

Loving God, Loving Others

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 28:18–22

Background Scripture: Romans 15:1–7; Philippians 2:1–8;
Colossians 3:12; 4:1

Today's Scripture: Mark 12:28–34; James 2:14–17

I. Right Belief

Mark 12:28–34

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but 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 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.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

28. *One of the teachers of the law* seems impressed with how Jesus has been answer-

ing his interrogators. The man approaches Jesus with respect; the parallel account in Matthew 22:36 includes the use of the title “teacher” (compare Mark 12:32). He wonders how Jesus might answer a question often debated among the rabbis: of all the commandments, *which is the most important one of all?*

Traditionally, rabbis counted over 600 commands in the Law of Moses. It is not surprising, then, that a debate might arise concerning which ones were the most important. If one were to create a “top ten” list, the task might seem easy: the most important ones are the Ten Commandments, of course! Some Jewish scholars, like the first-century Philo of Alexandria, thought those 10 summarized all the commands in the law. He believed they articulated two primary responsibilities: one pertaining to God (piety) and the other pertaining to people (justice).

Categorizing those commandments in this twofold way is not uncommon at the time. But does the Law of Moses suggest a hierarchy of importance whereby one commandment can be singled out as being the most important commandment of all?

29. Given his straightforward reply, Jesus recognizes that this is not a trick question designed to trap him. There is no

hesitation in identifying *the most important* commandment as Jesus quotes the opening words of Deuteronomy 6:4. This is often called “the Shema” (the Hebrew word for “hear”). This is ancient Israel’s foundational confession. As evidence of its centrality, some devout Jews in Jesus’ time recited the Shema twice a day.

Just before voicing the Shema to the Israelites, Moses charged them to follow God as they entered the promised land. This included fearing God and keeping his commands, so that things might go well with them (Deuteronomy 6:1–3). The Shema proclaims God’s singularity.

30. Jesus continues the quotation as he moves to Deuteronomy 6:5. The word *mind* is not in the original “with all” list, and so it has been added by Jesus. These terms collectively emphasize the whole person.

31. The teacher of the law asks which commandment is most important. But Jesus provides two answers. While distinct, the second commandment is intrinsically connected to the first. One cannot truly *love your neighbor as yourself* without first loving God. In practice, they form one commandment. The intrinsic connection is seen in the fact that our fellow human beings have been created in the image of God, just as we have been.

Jesus’ statement here matches Leviticus 19:18. This commandment appears as part of the Holiness Code, which is found in Leviticus 17–26. Some commentators suggest that Leviticus 19:18 serves as a kind of summary statement. To love one’s neighbor is to treat them with the respect and holiness demanded in the legislation recorded in Leviticus 17–26.

Together, these two commandments provide the foundation for the rest of God’s commands. Those who fail at keeping these two have no hope of fulfilling the rest of the law. An anecdote notes

an occasion when a Jew known as Hillel the Elder (lived about 40 BC–AD 10) was challenged by a Gentile to summarize the entirety of the Law of Moses in a single sentence. His reported response was, “What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor; this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

Inherent in the command of love toward our neighbors is to love them as we love ourselves. Rather than grounds for selfishness, love of self here carries the sense of seeking our own good. We don’t harm ourselves; we take care of ourselves.

32–33. While agreeing with and restating the answer Jesus gives, the teacher adds something to what Jesus said: the man claims that loving God and neighbor is more important than *all burnt offerings and sacrifices* of the Levitical system. Jesus’ declaration, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7), wasn’t intended to suggest doing away with the Levitical system but to ensure that people understood which command was relatively more important.

A relativizing of the sacrificial system makes sure that it doesn’t take precedence over loving God and loving neighbor. There was always a danger of inappropriately prioritizing the temple and its sacrifices. During Jesus’ final week, he condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law for missing “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

34. Jesus is apparently impressed with the teacher’s answer and affirms what the man perceives. As Jesus informs him that he is *not far from the kingdom of God*, Jesus is not saying that the man is *in* the kingdom of God. He is near to it but not yet there. This implies that he still lacks something. He has grasped something essential, and he very well may be closer to the kingdom than others within earshot.

The series of questions the religious leaders asked Jesus comes to an end with this dialogue. Jesus' response is profound and unassailable. Those looking to undermine him are silenced.

II. Right Action

James 2:14–17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

14. Verses prior to our printed passage tie this section of the lesson to the passage above from Mark 12. James claims his readers will do right to “love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8). James raises two rhetorical questions that introduce the larger question of when faith becomes ineffective. When is faith unable to save? James says there is no profit in *faith* when it does not have works—when it lies inactive. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, the highest priority is faith working through love. A faith without works is a faith that is failing to love God and our neighbors.

15. James' example focuses on a hypothetical person in abject poverty. More specifically, this is someone in the congregation who is without adequate clothing or food. James is asking, *What does saving faith do in such a situation?*

16. James highlights the sort of callousness of heart that neglecting the poor entails. The example is so embarrassing; it's difficult to imagine such a reality being an issue among believers. Yet this seems to be the situation among those to whom James writes his letter. The rich are hon-

ored, but the poor are despised. The rich are loved, but the poor are neglected.

James calls the second commandment as noted in Mark 12:31, above, the “royal law” (James 2:8). Honoring the royal law means loving others enough to include feeding and clothing others. When we fail to do so, we fail to love our neighbors. Faith that does not result in such works does no *good*.

17. Here, James offers an initial concluding statement in response to his rhetorical question in James 2:14, above. Faith that is void of good *action* is not authentic faith. Such a faith is *dead*.

It is important not to misread James here. He is not contradicting what is affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament, namely, that we are saved by grace through faith—not by works, as the apostle Paul establishes in Ephesians 2:8–9. Christianity is not based on salvation by faith plus works, but is instead a system that requires a faith that produces (or results in) works.

We were created to do good works, “which God prepared in advance for us to do.” What Paul stresses in this passage to the Ephesians is that our salvation is not of our own doing, but a gift of God. Rather than contradicting this, James adds clarity to what that faith entails. It is a faith that is alive (rather than *dead*) and united to good works. James 2:26 restates these ideas, driving home this point as crucial: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Having an active faith is a theme throughout the book of James. He charges his readers to be not just hearers but doers. He expresses that wisdom and understanding are evident in deeds done in humility and characterized by mercy and good fruit. Failing to do the good we know we ought to do is sin. He highlights prayer as an example of faith working itself out in action.

Involvement Learning

Loving God, Loving Others

Into the Lesson

What comes to mind for each word?

Love _____

Faith _____

Today we will study Jesus' teaching regarding the most important commandments: the directives to love God and love others. Then we will turn to the book of James to see how our actions demonstrate our faith in and love for God.

Into the Word

Complete the true/false pre-test with a closed Bible.

1. One of the scribes approached Jesus with a question. T/F. ___
2. The "first" commandment is "Love your neighbor as yourself." T/F. ___
3. Jesus said that loving God and one's neighbor as oneself is not more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. T/F. ___
4. James says that if faith lacks works, it is "dead." T/F. ___

Key Text

"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 burnt offerings and sacrifices."

—Mark 12:33

Read Mark 12:28–34. What is the significance of God's people being commanded to love the Lord God with their heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Summarize the relationship between loving God and loving others.

Read James 2:14–17. What is the significance of James's description of faith without action as "dead"?

Summarize the relationship between faith and action.

Into Life

What are the immediate needs of our surrounding community?

Write a proposal for how the class can see and address the immediate needs of the surrounding community.

Thought to Remember

Love God and love others.