

“The Foremost of All” Mark 12:28-34 (Mt. 22:34-40; [Lk 10:25-28])

TODAY we mark the words of Jesus that give us the foremost commandment of all – that one which is most important to God, and should be most important to us. Since LOVE is the greatest of the 3 things that will abide forever (1 Cor. 13:13) it should not surprise us that Jesus relates that the greatest commandment is to LOVE – love God and others.

In this regard, we want to contemplate that which is the most important ingredient in our relationship with God. If you want to draw nearer to God – this is the path closest to His heart.

THE TEXT

- 28 One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?"
- 29 Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD;
- 30 AND 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.'
- 31 "The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
- 32 The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM;
- 33 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 HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."
- 34 When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions.

THE CONTEXT

On this Tuesday of Passion week, the Pharisees had asked their best “trick question” and Jesus has astonished them with His answer: “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s.”

Following this, the Sadducees had countered with their best trick question and Jesus had embarrassed them with his answer of God being the God of the living and not of the dead.

Now a scribe – one of the experts in the Mosaic Law – poses a third question to Jesus, also to test him (according to Matthew’s account in 22:35): “what commandment is the foremost of all?”

The scribes had determined that there were exactly 613 laws and precepts given by Moses on Mt. Sinai. One of the favorite spiritual pastimes of this group was to subdivide these laws into many subdivisions of legalistic requirements. Another such spiritual pastime, however was to do the opposite – that is, to distill all the Law into the smallest common denominator.

We see this attempted a number of places in OT Scripture. Perhaps the best known in Micah’s list of 3 essentials in Micah 6:8

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Therefore, this was a question whose answer from any Rabbi would be of great interest to this scribe. Yet it was a “trick” question in that any simple answer would fail to satisfy everyone with the essence of God’s Law. This question was made to leave Jesus open to criticism with whatever answer he gave.

Yet Jesus surprised them and silenced any other questions thereafter by combining two great commands into one – both commands to LOVE.

Deuteronomy 6: 4, 5 (Shema = “hear”) Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Leviticus 19:18... you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD

THE “SHEMA”

Shema, in Hebrew means “hear” – and this was the name given to this most beloved, memorized and quoted passage of the Jews. It was traditionally recited at both morning and evening prayers, because later in this Hebrew text God says to teach these words “when you lie down and when you rise up” – and this was interpreted literally.

These were the words often first learned and memorized by young Jewish men. And because the text also says that these words should be bound on hand, forehead, gate and doorpost many Jews wrote the words on pieces of parchment and tied them in some way to their clothing and houses.

1. The Shema is the FOUNDATION OF MONOTHEISM – declaring that the God of the Jews was one God, not many gods.

2. The Shema is the IMPLICATION OF TRINITY – in that it literally says “the Jehovah is our Elohim. The Jehovah is one.” Elohim was the God of power in creation and miracles – and “Elohim” is a plural word. Thus, in Genesis, we read repeatedly “the LORD God” did this and that, meaning “the Jehovah Elohim.” We also read in Genesis that God said “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness (Gen. 1:26). And after the fall God says in Gen. 3:22: “Then the Jehovah Elohim said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil...”

So, our Elohim (that is our God of power and creation, of which heathen gods of creation are typically plural) is Jehovah, our Jehovah is one. Implication: our 3 is 1.

3. The Shema is the FIRST COMMAND TO LOVE GOD in the Scripture. This is the “love” of agape – the word Jesus uses in Mark 12 – the love which is self-sacrificing and given by God.

Since love is the “greatest” of those things that will last forever, it is not surprising that to LOVE GOD and LOVE OTHERS is the heart of the greatest commandment.

4. The Shema COMMANDS TOTAL COMMITMENT OF SELF to God. **Heart** – our emotions, specifically our desires; **Soul** – our inner everlasting self – our “God-consciousness”; **Mind** (added by Jesus in Mark) – our intellect, specifically our choices; and **Strength** (or might) – our physical self – all our actions and reactions.

Note the four uses of “all” – all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. Nothing is excluded from what God wants us to commit to Him and Him alone.

1 Samuel 15:22 And Samuel said, ‘Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.

John 14:15 [Jesus:] If you love me you will obey what I command. (NIV)

The essence of what Jesus says to us here in Mark 12 is “if you love me you will obey this foremost command.”

Even this scribe was impressed with Jesus’ answer. Jesus had encapsulated all the Law into one command in a way no one else ever had. It was the “Shema”, it was LOVE to both God and man and it was all encompassing. Jesus was likewise impressed with the scribe’s response and told him that he was “not far from the kingdom of God.”

Clearly, to know this truth is not the same as living this truth. This scribe knew the right answer, yet he was not a believer.

SO THE ESSENCE OF GOD’S LAW and the SUMMARY OF ALL THAT GOD REQUIRES is summed up in “the foremost of all”:

LOVE GOD WITH ALL THAT YOU ARE AND HAVE

LOVE OTHERS IN THE SAME WAY YOU WOULD WANT TO BE LOVED

This second part is like unto what is called “The Golden Rule” given by Jesus in His “Sermon on the Mount.”

Matthew 7:12 Therefore whatever you want others to do for you, do so for them for this is the Law and the Prophets.