

**The Memoirs of Peter**  
**What Commandment Is the Greatest?**  
**Mark 12:28-34**  
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We find ourselves on Tuesday of the Passion Week, as we continue our journey through Mark's amazing gospel. I continue, each week that I study, to be struck with **the** profound wisdom of Christ, with the beauty of His person, with the compelling nature of who He is. And I hope that has been the impression this study has left on you as well. We serve an amazing Lord and Savior.

It's Tuesday of the Passion Week. Jesus is at the temple. Just to remind you what that's like. This is a model of the temple and what it was like **in** the time of Herod the Great - that magnificent edifice he built. The central structure is the temple proper, and all of the rest of that huge courtyard is, in fact, **a** large gathering area that he created around the center which is the temple - the large structure that jets up there in the middle. **That** large area is more than 30 acres, and it will hold hundreds of thousands of people. In fact, even today, that basic footprint still remains and some of the Muslim holy days - of course, the Muslims now control the top **of the** Temple Mount area. And on some of the Muslim holy days they've had hundreds of thousands of people on top of that great Temple Mount. So, that gives you something of the order of magnitude and scale. Just the face of the temple, there in the middle, would have been some 50 yards wide by 50 yards high. So, if that gives you any sense of scale.

Jesus was over on the side, just to give you context. You see on the left side there, what's called Solomon's Portico - an area for teaching and gathering for other events. That's where Jesus would have been. And again, just to give you some idea of the scale, I've inserted that little red cylinder. Do you see that? That represents approximately a 6-foot person standing in that area. So, it would have been huge. Somewhere on this side of the great Temple Mount, is where Jesus would have been holding court. There were thousands of pilgrims who had come for Passover. Passover was just a few days away, now on Friday. It's Tuesday. They would have come and gathered, begun to prepare themselves. Jesus went early to the temple on that Tuesday morning. And a crowd gathered round, and He began to teach them. And as He teaches them, throughout

the morning and perhaps early afternoon, He's interrupted by a series of questions designed to trap Him in what He taught - questions that came from the leadership, **the** leaders of Israel, in order to trap Him.

And tonight, we come to the latest verbal trap. Look at Mark 12 and let me begin reading in verse 28: "One of the scribes came and heard them arguing [that is, Jesus interacting with the Sadducees about the resurrection], and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, 'What commandment is the foremost of all?' Jesus answered, 'The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; 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.' The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' The scribe said to Him, 'Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM; 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.' 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.'"

In this passage, Jesus brings home to us one great reality, and that is, that when you truly understand God's commands, it drives you to Jesus and to the spiritual kingdom over which He rules. That's the message of this paragraph. But the message unfolds in a most interesting way.

As we begin to look at it, **it** really begins with what we could call the unsettling question about God's most important command. The unsettling question. Verse 28 says, "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?'"

Now, first of all, notice that this is one of the scribes. Remember, Jesus has just been jousting with the Sadducees, the priestly leadership, the ones who really were **the** aristocracy. They controlled the politics of Israel. Here is one of the scribes. After the Babylonian exile, scribes

simply became, or came to be, an expert in the Torah, an expert in the Law. By the time of the New Testament, the scribes were almost entirely Pharisees. So, this is the other group, the ultraconservatives of their day in contrast to the Sadducees. Their responsibility was to interpret the law, to teach the law, and to apply God's law to the changing circumstances of the day.

Now, this particular scribe, notice, did not initiate this contact with Jesus entirely on his own. Matthew writes this in the parallel account: "But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him..." This is the context. **They** heard that Jesus had really silenced the Sadducees about the resurrection issue. And they're thrilled with that because, remember, the Pharisees believe in the resurrection. So, they were happy that Jesus managed to publicly embarrass the Sadducees over this question. But they weren't happy about the possibility that Jesus' influence might still remain strong or even grow, because they were agreed with the Sadducees. They disagreed on about everything, but they agreed on this: Jesus had to go.

And so, they come with their own question. They huddle up, they create their question, and they pick the right guy to pitch it. Verse 28 tells us that's what happens. Literally, he asked Jesus what is the first command of all. That's what he says. What is the first command of all? First, not in the sense of time, but first in the sense of prominence. What is the foremost commandment? What is the most important command of all of the commands that God has given us?

Now, to appreciate this question, you need a little bit of the cultural background of the times, because this question didn't grow out of a vacuum. This wasn't a spur of the moment question. This had been a question that had been hotly debated among the rabbis. The scribes had determined that there were some 613 (yes, count them) - 613 commandments in the law, that is, Genesis to Deuteronomy. 613 of them. 613 corresponded exactly, **in their** counting, to the number of letters in the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments. So, it kind of all worked together for them. Of those 613, they said there were 248 positive commands and 365 negative commands, one for every day of the year. And of those, of all of those 613 commands (some

positive, some negative) they said some of those commands are what they called “heavy” - they bear a greater moral weight, and some of them are light.

Now, if you think about it, aren't we all glad that regardless of the circumstances, this scribe asked this question? Because it's a question we all have. Faced with this book, not only as they had the Old Testament now for us the New Testament as well, there are thousands of commands. So, here we have the very question that you and I perhaps would have liked to have asked Jesus. What's the greatest command? What's the most important command? But think about that question for a moment. When we ask the question, as he did, “What is the greatest commandment?”, what's implied in that question? When we ask, “What is the greatest command?”, there is an implication that's portrayed. And the implication is this: the painful awareness that we don't, we can't, keep all of God's law. And so, we sort of console ourselves - “Well, maybe it would be helpful if I knew the really important ones, because then I could double my efforts to keep that one!” By asking the question it is really an admission, a clear admission, that in fact we have not, we cannot, keep them all. So, if not all of God's law, maybe we can keep some of it, at least, the most important commands. That's what's unsettling about this question when you really think about it. It was... **If** we could keep all of them, why would we need to know which was the most important? Out of this reality comes the question.

Now, that brings us to Jesus' straightforward identification of God's two most important commands. “*Okay, you want to know the most important commands*”, Jesus says, “*I'll tell you*”. Now, because we have the Scripture and because we have 2000 years of church history and teaching, we all know the answer. I'm not going to surprise you tonight with the answer. But I hope, by the time we're done, you'll realize that in reality you only know part of the answer, because there's a lot going on in this interchange between Jesus and the scribe. So, let's look at Jesus' answer together.

Before we look at this specific answer, I want you to first consider a couple of general observations about Jesus' response. First of all, Jesus agrees with this man's question that there is a - you love this word. I know. **I get** grief every time I use this word. There is a “hierarchy” to God's commands. There is a structure. There is an order. There are some that are weightier

than others. We're responsible to keep them all. We're to obey all of God's commands, but some of them are more important at the level of weight than others. Sometime later, on that same Tuesday, Jesus fielded this question and He said this, "Woe to you scribes" ... I mean... What I mean by that is sometime later on that day, Jesus fielded this question. He said this and we'll get there **in a** few weeks. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin [your herbs], and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law..." Jesus here says, "*There's a hierarchy. You ought to have done the one*", notice He says, "without neglecting the others". But there are - tithing your herbs is not as important to God as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. So, Jesus makes it clear that there is a hierarchy of God's command. Secondly, Jesus also - and this is a bit frightening - He says it's easy to focus our lives and attention on matters that are important, but not as important as others.

Now, with that background, let's look at Jesus' specific answer: God's most important command. We see this in verses 29 and 30. Look at Jesus' answer. He says, "*Alright, you want to know? Here it is. Here's God's most important command.*" "The foremost [the first, Jesus says] is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; 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.'

Now, that's consistent with what Jesus has said on at least one other occasion. In the fall of the previous year, about four to six months before the Passion Week, Jesus had said this to the Pharisees when He was eating in one of their homes, probably here in Judea. Luke records it for us. Luke says, "[Jesus says] But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue [so this wasn't the first time He'd said it - on that Tuesday of the Passion Week - He'd said it before] ... and yet [watch this] disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others."

Now, in this passage in Mark's gospel, Jesus is of course quoting from Deuteronomy 6. He's quoting what's called the Shema. It's called that because the first Hebrew word in that passage is the Hebrew word "hear", which is Shema. So, this passage has been traditionally called that to this day. And to this day, the Jewish people continue the ancient custom (probably began a

couple of 100 years before or at least 100 years before Christ) reciting this passage every morning and every evening. They still began the service at the synagogue by reciting it. It's part of the Scripture contained in the phylactery - those little leather boxes they bind to their forehead and around their arm. It's written on the little scroll that's hidden in the Mezuzah, that little wooden or metal box attached to the door frames, the right-hand door post of a practicing Jewish family. It is foundational to the Old Testament and to the Jewish faith.

Now, it begins, Jesus quotes it here, "HEAR, O ISRAEL!" That phrase only occurs in Deuteronomy - occurs five times in Deuteronomy. Each time it's used, Moses uses it to introduce his major discourses. He uses the exact same phrase to introduce the Ten Commandments as well in chapter 5 of Deuteronomy, verse 1. So, the people of Israel knew and still knew in Jesus' time, that when Moses used these words, "HEAR, O ISRAEL!", that what followed was of supreme importance.

But notice that what immediately follows is not a command at all. What immediately follows is a declarative statement. It is a confession about our God. That's because to love God, you must first know who He is. Notice this confession, "HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD..." In Hebrew, in the Old Testament passage in Deuteronomy 6, it's two phrases - "The Lord is our God", "the Lord is one". "The Lord is our God", "the Lord is one". It's a confession. It's a confession in several ways.

First of all, it's a confession about God's identity. Notice, if you were to go back to Deuteronomy, it's the word LORD in all caps. In your English Bible when you see the word LORD in all caps, it means that it's a translation in the Old Testament of God's personal, sacred name. It's Yahweh. It is by far the most frequent designation for God in the Old Testament. It occurs some 6000 times. In this third person form of the verb "to be", it means "he is". When God says it, He says "I am". When we say it, when we say "Yahweh", we're saying, "He is". We are simply referring to Him as the God who is.

What does that mean? What does it refer to? God's personal name speaks of His self-existence. He is simply the one who is. He is responsible for all existence including His own. He depends

on nothing. He depends on no one for His existence. He simply is. If you want to love God, you must first acknowledge Him to be the one who has revealed Himself in Scripture as the eternally existent one who is.

There's another confession here in this little statement, though, and it's a confession, not about God's identity, but about God's gracious choice. Notice again the Hebrew expression "the Lord is our God" - Yahweh is our God. How did that happen? Well, the first person to use this expression was God Himself. In Exodus 3:18, you remember Moses says, "*Who do I say*"? And God says, "*Tell them I'm Yahweh, our God*".

What does that mean? How exactly does anyone come to have God? Well, in Deuteronomy 7 (and I won't take you back there in the interest of time), but in Deuteronomy 7, God explains. He says, "*Listen. I chose you. I determined to set My love upon you, and because I had sovereignly determined to set My love upon you, I have become your God, and you have become My people.*" So, when they say, when we say, "The Lord is our God", it's an acknowledgment that God's electing love was grounded solely in Himself and in the promises He made. It had absolutely nothing to do with merit or intrinsic goodness in Israel or in us. So, when an Israelite said, "Yahweh our God", he was really admitting that his only hope was the love and grace of God.

It's really true for us as well, isn't it, in the same way? If we want to confess that Yahweh is our God, we must admit our sin. We must admit our own unworthiness. We must acknowledge that we could never call Him, "My God", "Our God", except by His grace and His sovereign choice.

There's a third confession, though, in this statement and that is: it's a confession about God's uniqueness. God's uniqueness - "The Lord is one!". Yahweh, the God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament and who revealed Himself through His Son in the New Testament, is the only one to whom the true attributes of deity belong. There is one God who exists, and His name is Yahweh, eternally known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This verse, then, is the great Old Testament declaration of monotheism.

By the way, this isn't the time to really defend this; you can go back and listen to the message I did on the Trinity, in the Systematic Theology series we did. But understand that monotheism does not contradict the doctrine of the Trinity. It complements it. Because even though Jesus taught the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), His apostles understood it to compliment monotheism. It was Paul who said in 1 Corinthians 8 (verse 4), "...we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one." Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus..." James, the half-brother of our Lord, in James 2:19: "You believe that God is one. You do well..." So, understand that even though Jesus taught us to address God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that is not incongruous with the monotheism of the Old Testament; it is, in fact, a compliment to it. That has not changed. God is still eternally one in His being. So, there's **the** preamble. There is the confession that introduces the great command.

Now, that brings us to the great command itself. Look at chapter 12, and notice what Jesus says in verse 30: "AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD..." There is the greatest, most important commandment. The main command of this one true God, who has made a gracious choice, who is the only God, is that we as His creatures love Him. That is the great command.

There's only one Hebrew word for love. Jesus is quoting here from the Septuagint (Greek version) using the word "agape", the word we're familiar with. But that's built on the Old Testament Hebrew word "ohev". The Hebrew word for love is used in a lot of different ways. In fact, it's used for the infinite affection that God chose for His people. It's used for the best of human love - the love of a man for his wife, the love of parents for their children, the love of God's people for one another. But the same word for love, is also used to refer to **the** carnal desire of a lazy glutton. How can that be? How can one word describe all those different contexts? Just like our English word does. Think about how we use the English word love. There's no immediate discrimination but we say... I can say this. I can say, "I love my wife, I love my children, I love my God, **and** I love the Dallas Cowboys." You understand, by the use of that word, that there're totally different things meant.



But what is implied when we're told that we are to love God? Well, there's certain characteristics that must be present. If we're going to love God, understand that it is a decision of exclusive allegiance. If you go back to Deuteronomy, and I'm not - if I had time, I'd take you back there. I'm not going to do that. If you go back and read through Deuteronomy, you'll find out that, over and over again, God says, "*It's Me and Me only! If you're going to love Me, I have to be the exclusive object of your devotion.*" Exclusive allegiance. It is a decision to worship and serve and follow the one true God and Him only.

It also involves actions. Not only a decision of the will, but actions of selfless service. God says, "*I want you to serve Me*". What did He mean? He meant praise Him, worship Him, obey His commands - actions. Love expresses itself, not only a decision of exclusive allegiance, but actions of selfless service.

Also implied in this command is the reality that love is an emotion. It's not only an emotion, it's not solely an emotion, but it does include emotion. It is an emotion of genuine affection. Wherever there's true love, there will be genuine feeling and emotion. You understand, this is what God is commanding of every single creature He's made?

Exclusive allegiance - serving Him selflessly, and genuinely having affection and love for Him. That's the standard. That's what God wants from you. It's the great commandment. Forget everything else. This is the thing that matters most to God. It's not enough to try to live like a moral person. It's not enough to try to be a good Christian. To truly respond to God, there must be exclusive allegiance, you must serve Him actively with your life, and you must genuinely have an affection for Him. And not solely for what He does for us and what He gives to us, but as one old Puritan put it, "Our love looks to God Himself as the highest good and end". Because to love God solely for what He does, would be mercenary." Our primary duty to God is to devote ourselves to Him and to do so in these ways. It is a total commitment to and submission to God, with a willing and eager heart.

But, how? How are we to love? Well, in Deuteronomy, these are the expressions that we read: "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might". In Mark, Jesus puts it like

this: “with all your heart, and with all your soul [and then He inserts], with all your mind, and with all your strength.” So, they are essentially the same except the Lord adds “with all your mind”. And what that tells us, by the way, is that in neither place in Scripture are we trying to neatly divide the human person into neat little categories. That’s not what’s going on here. By the way, when the scribe repeats it, he changes it as well - he makes it “understanding”. So, we’re not dealing with neat little categories of the human person here. That’s not the point.

The emphasis is on the word “all”. Do you see that in both contexts? All. But let’s see if we can sort of divide these up a little bit and see what the nuances are here. First of all, He says, “with all your heart”. The Hebrew word for heart, as I mentioned just to you recently, is not about emotion. When we think of the heart, we think about Valentine’s Day. We think about emotion. That’s not the Hebrew word for heart. The Hebrew word for heart refers to the seat of the intellect, the will, the intention. Your heart shapes your character, your choices, your decisions. You think in your heart. The heart is where you make moral choices. In fact, the Septuagint substitutes the Greek word for mind in the place of heart in Deuteronomy 6 and that’s why Jesus adds that word here as He quotes it. He includes heart which is in the Hebrew, and He includes mind which is the word that **the** translators of the Septuagint used to translate heart. So, He includes them both.

Then He says, “with all your soul”. This word expresses the entire inner self - emotions, desires, and the personal qualities that make you who you are - your whole being. Putting it altogether, we’re to love God with our entire heart, soul, and mind. It means we’re to love Him with our whole self, with our will, with our emotions, with our desires, with how we think, even in our moral choices. To be genuine, in other words, your love for God must include your entire being. That’s the point.

And just in case we missed it, notice what both Deuteronomy and Jesus include - “with all your might” or “with all your strength”. The Old Testament Hebrew word implies unbroken consistency - there’s a continual pattern of it - and maximum capacity. You’re doing this with all of your strength, with all of your capacity.

But, again, the focus here in both Deuteronomy and Mark, is with *all*. God's standard is, "Okay, you want to strip away to the most important command that God requires of you, the One who holds your breath in His hands, the One who's keeping your heart beating right now?" Here is what God demands of you. Here is what God requires of you above everything else. You need to love Him with exclusive allegiance, with genuine affection, with service to Him in action, and you need to do this with all of your true self, with your whole heart. Christopher Wright paraphrased this verse like this: "Love the Lord your God with total commitment, with your total self, to total excess." That's God's requirement. That's the first command according to Jesus.

Now, that brings us to the second command - God's second most important command. Jesus wasn't asked this question but, you know, **here's a special, a discount**. I'll throw in two for one. Verse 31: "The second is this, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18. He pulled one from Deuteronomy 6. He pulled the second from Leviticus 19:18. And together, He says, they are the greatest. You notice that one of them deals with the first half of the decalogue - the Ten Commandments, our love to God, the first four commands? The second deals with the second half of the decalogue - **the six that deal with our responsibilities to man?** It summarizes everything. Leviticus 19:18 says, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD [Yahweh]." Jesus says, "*That's it! Love God and love people.*"

Where there is a genuine love for God, there will be a genuine love for others. Where there's not a love for God, there cannot be genuine, selfless love of others except, in the barest form of the residual image of God in man. In the fallen heart of man, there is a slight residual image of God. And so, man can express something of love outside of selfishness but very, very little. Love for God always generates love for others. You know if I have someone say to me, "I love God", but **he** or she is utterly disconnected from the lives of other people, I know that person is deceived or lying. It can't be true because one always goes with the other. 1 John 4:20: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also." It's a package. If you

love God, you'll love others. And if you don't love God, you won't have the capacity to selflessly love others.

And just as we are told with the first commandment how to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, with all our strength, we are told also how to love others. Notice what Jesus says - and this He adds. This wasn't in **the** Leviticus passage. He adds "as we love ourselves". Jesus automatically assumes, by the way, we love ourselves; He's not commanding us. You know, there was a teaching for a while and still popular in some circles - "You know, if you're going to love others, **you**'ve got to really focus for the next few years on learning to love yourself. And if you really learn to love yourself, then you'll be able to love others." That's not what this is saying at all. Jesus is assuming self-love; so does Paul in the Ephesians 5. We take care of ourselves. And He's saying that's how we should love others. Our natural, consuming love for ourselves is the measure of how we should love others. In the same way that you take every possible step to care for yourself, for your needs, you're to do the same thing for others.

By the way, who's the neighbor? Jesus made that really clear in the question that came to Him in Luke 10 when He said and He told the story of the Good Samaritan. The point of the story was: your neighbor is anyone God sovereignly brings across your path, even someone you formerly thought of as an enemy. Nobody is excluded.

Now, those are the commands - the most important, the second most important command. But we're still not quite to where Jesus wants us to go yet, because **the** third part of this identification of these two commands, Jesus gives us His reasons for selecting these two. Why did He pick these two? Well, obviously, they are the most important ones, **but** He tells us His reasons for choosing these two. First reason is that these are the greatest commands in the entire law. He puts it this way in verse 31: "There is no other commandment greater than these." There's nothing, nothing that rises higher than these commands. But He also chose these two for another reason. It's because these are the essential heart or summary of the entire law. Matthew records this for us in his account. **He** tells us Jesus added this statement: "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." The whole law and the prophets was a summary of the entire Old Testament. That's how they spoke of what we call our Old Testament. Jesus says

these two commandments summarize everything else. William Hendrickson writes, “The whole duty of man, the whole moral spiritual law can be summed up in one word: love.” That’s what the law is about. It’s to teach us how to love God and to teach us how to love others.

Now, the story moves from Jesus answering the question to this unbeliever’s surprising admission about what Jesus has said. The scribe responds **and** Mark records it for us. He doesn’t merely re-quote Deuteronomy, he interprets it. And we know his interpretation is right because Jesus affirms it in verse 34. So, look at how he interprets this phrase from Deuteronomy 6: “the Lord is one”. Notice verse 32: “The scribe said to Him, ‘Right, Teacher...’” You could translate that several different ways. Some translate it, “Excellent, Teacher!”, “Beautifully done, Teacher!” This guy apparently isn’t completely antagonistic. He is open to the truth, and he recognizes, even though he came to ask Jesus a question to test Him, he recognizes in Jesus’ answer the truth and he responds to that spontaneously, probably to the wincing of the colleagues that sent him. And he says, “You have truly stated that HE IS ONE...” And then he pulls another passage from Deuteronomy 4 (verse 35): “there is no other besides Him”, which interprets “He is one”. Basically, God is one - there’s no other God - and the scribe understood this.

But notice he understood even more, verse 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 [now watch this], is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The key here is what comes at the end of that verse. He affirms that these two commands are the most important and they’re more important than all of the sacrificial system. That’s amazing! Now, it’s amazing because of what first century Judaism had become, but it’s not really amazing in light of what the Old Testament taught. The Old Testament had said this, in a number of places. 1 Samuel 15: “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...” Proverbs 21:3: “To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice.” Hosea 6:6: “For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Micah 6:6-8, again, make that same point.

It's also consistent with Jesus' teaching. Jesus had said on a couple occasions something like this, Matthew 9: "But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE...'" Sacrifice is not the most important issue, again in Matthew 12. This scribe - he understood that. It's pretty remarkable, really, in light of the whole system he was a part of. He understood that Yahweh is God. He understood that, by covenant, he had become, or one could become, connected to God by gracious sovereign election, that the one true God most desires our hearts, that He wants us to love Him more than He wants anything else, to love Him first and foremost, and then to love others. And that all the rest of the commands are in various ways making this same point. **He** understood all of that. And although he was sent to trap Jesus, he responds to Jesus' answer with what appears to be sincere praise, sincere enthusiasm that says, "*I get it. I understand that this command is more important than everything else, even the sacrificial system.*"

And that brings us to the heart of what Jesus is saying. We've seen the unsettling question, the straightforward identification, the unbeliever's surprising admission about those commands, but that brings us to verse 34 and the spiritual purpose behind God's most important commands. Look at verse 34: "When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'" What does that mean? Jesus does not mean, "*Listen, when you really understand the truly important commands - love God and love your neighbor - and then when you attempt to keep them, you're going to get into the kingdom.*" We know that isn't what Jesus was saying. What Jesus means is this: you have come to understand the crux of what God demands of us. And when you truly understand those important commands, that what God wants of you most and commands of you most is that you love him with your entire being and you love your neighbor as you love yourself, then you will see that God's standard is impossibly high and that you have no hope of getting into the kingdom of God. You will see your sin, you'll understand how utterly sinful you are, and you will be reduced to begging for a Savior, a rescuer.

You say, "Did Old Testament believers have enough information to get that?" They did. Go back to Deuteronomy. Go back to Deuteronomy 30. Remember, it was in chapter 6 we were told to love God. In the chapters leading up to Deuteronomy 30, Moses recounts the curses for disobedience. He tells them what's going to happen, and of course all those things did happen.

Here's the standard, chapter 30:16: "...I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments [this is how you show your love for Him], that you may live and multiply... But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. [Okay, very simple. You want to live? Love God with your whole being and show that by keeping His commands. But if you don't do that, you're done. You will perish.] You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants." And here's how you do it. All you've got to do is obey the most important command God ever gave us: love Him with your entire being. It's impossible! This chapter tells us it's impossible.

Go back up to verse 6. Moses says, when you've broken that, when you've endured the curses that I'm promising you, then "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." God says, "*You can't do it, and I'm going to have to step in, and enable you to do it. I'm going to have to change you at the heart level. Otherwise, all you're ever going to get is the curses. Otherwise, all you're ever going to get is perishing.*"

Jesus affirms that the scribe got this. And Jesus was extending an invitation to this man to enter the kingdom: "You are not far from the kingdom..." But at the same time, on the backside of it, Jesus was giving him a warning. He was saying, "*In spite of all that you know, in spite of all that you understand, in spite of your credentials as a scribe, in spite of your knowledge of Scripture, you are not yet in the kingdom.*" By the way, I can't be sure, but I think it's possible that this man actually eventually came to faith. We really can't know, but we know some scribes did. Jesus talks about them - scribes who become a disciple of the kingdom. It's possible we'll meet this man in heaven; we just don't know.

But notice the end of verse 34. After Jesus says this, "no one would venture to ask Him any more questions."

So, what's the point? Let me draw it to a conclusion for you. There are really two primary applications of the great commandment. The first application is that the great commandment serves as a constant reminder of our need for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why? Because of the standard - an absolutely impossible standard. I have never obeyed what Jesus called the greatest commandment. I have never obeyed it for a single moment of my life, and neither have you. Can you really stand before God and say, "God, for one moment, I loved You with my entire being, and I did it with exclusive allegiance. I worshipped nothing else. Nothing else was more important to me than You. And I served You with my life. And I had genuine affection for You, with my entire being." I can't say that and neither can you, much less our entire lives. Not a single person - not you, have kept the single most important command God ever gave. That means that when you stand before God to see if you, by your own efforts, can earn your way into heaven, your eternal destiny will be settled before God even gets to the stuff we normally think of as sins.

God gave this commandment to show us, **first** of all, because it's right but, secondly, to show us how bad our situation really is. That's why in Galatians 3, Paul says the law became our tutor to, what? Drive us to Christ, because the law said, "Love the Lord your God with your entire being", and we can never do it. We only have one hope, and that hope is a person. Only Christ, as the children sang this morning, only Christ has perfectly fulfilled the command to love God and love others. And He kept it, not for a moment, not for a fraction of a second, not for a minute or for a day, but His entire life. And then He died in the place of those who have never kept it and never can. To those who will submit themselves to Christ, His perfect life and His death, including His perfect love for God, are credited to us.

As we've examined God's great commandment, if you've been honest with yourself, any hope you have of being right with God or of pleasing Him through your own actions, have been utterly demolished. The standard is just too high - absolute, unmitigated, perfect, constant love for God our Creator.



There's one other application. Not only is it a reminder of the gospel and our need of it but, for us who are in Christ, once we've come to that point, once we've come to see Christ is our only hope, His perfect love for God and His death on our behalf, then this becomes the standard or pattern for our obedience. Once you've been forgiven, once you've had Christ perfect obedience imputed to your account, then the law becomes a standard for your behavior, not to become right with God, but out of a desire to love Him and obey Him. This command to love God should become the pursuit of your life, the passion of your heart, the end of everything, your obsession. You should want written on your tombstone, "I loved my God and I loved others".

What is it you want written on your tombstone? Is it that? If you could stand before Christ today and ask him, "Lord, what is the most important thing to You? What is the great commandment?", this is what He would say: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.*"

Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for the gospel. Lord, the standard is impossible. We could never ever have done that. We never have. But thank You, oh God, that Christ did and then He died for us who didn't. Father, I pray that even tonight, there would be someone here who comes to acknowledge that they owe You everything and yet they've not kept Your most important commandment ever. May they turn to Christ. Father, for us who are in Christ, forgive us for worrying about so many things, getting caught up in the stuff, and not loving You and loving others. Thank You for the simplicity of this. May Your Spirit enable us to, in some small way, live it out. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen!