

What Is Most Important?

Mark 12:28-34

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Of all the commands, which is the most important? That is the question posed to Jesus by the teacher of the law. Unlike the other teachers of the law and the Pharisees that day, this particular teacher of the law didn't seem to be insincere about his question. He was not trying to trap Jesus into saying something that would discredit Jesus; this teacher of the law seemed to be genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus thought was most important.

It is necessary to identify that which most important. After all, we have to know what goals we want to set for ourselves, we have to know which things will have priority in our lives, we have to know which direction we will go; without identifying that which is most important, none of these other things will fall into place.

It makes sense, then, that someone interested in knowing more about Jesus would ask him to share that which is most important.

The answer that Jesus gave was direct and to the point. "The most important [commandment] 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.'"¹ That command is called the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for "Hear". Every good practicing Jew of Jesus' day would have known that command by heart from their early childhood. It was like a confirmation requirement, to know and recite the Shema every day. The command Jesus quotes comes from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy, in the context of giving the law to the people of Israel. As it indicates in Deuteronomy, there is a direct connection between loving God and obeying God's law.

Jesus knew that. He knew what the greatest command was, and he lived it fully.

But Jesus didn't leave it at the Shema. After quoting the command to love God, Jesus told the expert in the law this: "The second [command] is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."² The command to love one's neighbor, like the command to love God, comes from the Torah, the Old Testament law; Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18 as the second commandment. Jesus added what author and New Testament professor

1 Mark 12:29-30

2 Mark 12:31

Scot McKnight calls the First Amendment of the Shema.³ It's no small thing, to add to the central creed of Judaism.

And yet, that is what Jesus did. He did not make the Shema any less Jewish, or even any less important. But by adding to the command to love the Lord our God with all our being the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, Jesus lets the expert in the law know – and he lets us know as we read along in the gospels – that we cannot love God without loving our neighbor.

When asked what is most important, Jesus puts love front and center in all our relationships: loving God, loving neighbor (and even loving ourselves). To quote the Beatles, “All You Need Is Love.” (Of course, the Beatles were referring to a more warm-and-fuzzy huggy-huggy kind of love; that is a far cry from what Jesus means here. But the Beatles are on the right track.)

If we know what is most important, then what is most important should be that which molds, guides, and informs our lives. The “Jesus Creed”, as Scot McKnight calls it, is at the very center of every page of the gospels—you see it manifest in Jesus' actions, and you hear it in his words and his teaching. In the same manner, this “Jesus Creed” – that which is most important – needs to be at the very center of all we say, think, pray, and do as followers of Jesus Christ.

This in no way negates the law. Simply put, it is the lens through which we understand the law and live out its precepts.

Here's the deal: You cannot live out these two commandments and remain unchanged. When we follow Jesus by loving God and neighbor, our hearts will be transformed. And as a community of people transformed by our love for God and neighbor, then the world around us will also be transformed. It is the way that we manifest the kingdom of God among us, and the way that the kingdom of God grows and spreads throughout the world.

And so during these weeks of Lent, I am challenging us all to do some serious reflecting on what it means to be shaped individually and collectively by what is most important. On Wednesday evenings we will have vespers in the chapel at 6:00 p.m. During that time we will begin to consider a perspective on what is most important, and carry that conversation into the following Sunday in worship.

Full disclosure: Outside of the Bible and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the resource to which I will most often turn during this Lenten study will be the book by Scot McKnight, The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others. I would recommend that you go online and buy a copy; you can order a real book, or you can get it in Kindle format for your iPad or tablet. If you would like for me to order one for you, let me know. I think it's about \$14 plus shipping for the book,

³ Scot McKnight, The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others – 10th Anniversary Edition (Paraclete Press, Kindle Edition).

and \$10 for the Kindle edition.

One of the things that McKnight recommends that we do every day is repeat the two great commands when we wake up and when we go to sleep. I think that's a good idea, so I've put a copy in your bulletin as an insert. Take it home with you and commit it to memory. Then say the words every day. The more often you say them, the more likely they are penetrate and fill your hearts and change the way you look at life.

The world can use more of the kind of love we are going to consider. The church that calls itself Christian can use more of the kind of love we are going to consider.

After Jesus answered the expert in the law, the man commended Jesus for his answer. He said, "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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."⁴

Jesus looked at the teacher of the law and said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."⁵

How close do you want to be to the kingdom of God?

How close do you want to be to Jesus?

If you want to get close, you need to focus on what is most important.

What is most important, for you?

4 Mark 12:32-33

5 Mark 12:34