

Sermon File # 857

Scripture Text: Mark 12:28-34

Sermon Title: *The Great Commandment*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

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The Great Commandment

Open your Bibles with me to Mark 12:28-34. Today we will look at the Great Commandment and next Sunday at the Great Commission, the words of Jesus that should form every church's vision and mission.

\Following his answer to the Sadducees about the resurrection, Jesus is confronted by a teacher of the religious law of the Jews. This scribe, Matthew tells us, was representing a combined effort on the part of the Pharisees to test Jesus on an intricacy of the Law (Matthew 22:34-35). There were 613 laws they had designated. Of these, 365 were negative commandments and 248 were positive in nature, and these they divided into "heavy and light" Some were written laws derived from Scripture, but most were part of an oral tradition. The latter were extra laws written to interpret the given Law of Moses. The negative prohibitions included such laws as the one restricting how far one could walk on the Sabbath Day.

This morning I want us to note the answer Jesus gives to the religious lawyer who asked which is the most important of all these 613 commandments. The answer Jesus gives is a combination of the Shema, the passage every devout Jew recited daily, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and Leviticus 19:18.

Follow as I read **Mark 12:28-34**.

The religious leaders were throwing their best efforts at Jesus, trying to stump him, lead him to say something that would be self-incriminating, or cause him to lose his composure under the constant barrage of their questions.

I agree with the interpreter who says that the man who asked this next question of Jesus (in our text) appears to have had a different motive from the others. Although he represented the scribes, the religious scholars who were generally hostile to Jesus, this man seemed to have been impressed by Jesus' previous replies and open to his teaching (France, 476). This man was possibly on an honest quest for truth and understanding of God's requirements of him and was "positively inclined toward Jesus" (Stein, 1678).

This religious lawyer seemed to have an understanding beyond that of his colleagues. In fact, Jesus commends and encourages him as one who was not far from the kingdom. He had at least a beginning understanding of the most important message of Scripture, including all of the Law. He seemed to understand the meaning of the Great Commandment.

Let's note, first of all, that the greatest commandment involves **a definition**.

In answering the scribe's question, Jesus quoted from the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:5 and from Leviticus 19:18. In summarizing all the commandments of Scripture and tradition into this Great Commandment, Jesus is simply following the teaching of his Word and the intent of the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments. All of the Moral Law is summarized by the command to love God and others.

God defines love

We have cheapened and weakened the meaning of the word, "love." We use this same word to describe our fondness for certain foods or recreation. I love good cheese and summertime in Wisconsin! Often we use the word "love" to describe our personal preferences and pleasures. Sometimes we use "I love you" as a ruse to gain something we want for ourselves. Frequently, young men tell young girls how much they love them in order to persuade them to engage in sexual activity with them, for their own selfish gratification of lust.

Jesus, the eternal and incarnate Son of God, is the revelation of the Father (as Helmut Thielicke somewhere said, "He was the mirror of the Father's heart."), who revealed the meaning of perfect love. The word most often used in the New Testament for God's love is the word "agape," which means a love that expresses itself in practical and sacrificial service for others, regardless of their deserving.

In 1 John 4:8 we read that God is love. As Paul Scherer says, we usually think that this is a definition of God. But we can say a lot more about God than that he is love. God is holy. God is almighty. God is wisdom. So, love does not adequately define God. But God defines love. When you say *God* is love, you have said everything you can possibly say about this highest kind of love, says Scherer. John 3:16 is another verse that describes this costly love of God. It is a love that begins with and

must come from God, and is “the costliest thing we can say about God” (Scherer, 225).

For most people, God’s love is presumed. Most people think God ought to love us. As Catherine the Great said, “Ah, God is good; he’s bound to forgive us; that’s his job.” And, we’re pretty good folks anyway.

God’s forgiving love and grace is free but not cheap. Our forgiveness came at the cost of the cross. A month or so, I read a cover story in the local State Journal newspaper about a Rwandan lady, from the Tutsi tribe, whose right hand was cut off and whose child was killed by a member of the Hutu tribe, during the genocide war in 1994. The story was about how this woman eventually forgave this man, who was shown in the photo, holding her stump, where he had severed her hand. The woman said it wasn’t an easy thing to forgive the man. She had discussed and prayed with her husband whether or no she could forgive, but then decided to do so. Now the two families are friends. But forgiveness was not cheap or easy.

As we hold to the cross of Christ, let’s be forever reminded of the cost of our forgiveness, and that...

God gives love

CS Lewis says that our human ways of loving and being loved are “need loves.” We need to be loved and to love others to experience our humanity. But God’s love for us is his gift love. God had nothing to gain from loving us (Lewis, 11ff). God the Triune Father/Son/Holy Spirit is and always has been complete within himself. Our existence does nothing to fulfill a need within God.

As Lewis said, the love God has for us is entirely a gift love. “God so loved that he gave.” One of the great passages about God’s gift love is Romans 5:6-8, where Paul says God demonstrated his love for us when we were powerless, ungodly, and sinful. In fact, he says in verses 9-10 he saved us while we were his enemies! The Great Commandment is that we love God with the same kind of love he has for us, and that we love others with this kind of costly love. This takes us a long way from the sentimental notions of love as a reciprocal exchange between mutual admirers.

Not only does the Great Commandment involve a definition, but also our text tells us it involves **a direction**. The Great Commandment has a two-fold direction. Godly love has a vertical and also a horizontal direction. Jesus’ answer to the scribe’s question left no doubt that the foundational and more important part of the commandment was directed, first of all...

Toward God

As we see in the Great Commandment, we first love God with our entire being. Even in the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, the first four have to do with our relationship with God. As the Israelites discovered as they tried to obey these commandments, we do not have a heart that naturally loves God. Our love for him must be in response to his grace.

As the Apostle John writes in his first letter, "Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 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. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins....We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:7-10,19).

Our need is not to work in order to make God love us. We cannot make him love us anymore than he already does. We are, he says, simply to make our hearts a well to allow his love to flow into our lives (Shoemaker, 87).

Our love is in response to God's love poured from the cross and from his heart, and it is to be with all of our hearts. We are to love God with our entire being. There is to be no part of our being and personality that does not love God.

The requirement of the Great Commandment that we love God with our entire being is assumed by our Lord Jesus when he demands our unrivaled love for him. "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10: 37). Indeed, our love for the Lord Jesus is to be so absolute that other loyalties and loves appear as hatred by comparison. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters---yes, even his own life---he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

I heard RC Sproul quote this Great Commandment as proof that we are all guilty before God as law-breakers, saying that no one in all his/her life has kept this commandment for as long as 10 minutes, much less for a lifetime. Much like Jesus' command that we "Be perfect...as (our) heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48), so this is a command that we must continually strive by grace to keep, but will never keep it fully this side of heaven.

The great 4th Century theologian and church leader, Augustine of Hippo, once said, "Love God and do as you please." Some modern theologians and ethicists have taken this in the libertine sense that we can decide for ourselves our own standard of conduct as long as we claim to love God. Quite to the contrary, what Augustine meant was that if we in fact love God with our entire being and love others as ourselves, we will do not only what we please, but also what we please will be pleasing to God. An even greater theologian than Augustine, the Apostle Paul, said that the command to love is the summation of all the Law (Romans 13: 8-10). The Great Commandment is the requirement to be holy toward God and in the way we relate to others.

The Message paraphrases the Great Commandment in our text as "so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." Soul is translated as prayer. To turn our lives into a continual prayer to God is the way we are to live and is the key to how indeed we can love God with all our passion, intelligence and energy. As we focus on the Word and let Scripture shape our thoughts, and as we prayerfully live in dependence on God's Spirit, we find that we grow in passion for

God. We learn to delight in him and find our joy in our walk with him. And this prayerful, passionate living leads to focusing our intelligence, our thoughts on God. Notice that the Great Commandment is directed also...

Toward our neighbor

Inextricably connected with the command to love God is the command to love our neighbor. In fact, we cannot keep one aspect of the command without keeping the other. This part of the Great Commandment, directed toward our neighbor, covers the last six of the Ten Commandments. These have to do with our relationship toward others. The command to love our neighbor is inextricably connected with the command to love God. And we cannot love our neighbor if we violate the Moral Law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows how his followers are to interpret and fulfill the Ten Commandments, not only by the letter but by the spirit and full intent of the Law. If we love God and our neighbor, for example, we not only do not murder, we also refrain from unjustified anger. We not only do not commit adultery, but we also keep our minds and hearts free of lust (Matthew 5:21-30). We love God and others by "negative holiness" (what we don't do), but also by positive holiness, what we do to care for our neighbor.

This is the point John makes in his first letter. In fact, John says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Jesus is living *within* those who are around us and when we minister to them we minister to Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46). Our neighbor is anyone in need. This is what is behind Augustine's statement, "Love God and do as you please." If you truly love God you are going to relate with holy love toward your brother and sister.

The Jews had understood the command to love their neighbors as pertaining to their fellow Jews (Leviticus 19:33-34). The Old Covenant took neighbor to include aliens who sought to live among them. Jesus redefined neighbor to mean anyone in need of our love. This was his answer to the man who sought to justify himself in the eyes of God. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to say that if we have the gift of eternal life, we will regard anyone in need as our neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). In the case of the Good Samaritan, a man who was a despised enemy, but in need, was the object of the Samaritan's love. In fact, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said specifically we are under command to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).

When we express love and kindness to others, we are really showing love to Jesus, whose image is in all people (Matthew 25:37-40). And, when we do loving acts toward God's people, we receive his commendation.

Paul says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). When we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are really loving Christ in them. John says that love for fellow believers is evidence of converting grace, and the absence of love signals a void of saving grace and means the failure to pass one of the tests of assurance of salvation (1 John 4:7-8). And, sometimes the hardest people to love are those who are in the family of believers, particularly those who have offended or disappointed us, or who simply irritate or annoy us. It will be our love for one

another, Jesus says, that will be the distinguishing mark of his disciples (John 13:35).

*To live above with saints we love,
O that will be glory!
To dwell below with those we know,
Now, that's a different story!*

We may not like their behavior or feel drawn by their personalities and may even be repelled by their quirks. But if they are our brother or sister in Christ we are commanded to look out for their interests and care for their needs, which is agape love.

Jesus told Peter that the way he was to express his love for him was to do acts of love toward his people. Paul the apostle grasped this truth as he wrote to the Corinthians, a people who were big on religious talk and the flaunting of their spirituality but who were deficient in love for one another. In the great *Love Chapter* thirteen of First Corinthians, Paul said that religious talk, and spiritual giftedness and even acts of bravery and sacrifice, without love equaled zero (verses 1-3).

Applying his argument to today, Paul would say that being a dedicated layperson, making huge financial contributions, surrendering for mission service, having spell-binding musical talent and worship leadership, and being an eloquent preacher would all amount to zero without love (1 Corinthians 13). The failure to love God and his people nullifies everything else we do and try to be in the kingdom.

I'm sure we've all heard the concept that this Great Commandment proves we are to love ourselves, since Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. . . From John Calvin to modern interpreters, the understanding of this verse is that we are commanded to love others as we already love ourselves, even though there are many who need to realize their value creatures loved by God. Of course, we are to love Jesus in us, who lives in us by the Spirit.

The Great Commandment involves a definition and a direction, but also it involves **a dynamic**.

To keep the greatest commandment requires a dynamic we do not possess in ourselves. We must, first of all...

Admit our need for God's love

I have often wondered at the answer Jesus gave to the expert in the law (in Luke 10), who "stood up to test Jesus," and asked him "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked him what was his understanding from what is written in the law, and the expert answered with the Great Commandment. Jesus said, "You have answered correctly...Do this and you will live." But this expert knew in his heart he hadn't been able to keep this Great Commandment. We read that he persisted in his querying of Jesus. The text says "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29).

Jesus then told the story of the Good Samaritan, and said at the end of the story, "Go and do likewise." The expert in the Law knew then he didn't have the dynamic that would enable him to do likewise. He didn't have the dynamic of love to keep the Great Commandment.

We must admit our need for God's dynamic to love, but also we must...

Accept his love

AW Tozer writes, "God is love, and is for that reason the source of all the love there is. He has set as the first commandments that we love him with all our hearts, but he knows that the desired love can never originate with us. 'We love him, because he first loved us,' (1 John 4:19) is the scriptural and psychological pattern," says Tozer. "We can love him as we ought only as he inflames our minds with holy desire" (45f).

As Shoemaker said, we must receive his love into our hearts as open wells. But, finally, we must also, as part of the dynamic of his love...

Act with his love

The Great Commandment is such a cross-cultural sort of love. Our society thinks of love primarily as a self-serving, self-affirming emotion. In fact, the only thing that seems to hold some marriage relationships together is the idea of being "in love," whatever that might mean. But a married couple has pledged to remain together till death alone separates them. And if love is necessary, then they must always love each other anyway, since Jesus said we are to love even our enemies (Matthew 5: 43-48). Love is a commitment and not an emotion.

AW Tozer speaks of "a love of willing as well as of feeling. Though we may not be conscious of any great degree of inward sensation," says Tozer, "we may set our wills to love God and the feeling will come of itself. Let us bring ourselves under obedience to his revealed Word and our love for him will grow," says Tozer (46).

What is true of our love for God is true for our love for others. I heard a Christian psychologist say that it is easier to act our way into feeling than it is to feel our way into acting. And God gives grace to love, to respond in practical caring involvement to meet the needs of even our enemies as we obey God's word.

Think of the love Paul expressed for his kinsmen, the unconverted Jews, in Romans 9 and 10. And, these were the same people who opposed, incited mobs against him, and had him beaten and arrested for his evangelizing. Paul prayed that they might be saved, even at the cost of his being accursed (Romans 9:1-3). Obviously, this was the love of Christ in him saying this.

Think of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, as he was being stoned to death, praying for his killers to be forgiven (Acts 7:60). No doubt, the Holy Spirit was praying through him in the spirit of Jesus himself.

Moses also, a man who was often opposed by his grumbling, unbelieving flock, who had even thought about killing him, prayed that God would spare them, and if not, cut him off from the people for their sake (Exodus 32:32).

This is love that we don't have within ourselves, but that comes from Jesus himself, who prayed for our forgiveness as he was suffering and dying on the cross, experiencing our hell in our place (Luke 23:34).

Only Christ within us can enable us to put love his in action. And his love in action through us is the only appropriate way to show our love for Jesus, who actually loves others, sometimes supernaturally, through us. As we obey the Great Commandment, God makes himself known to others. John writes in his gospel that Jesus made God known through his incarnation (John 1:18). And in his letter, John says we as Jesus' followers make him known as we incarnate his love (1 John 4:12).

I think of that experience between the risen Lord Jesus and Simon Peter, the disciple who had, despite Jesus' warning, denied him. Jesus reinstated Peter by asking him three times if he loved him. Every time Jesus asked him, "Do you love me?" Peter answered, "Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus then said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

The way we respond to God's love, and the way we express our grateful love for God, is to serve others in an "unselfconscious" way. The Great Commandment is obeyed as we let Jesus love others, even himself, in others that we serve. This is also what he is saying in The Sheep and the Goats passage in Matthew 25:31-46.

Martin and Gracia Burnham were missionaries serving in the Philippines with New Tribes Mission. In 2001 they were celebrating their wedding anniversary on a remote island when they were abducted by Muslim extremists. Martin and Gracia were for a year ruthlessly dragged by their brutal captors through the jungles during that horrendous ordeal that left them emaciated and almost hopeless of any rescue. Finally, Philippine forces located and stormed the guerilla forces in a heavy shootout in which Martin was fatally shot. Gracia was wounded in the rescue effort, but was delivered from her captivity and lives with her now grown children near our former home in Wichita, Kansas. According to Mission News Network, "Gracia tells about Martin's servanthood attitude during their captivity...in her own words. 'Jesus said, "If you want to be great in God's kingdom, be the servant of all".... I think when he said "all," he meant "all." He didn't mean "all but these-really-bad-guys-who've-taken-us-hostage." And I watched him be kind to them and I just watched him be a servant and love them. And I cherish those moments watching Martin. (Mission Network News, Grand Rapids, July 23, 2003).

Jesus' love goes into action when we obey him by our doing our mission in the Great Commission. As we go into our everyday world, at school, work, or in the home, we love God as we serve our spouse, our children, or friends and even our enemies. We relate the love of Jesus through practical and sometimes sacrificial acts of kindness and compassion.

The fruit of the Spirit is all related to the major fruit of love. Love is the common substance and flavor of all the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. The love

chapter 13 of First Corinthians describes the attributes and attitudes of love. In essence this great Love Chapter says that if we are great speakers and leaders and even martyrs for the faith, if we don't have love the net gain is zero. With all the wonderful giftedness of East Madison Baptist, if we follow the logic and simple math of Paul's thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, we would have to conclude that EMBC without love equals zero.

In his High Priestly Prayer Jesus prayed for the unity of his church, a unity that would be possible by our being united in his love for us (John 17:20-26). Paul also knew the church would be united only as it would grow and build itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16).

In any church, you will have different opinions on matters. But if you are in love with Jesus and in tune with him, you will love his people in his church, and will be agreeable with one another even if you may disagree on a particular matter. The New Testament describes a church where the people love one another and share in meeting any and every need. In fact, a church theologian noted that the people who witnessed the fellowship of the early church remarked, "Behold, how they love one another!" When we are in tune with Jesus we are in tune with and love his people he has placed in our lives.

Love must be the motive behind the life, fellowship and ministry of the church. Love alone will draw people into the fellowship and ministry of this church. Love is the motive for all the fellowship and ministry of East Madison. Without love, ministries and so-called fellowship are futile and even potentially detrimental. But if love is the motive behind what we do, either in quiet, personal acts of kindness and thoughtfulness, what we do out of love for Jesus and his presence in others will count for eternity.

Our text tells us that this scribe who came to Jesus with this question about the most important commandment agreed with Jesus. He quoted the commandment again, saying this was "more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Notice that Jesus saw he had answered wisely, and "said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'" We can only hope this scribe, who was not far, eventually found his way into the kingdom, and experienced God's love for himself.

Before anything else, we must learn to love God and one another, and to give of ourselves to those in need. The Lord who first loved us will enable us to keep the Great Commandment, which is essential to our vision and mission in what God has called us to be and to do.

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