

Mark 12:28-34

Let me ask you a question... What would you grab if your house was on fire? In that instant, in that moment of panic, what is the one thing you go for? You would, I'm sure instinctively help another person who needed it, if you were able. But what else? Your phone, your wallet, your computer, your personal documents, a precious photo?

And as you stand outside looking at everything else burning to ashes you have a moment to take stock, to realise the significance of your choice you made. What you have rescued, those things you have thought about just now, represent the priorities in your life, the things that are most important to you.

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is being quizzed about the whole of the Jewish law. Of all the many laws to choose from, which one was the most important to Jesus?

Last week, Bruce reminded us to look at the context of the reading, what it meant then, why it was written and then consider how it applies to us today.

You see, today's passage comes at the end of a whole section where Jesus is fielding some difficult questions. Firstly, the chief priests and teachers of the law had a real go at questioning his authority. The Pharisees and Sadducees then had a go, trying to catch him out about details of the law given to Moses and in today's passage we have one of the teachers of the law asking another question.

To his credit, he had clearly been listening to the fierce debate and noticed that Jesus had given them all good answers.

So his question was both deep and profound. *'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'*

We know Jesus's response, but what would yours have been?

Which commandments really matter to you?

In a moment of crisis, which commandments do you instantly go to?

What's your default?

What is your priority?

Which one will you grasp on to in a moment of crisis?

From the beginning of time, we were made to worship, to worship God. If it is true that we are made in God's image, we will find our fullest meaning, our true selves the more we learn to love and worship the one we are designed to reflect.

And God is not some cosmic force, he is a living person. He showed himself to us in the person of Jesus.

And Jesus is alive today.

He lived, he died and he rose again so we can have a relationship with him. We are called to love God, and our love of God is in response to his absolute love of us.

We heard in our reading from Hebrews

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God. God has given everything for us.

That word 'serve', in our first reading in Greek word *Latreuo* – which is often translated as worship...

Our love for God is shown in our worship of him. Our whole life of worship, of love and service of the living God.

No half measures, **every aspect** of our life to be gladly spent in worship of the one true God.

Jesus warns, us elsewhere that we cannot serve two masters. It is impossible to divide our allegiance between God and what Paul calls 'the world'. You cannot seek power, wealth, empire, or sensual

gratification, and at the same time be submissive to God's will. Those who try to straddle the fence by allotting God only token love while maintaining a bosom friendship with the world, are suffering from religious schizophrenia. Doomed to be frustrated in this world and, my friends, doomed in the world to come. With God, it is all or nothing.

Hear what Jesus says is the most important commandment.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

What does that mean? What does that look like?

Love the Lord with all your heart....

Well, In the **Bible**, the "heart" is more than just a pumping station. It is the command center of the body, where decisions are made, and plans are hatched. It is the center of our inner being, which controls our feelings, emotions, desires, and passions. The heart is where religious commitment takes root. It is in our innermost being, where we decide for or against God.

We can say things with our mind and lips, but it is the tell-tale heart that betrays our true loyalties. The elder brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son provides a good example of this. Unlike his younger brother, he stayed home and obeyed his father's every command. But his heart was not in it, or else he would not have begrudged his father's joy at the return of a lost son. Jesus said that where our treasure is, there our heart will be (Matt. 6: 21),

Let us not be, like the teachers of the law, who people looked to, and assumed they clearly loved God. You see, Jesus saw through their religious showmanship and examined their hearts. They were in love with themselves, their position, and their financial and religious success.

Jesus says 'give up your own agenda, and seek God's will. And for those who ramble aimlessly through life and give their hearts to everything and nothing, he says, give your hearts completely to God.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart...

Secondly, Love the Lord with all your soul

When we are commanded to love God with all our soul, which refers to the **power** of our lives. The apostle Paul, provides a good example of someone who loved God with all his soul. With every fibre of his being. With every fibre of his being. All of his energies were focused on pursuing God's purposes in his life. He wrote, "But one thing I do" ONE THING I Do! (Phil. 3: 13). It was this commitment that drove him to do, and suffer all that he did for Christ (see 2 Cor. 11: 23–29). His soul was so consumed by God that he was compelled to preach, to press on, and to fight the good fight. Those who love God with all their soul will, like Paul, commit all of their energy and strength to him.

Jesus is laying down quite a challenge for us here, don't you think?!

Thirdly, Love the Lord with all your mind

The early Christians were tough-minded. They read, they studied, they wrote, and served God with all their minds. Romans 12:2 says that Christians today should not be conformed to the thinking of this world. We need to commit our minds to God, so that we can offer our society the vital "know why" of our faith. As Bruce reminded us last week....

¹⁶ *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

By reading and inwardly digesting your bible so that you are Always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

And fourthly, we are called to **Love God with all our Strength...**

“Strength” refers to our physical capacities, and that includes not just our muscles but also our possessions. The widow provides the best example of this love. She did not come to the temple to recite prayers, she gave all that she had to live on. to the Lord. The rich gave God what they skimmed off the top of their abundance. She gave out of her lack and did not worry about what she would have left over. This is true strength, real strength of character and belief and trust.

Tom Wright wrote, if we really lived lives of complete love of God (with our heart, soul, mind and strength), even for a single day, God’s kingdom would have already come on earth as it is in heaven. And that’s the point. Jesus is saying through this commandment – his kingdom is in our reach.

But that’s not the end, Jesus goes on to say – love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. Yeh, ok, that’s two commandments but they work so much together.

Love your neighbour as yourself. This doesn't mean loving others instead of ourselves but showing to **all** people the same respect and care that we show to ourselves.

No one likes to be criticised, no one likes to be judged, marginalise or undermined. We want others to deal with us according to their highest ideals rather than according to our merits. To see our flaws and love us the same. In the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25–37, Jesus expands the definition of neighbour to include those whom we would write off as enemies. In other words the whole question “Who is my neighbour?” is a non- question because there is no such thing as a non-neighbour. Whoever needs me is my neighbour, and we express our love with active compassion, forgiveness and justice.

When someone insults you or undermines you – our default should not be to fight back but to remember to love our neighbour. I know, it is not easy, it does not come naturally, but this is what God requires.

Who do you need to love? Who do you need to be reconciled with?

Loving our neighbour does not mean that we never confront them with their evil or sin. Jesus did not shy away from offending the powerful. He attacked hypocrisy and injustice, wherever he saw it.

But reconciliation and love is the central message of the Gospel. Jesus came to reconcile us to God and to one another. It is to this, we are called.

So, love God and love one another. Can you do that?

Finally, Jesus answers to the scribe’s question carries another important implication. By quoting the central Jewish prayer, or the Shema, Jesus showed that he wasn’t bringing a new religion or a new way of life but the fulfilment of the law and the prophets.

The lawyers musing on Jesus’s answer draws out a meaning which Jesus hasn't said out loud which but which was certainly there.

If these commandments are the primary ones. If this is what worshipping, loving and serving God is all about, then all that the temple stands for the daily weekly and annual round of sacrifices and offerings are virtually unnecessary.

Loving God and loving our neighbours – whether we like them or not, is more important than all burnt offerings or sacrifices. Or in today’s world. Loving God with everything we are and have and loving and reconciling ourselves with others is much more important than any of the rituals we hold dear. We need to let go of earthly priorities because we can only approach God, we can only love God with clean hearts.

Jesus says in Matthew 5: if you are coming to leave a gift at the altar... and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you... First go and be reconciled to them; then come.

Will you let go of grudges? Will you put down your posturing and point scoring? We will shortly be coming to a time of healing and remembering. Confession is an important part of this process.

In conclusion, for those who are facing a crisis, when you come up against opposition, when you feel like your house is on fire and everything around you is lost, what is most important for you? Will you remember the greatest command?

Love God with all your heart, your soul your mind and your strength and love your neighbour as yourself.

Or, as Tom Wright challenges us when he says - To put it another way, when crisis comes, what is it that remains solid in your life and the life of your community? Is it a wholehearted love of God and neighbour?... or is it a mad scramble as you try to save their own skins?

What is your priority?

Let us pray,