None of them mean the same thing as the way the Bible uses that Word.

The love that God has for us and believers have for him is all-consuming. We love him with our hearts, the part of us that is the center of our being and personality. We love him with our souls that shows that this love covers our whole person both physically and spiritually. We love him with our minds which is where we think and make decisions. We love him with our strength which gives us the ability to take the decisions that we've made and put them into practice.

So practically what does this look like? That's important to ask because the Biblical concept of love is not merely a feeling. It's an action. We use God as our motivation. God loves us so much that he was willing to come here, become like one of us, live perfectly for us, and die in the place of us. We will never be able to perfectly imitate God's love for us. Our sinful natures will see to that. But that is still our goal.

That means that in everything in life we put God first. It's not about what I want. It's about what God wants. If what I want happens to line up with what God wants, great! But if I want something different, then that idea goes in the garbage. If following God's way means that I'm going to lose out on something here, so be it. God can and will take care of me no matter what.

Love means remembering that everywhere I go and in everything I do, I am a witness for my Savior. So before I say anything or do I'm going to first ask, "Is this God pleasing? What kind of Christian example am I going to be setting by doing this? Is this going to give God glory or is it going to make things seem like I don't know the first thing about him?" Just think about how much our lives would change if we would first stop and ask ourselves those questions.

Another aspect of loving God is trusting him. That is especially fitting this week as we will be electing a new president. Certainly educate yourselves on the issues and then vote your conscience. But realize that Tuesday changes precisely nothing. The one who is really in charge is not going to change. His love for us isn't going anywhere. He has worked through good leaders and bad ones. Finally, every politician is a sinner. They will mess up. God is not and he will not. That sets us free to love and trust him forever.

True Love loves God and loves our neighbor.

Some might argue that Jesus is cheating a bit in this text because the man asked for one law and Jesus gave him two. It's more like commandments 1a and 1b. You can't obey the first unless you are also obeying the second. The second is meaningless unless we also know the first. Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18, **"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."** That commandment sums up the final seven of the Ten Commandments.

A couple things we need to consider here. First of all, who is our neighbor? Someone asked Jesus that one time and he went on to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Sometimes people say that your neighbor is everybody. Sort of. Potentially it could be anyone. But it is an impossible task for me to serve all 8.2 billion people on the planet every day. A simpler way to define it is anyone you might come into contact with.

This is where this commandment becomes harder than the first one. God is always perfectly deserving of our love. Your neighbor, no matter who it might be, almost certainly won't be deserving of your love. Even the people who are easiest for us to love—our friends and family—are sinners. They know you best. If they really wanted to hurt you, they would know the best ways to do it.

So practically what does this look like? It means that in everything I want to be Christ to that person. That doesn't mean that I'm going to become their personal Savior. It means that I'm going to love that person with the same love that Christ showed for them. Christ died for them all from your dearest friend to your most hateful enemy. If Jesus was willing to die for them, then I'm going to be willing to put them after God on my priority list. I myself will be last.

Remember that Godly love doesn't mean that I'm going to give everybody a big hug. I'm not going to act like the sins they commit are no big deal. But what I want is nothing more than their soul's salvation. I want them to know Jesus and be in heaven too. If they are doing hateful things that simply shows how deeply Satan has his claws in them and how desperately they need some Jesus in their lives.

I get all kinds of emails and texts from people asking my advice on how to reach out to someone else with Jesus. I love every one of those conversations because it shows that God's people are trying to live that way. If you can talk to people about Jesus, great! Use every opportunity you get. If they refuse to listen, you can still show love by living like a Christian 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Then your life is preaching a faithful sermon even if they won't listen to your words.

Let's get back to this man. He said, "**Well said, teacher.**" Even this man had to admit that Jesus was exactly right. What he said at the end is even more surprising, "³³**To love him...and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.**" You can't even imagine what a huge statement that was. He understood that without love keeping any other law is impossible.

Jesus replied, "**You are not far from the kingdom of God.**" That was an invitation for him to learn more. I don't know what happened to that man. I hope he later trusted in Jesus as the Savior. Jesus could say similar things about the people all around us. The kingdom of God is near anyone when believers are living like believers. May God strengthen us so we can show love for the people around us and by doing that show love for him too.

True Love comes from God, it loves God, and loves our neighbor. So we see that true love isn't about us at all. It isn't about how we feel. It isn't about what other people do. It's knowing the love that God has shown for us by doing everything to save us from ourselves. God plants that love in our hearts too so we can reflect his love back to him and to the people all around us.