**LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD  
Mark 12:28–34**

***“‘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.”’” (vs. 29-30)***

If you could ask God any question and receive an immediate answer, what would you ask? Some might ask God if there’s physical life on other planets. Others might ask what major they should pursue in school. In today’s passage, one ancient theologian had the opportunity to ask Jesus his burning question, and he was not disappointed by Jesus’ reply. Through Jesus’ answer to his question, we can learn about the Lord our God who is one, why and how we must love him, and why and how we must love our neighbors as well. May God open our hearts to learn and accept these most important commands in all of Scripture.

1. **The Most Important Commands (vs. 28–31)**

After Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple, his opponents tried to trap him with difficult questions so that they could arrest and murder him. When they demanded to know by what authority Jesus was working, Jesus asked them about John’s authority and told a parable revealing that he is the Son of God come to collect what belongs to God. When they asked about taxes, Jesus taught they should give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. And when tried to disprove the resurrection, Jesus taught them about the God of the living. Everyone was amazed by Jesus’ divine wisdom, including one teacher of the law.

Look at verse 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?’***” This teacher was not involved in the attacks against Jesus but he was interested in the theological questions raised and deeply impressed by Jesus’ knowledge and application of Scripture. As a teacher of the law, this man had spent many years studying the law in depth, like a seminary graduate or theologian. The biblical scholars of Jesus’ day had worked hard to classify Moses’ laws into 613 separate commands. They were interested in further classifying those laws by importance, but they couldn’t agree on which law was most important. So when the teacher of the law recognized Jesus’ spiritual authority and wisdom, he seized the opportunity to hear Jesus’ answer to his burning question: “***Of all the commandments, which is the most important?***”

We can learn from this man’s example to want to know the big picture of Scripture, the heart behind all God’s laws and God’s fundamental expectations for us his creatures. And we can also learn from this teacher of the law the right place to look: Jesus. Jesus is God’s revelation of himself to the world, from whom we can learn God’s holiness, power, and love. Let’s pay close attention as Jesus tells us the most important commands in the Bible.

First, the Lord is One. Let’s read together verse 29: “***‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel:*** ***The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”’***” Jesus doesn’t start with “***Love the Lord your God***” but backs up to give the context and the reason why God is worthy of our love. The original recipients of this command were the people of Israel, as Moses spoke to them in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Let’s consider the significance to them of the declaration, “***The Lord our God, the Lord is one.***” The nation of Israel was born during an era of widespread polytheism, where many gods were worshiped and prayed to regarding many different aspects of life, such as fertility, agriculture, and war. These gods were thought to be petty, selfish, and capricious. But the Lord, the God of Israel is not like those so-called gods.

In the original Hebrew, “the Lord” is YHWH (Yahweh). God declared his name to Moses as YHWH, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14–15). This reveals that God’s existence isn’t dependent on any other thing; God is self-existent, the only uncreated being and the Creator of all. God is the absolute being and the Giver of all life.

God is not an impersonal Creator. Moses told the people of Israel, “***The Lord* our *God.***” God is the God of Israel. We learned last week from Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is the God of all who trust in him. God became the God of Israel through saving them from slavery in Egypt, making a covenant with them, and leading them to the Promised Land. God wants to be *your* God.

“***The Lord is one***” tells us that there is one true God, the Lord, who is the only proper object of worship. Other gods are nothing but idols, and to worship them is a terrible insult to the one true God. The existence of a Creator implies a purpose for creation, and God’s purpose for humanity is for us to glorify him and to enjoy him forever. All human problems come from rebelling against this purpose and losing our love relationship with God.

Today, we are not tempted to worship Baal or Ashtoreth, false gods that tempted the ancient Israelites, but there are many idols today that vie for our affection, seeking to steal our hearts from the one true God. These are generally things of the world that promise the peace, security, fulfillment, self-worth and joy that we should rightfully seek in God alone—good things that we make into our ultimate thing. These potential idols can include fun, pleasure, human love, success, and material possessions. If we pursue any of these above God, then we will end up disappointed and full of regret. The solution to such a tragic and unfulfilled life lies in the greatest command.

Second, Love the Lord your God. Let’s read together verse 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.***” Love for God is the greatest commandment and our most important duty as created beings. God desires our love because he loves us. God is worthy of our love as the only Creator, Provider, and Savior. God is not selfish in commanding us to love him, for failure to love God leads to our degeneration and death, whereas love for God leads to joy, satisfaction, and life.

Jesus mentions that we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Together, these refer to one’s whole being; we should love God with everything we have and are. A command to love God with one’s whole being may seem very abstract, so let’s think about what it means practically to love God with these four aspects of our lives.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart. In ancient thought, the heart represents the core of one’s being, the very center of one’s personality. The biblical understanding of the heart includes emotions but extends also to the will and intellect. Loving God with all our hearts places him at the center of our being. We also have an emotional obligation toward God, who first set his deep affection on us. We should delight in the Lord and rejoice in his presence. What we fix our hearts on determines the direction of our lives. If our hearts desire God, then our lives will move toward him. We need to ask ourselves who or what occupies our hearts—God or self or something else?

Love the Lord your God with all your soul. The soul refers to one’s life. Each of us has only one life to live on earth; we should love God with that life, living for him and worshiping him. We must not waste this one precious life God has given us. How we spend our time, especially our free time, reveals what we are loving with our soul—whether God or another; “*No one can serve two masters*” (Mt 6:24). We should spend our lives on what is truly and eternally important, growing in a right relationship with God and building his kingdom.

Love the Lord your God with all your mind. The mind refers to our intellectual powers, which we should engage to love God. As we look at nature, we can contemplate God’s eternal power and divine attributes (Ro 1:20). As we study in school, we can learn about God’s creation and appreciate God’s wisdom and love to create and provide everything for us. Many famous scientists such as **Copernicus,** Francis Bacon, **Galileo, Blaise Pascal, and Isaac Newton were greatly motivated in their exploration of creation by a desire to know their Creator.** Faith in God doesn’t mean shutting down your mind—quite the opposite! **Proverbs 9:10 says, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*”** Especially through the study of God’s word we can love God with our minds. When we read God’s word, we can read it actively, meditating on it. We can study God’s words rigorously and learn his words by heart. We shouldn’t let anxieties, sinful thoughts, or distractions rule our minds, but intentionally turn our thoughts toward God and his words—like a helmsman continually correcting a ship’s course based on the compass. Writing a reflection on God’s word we’ve studied or heard preached is a good way to love him with our minds.

Love the Lord your God with all your strength. Loving God and following him is not easy but requires effort. Strength here refers to physical, mental, and emotional strength. Loving God with all our strength refers to striving, pushing forward, pressing on, persevering through difficulties out of love for God. We should struggle to repent of the sin that hinders us from loving God wholeheartedly. We should put in the full effort to offer our very best to God in whatever we do for him. We shouldn’t waste our strength on futile pursuits, but love God and work hard for his kingdom.

Jesus taught that the way we should show our love for God is obedience. Jesus told his disciples in John 14:15, “*If you love me, keep my commands.*” God’s commands are given for our good, and keeping them helps us live happy and meaningful lives and be a blessing to others also. Since many of God’s commands are primarily directed not toward God but toward others, Jesus throws in a bonus second greatest command.

Third, love your neighbor. Let’s read verse 31 together: “***The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.***” The first question this second most important commandment may raise is, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus taught the parable of the good Samaritan to show that no one is excluded from the definition of neighbor. Everyone is my neighbor, especially those in need of help, and even my enemies.

Loving others is connected to loving God, for God loves the world and each person in it. God doesn’t personally need anything that we could do for him, but God identifies and empathizes with people such that when we show love to one of his loved ones, he receives it as love toward him. John writes that we cannot love God without loving others. 1 John 4:20 says, “*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.*”

So how should we love others? Jesus gives us the example of ourselves: “***Love your neighbor as yourself.***” How do I love myself? I care for myself, making sure I have everything I need. I am always mindful of myself, concerned with my own problems and anxieties. I seek what is best for myself. When I am hungry or thirsty, I quickly try to satisfy that need. When I behave badly, I make excuses for myself, giving me the benefit of the doubt: “I’m only human after all; nobody’s perfect.” Love for self should be the pattern of love for others. We must care for others, seeking to meet their needs. We must be mindful of others and concerned for their wellbeing. We must seek what is best for others and show them grace and forgiveness when they slip up. Just as we hate the sin we see in ourselves yet still love ourselves, we should hate sin when we see it in our neighbors yet love them, hoping and praying that they may one day be set free from that sin. Love toward our neighbors is not a feeling of affection so much as a decision to act as though we love them.

The greatest need anyone has is forgiveness from sin through the gospel. So the greatest act of love for another is to bring someone to Jesus, in whom alone is forgiveness, and to help them grow as his followers. Bringing the gospel to the lost also shows love for God, for God cares deeply about his lost children. We should love God by caring about what he cares about—world salvation and the advancement of his kingdom. There is much rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. Jesus connects loving him to shepherding others in John 21:16 “*Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’*” How can we say we love Jesus without caring about the ones he loves so dearly? Jesus cares about each of his sheep enough to lay down his life for them, and he accepts and rewards whatever kindness we show to them as done to him.

The two greatest commandments—to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one’s neighbor as oneself—summarize all the other commands. Breaking any other commandment in the Bible is a result of breaking the greatest commandments, that is, of failing to love. Loving God with all we’ve got drives idols from our hearts and sin from our lives.

Have you ever met anyone who perfectly loves the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and who loves their neighbor as themselves? Perfect love for him and others is God’s standard for righteousness, yet each of us has failed to love God and our neighbors as God requires. In breaking these greatest commandments, we have committed the greatest sin, falling short of God’s glory. Through refusing to love God and worshiping created things, we rebelled against the created order, asserting our independence from our Creator and breaking our relationship with him, the source of spiritual life. But God had mercy on us and took the initiative to reconcile us to himself, and in doing so, he taught us the true meaning of love. 1 John 4:9-10 says, “*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*”

Not only did God atone for our sin through Jesus’ sacrifice, but he also taught us true love for God and for our neighbors through Jesus’ example. Jesus loved his heavenly Father with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, obeying God’s every command flawlessly, even to the point of death. And Jesus loved his neighbors—that is, us—by leaving his heavenly throne to dwell among us, teach us God’s word, and give his life for us, although we were unworthy, unlovable, and even hostile to him. Instead of seeking retribution, Jesus prayed for our forgiveness and offered his perfect life as payment for our sins on the cross. He fully gave himself to us. Jesus opened up the way for us to have peace with God through his blood. Thank God who first loved us and gave us a perfect example of love! Let’s fix our eyes on Jesus and learn from his life of sacrificial love.

Now that we know God’s greatest commandments and how to obey them through Jesus’ example, how should we respond?

1. **A Wise Answer (vs. 32–34)**

The teacher of the law accepted Jesus’ answer. Look at verses 32–33: ***“‘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.’***” This man confessed that Jesus’ answer was well said and right, and he restated Jesus’ answer in agreement. We can learn from this man’s wise answer.

First, loving God is inseparable from loving one’s neighbor. In verse 33, there is a compound subject—“to love [God]… and to love your neighbor…”—yet the verb is singular: “is”, not “are”. We cannot truly love God without loving our neighbors. At the same time, we cannot truly love our neighbors without loving God above all else, for love comes from God. Moreover, man’s deepest need is God himself; philanthropy removed from the gospel can never meet that spiritual need or save from judgment.

Second, love for God and our neighbor is more important than all sacrifices. Paul taught a similar lesson in 1 Corinthians 13:3, saying, “*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*” God doesn’t want our stuff or our money; he doesn’t want us to suffer and forego just for the sake of being miserable. God desires our sincere love for him and for our neighbor, and without that underlying motivation, our best deeds are worthless to God. So we should carefully examine our hearts and motives when we worship or serve God or present our offerings to ensure we’re not doing it just to boast before people.

How did Jesus respond to the wise teacher of the law? Look at verse 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.***” The teacher understood the spirit of the law and God’s heart that desires us to reciprocate his love, and Jesus observed that he was close to the kingdom of God. However, he wasn’t quite in the kingdom of God. What did the teacher still lack? He needed to acknowledge that he had failed to love God with all his heart and to love his neighbor as himself, that is, to acknowledge himself as a sinner before God. Then, he needed to put his faith in Jesus as his Savior and follow Jesus as his Lord. Did this man ever enter the kingdom of God? It is very possible, but we will never know in this life.

The question we can answer today is, will you enter the kingdom of God? It is not enough just to be able to give a wise answer. God gave us his law for our good, but the purpose of the law was not merely for us to know it, but to obey it. Yet when we sincerely try to obey, we find we are powerless to fulfill God’s requirements by our own efforts. The law’s ultimate purpose is to show us that we are sinners who fail in observing the law who are in desperate need of Jesus Christ, and then to lead us to repent and put our faith in Jesus. God is giving each one of us the chance today to enter his kingdom. The way is to *confess* that you have sinned by failing to keep the greatest commandments; then to *trust* in Jesus, who fully paid for your sins on the cross; and then to *follow* Jesus as Lord, learning from him how to love your God and your neighbors.

Through today’s passage, we have learned about God and the core of his law, which is love for him and for others. The Lord our God is the one Creator who created us to be in an eternal love relationship with him; God is the one Savior who redeemed us from sin and death by paying the highest price of the blood of Jesus; God is the one object of worship who gives his worshipers true satisfaction, security, and life. Because God first loved us so much, we must love him with every part of our being and love our neighbors as ourselves, bringing them the wonderful news of God’s love. Jesus is the standard of love, so let’s learn and practice his wholehearted love for the Father and his sacrificial love for others.