

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One 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?" ²⁹"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ³⁰Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." ³²"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To 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." ³⁴When 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.

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TEACHERS OFTEN TELL STUDENTS THAT THERE ARE NO STUPID QUESTIONS. WHILE THAT IS A VALID STATEMENT IT IS ALSO TRUE THAT SOME QUESTIONS ARE BETTER THAN OTHERS.

SUCH QUESTIONS MIGHT ALSO BE LABELED THE "RIGHT QUESTION."

A QUESTION IS THE RIGHT QUESTION FOR TWO BASIC REASONS: FIRST IT IS ASKED WITH A SINCERE DESIRE TO LEARN, RATHER THAN FOR SOME ULTERIOR MOTIVE.

THE SECOND THING THAT MAKES SOMETHING A GOOD QUESTION IS THAT IT HONES IN ON WHAT ONE REALLY NEEDS TO LEARN OR UNDERSTAND.

THIS BRINGS US TO THE GOSPEL STORY AND THE SCRIBE WHO ASKED JESUS A QUESTION, LIKE MANY OTHER PEOPLE DID.

HOWEVER, MANY OF THE INQUIRIES BY JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS WERE THE WRONG KIND, IN THE SENSE THEY SOUGHT TO GET HIM INTO TROUBLE, EITHER WITH THE PEOPLE OR WITH ROME.

IN TODAY'S GOSPEL STORY, HOWEVER, A SCRIBE COMES TO JESUS ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION.

IT IS RIGHT BECAUSE OF HIS SINCERITY, AND BECAUSE BY ASKING HIS OPINION ABOUT THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT, THE SCRIBE SOUGHT TO LEARN WHAT IS REALLY IMPORTANT TO JESUS.

ANOTHER THING ABOUT ASKING "WHICH IS THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT" IS THAT IT WAS A RELEVANT QUESTION, ONE THAT WAS OFTEN DEBATED.

YOU SEE IN THE LAW OF MOSES THERE WERE A TOTAL OF 613 COMMANDMENTS, AND THIS GAVE RISE TO SOME FIERCE DEBATE ABOUT WHICH WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT.

JEWISH MEN, WHO HAD THE TIME AND MEANS TO STUDY THE LAW, WOULD ARGUE WITH ONE ANOTHER ABOUT THIS.

EACH ONE WOULD EXPLAIN WHY THE COMMANDMENT HE FAVORED WAS NUMBER ONE, AND TRY TO CONVINCED OTHERS TO AGREE.

AND SO THE SCRIBE SOUGHT TO LEARN WHERE JESUS STOOD CONCERNING THE COMMANDMENTS.

KNOWING THAT - WOULD ALSO TELL HIM SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS' PERSONAL VIEW OF GOD, AND THUS HIS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT AS A RABBI.

NOTICE, AFTER JESUS PROCLAIMED ONE MUST LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND STRENGTH, HE TIED IT TO A LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AS SELF.

THUS HE SHOWED THAT OUR LOVE FOR GOD CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AS SELF.

EVEN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS WHICH BEGIN, WITH HOW TO LOVE GOD, END WITH HOW TO LOVE NEIGHBOR AS SELF.

FURTHERMORE, THE BIBLE TEACHES IF WE BREAK ONE COMMANDMENT WE VIOLATE THE ALL, SO WE CANNOT PICK AND CHOOSE THE WAYS WE WISH TO LOVE.

RETURNING TO THE GOSPEL STORY, WE HEAR THAT THE SCRIBE THOUGHT A MOMENT, AND THEN AGREED WITH JESUS, ALSO SHARING WHY HE THOUGHT JESUS WAS RIGHT.

HE EXPRESSED HIS THOUGHTS THAT LOVE OF GOD WITH OUR WHOLE SELF AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR IS GREATER THAN ALL OUR OFFERINGS AND SACRIFICES.

THE APOSTLE PAUL EXPRESSED THIS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13, SAYING WITHOUT LOVE WE GAIN NOTHING.

HE FINISHED THAT PASSAGE WITH THE REMINDER THAT: "FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE ABIDE, BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE."

LOVE INDEED IS THE KEY TO FAITH AND LIFE FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

OUR ABILITY TO LOVE GOD, AND OUR DESIRE TO LOVE OTHERS, AND TO LEARN TO LOVE THEM MORE FULLY, IS A SIGN OF AN AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

SADLY, A BAPTIST PREACHER RECENTLY OBSERVED THAT: "HATRED HAS SPREAD ALMOST AS FAST AS COVID-19.

IT IS VERY CONTAGIOUS, WHICH IS WHY WE MUST MAKE SURE WE REMEMBER WHO AND WHOSE WE ARE."

WE FIND THE ANSWER THE QUESTION ABOUT WHO AND WHOSE WE ARE IN THE BIBLE.

SCRIPTURE TELLS THAT OUR IDENTITY IS FOUND IN JESUS, WHO BRINGS US INTO GOD'S FAMILY AND KINGDOM.

SCRIPTURE ALSO SAYS WE NEED TO FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS, SO WE MAY BOTH FOLLOW HIM AND TO TELL OTHERS ABOUT HIM.

AND WHAT IS THE GREATEST WAY WE CAN WITNESS TO CHRIST?

THE ANSWER IS FOUND IN THE CHORUS OF AN OLD PRAISE SONG:

"AND THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE, BY OUR LOVE, YES, THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE."

SO IF WE ASK OURSELVES: WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO GOD? THE ANSWER, ACCORDING TO JESUS, IS LOVE.

CONSEQUENTLY WHEN CHRISTIANS TO FAIL TO SPEAK OR ACT IN WAYS THAT EXHIBIT CHRIST'S LOVE, IT IS A SIGN THEY HAVE LOST SIGHT OF THE LORD, AND ARE FOLLOWING SOMEONE OR SOMETHING ELSE.

THIS IS A SERIOUS PROBLEM AND HAS BEEN FOR CENTURIES. CHRISTIANS ARE SO OFTEN DRAWN AWAY FROM JESUS.

WE GIVE OUR LOYALTY TOO EASILY TO LEADERS, WHETHER POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL OR CORPORATE.

BUT LET US NOT FORGET THAT FOR CHRISTIANS, OUR LOVE FOR GOD CALLS US TO PURSUE JESUS WITH A PASSION.

REMEMBERING TO FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS IS IMPORTANT, IT WILL HELP US GET TO KNOW AND LOVE HIM BETTER, SO THAT WE MAY BETTER LOVE OTHERS.

BUT WHY, YOU MANY WONDER IS LOVE REALLY SO IMPORTANT?

ONE COMMENTARY USED THE GREEK MYTH OF SISYPHUS TO EXPLAIN THE PRIMACY OF LOVE.

SISYPHUS WAS PUNISHED BY BEING FORCED TO PUSH A HUGH STONE UP A HILL, ONLY TO HAVE IT ROLL BACK DOWN. HE HAD TO CONTINUOUSLY REPEAT THAT FUTILE ACT.

THE COMMENTARY SAID THAT ALL OF OUR WORSHIP, PRAYERS, AND SACRIFICE ACCOMPLISH NOTHING IF THEY ARE NOT LINKED TO LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR.

THE GOSPEL STORY REMINDS US ABOUT JESUS' TEACHING THAT LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR ARE THE NON-NEGOTIABLE PRINCIPLES UPON WHICH THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS BUILT.

BUT LOVE, WE MUST REMEMBER IS MUCH MORE THAN A FEELING. IT INVOLVES OUR ENTIRE BEING.

THIS FACT IS EMPHASIZED BY THE COMMAND TO LOVE GOD WITH ALL WE ARE. SO LET US LOOK AT HOW WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE GOD:

LOVING WITH OUR HEART MEANS TO LOVE GOD WITH THE CENTER OF OUR BEING- OUR WILL AND PERSONALITY.

AND LOVING WITH OUR SOUL IS TO LOVE WITH OUR AFFECTIONS AND OUR LIFE. IT IS ALSO TO SEEK A SPIRITUAL CONNECTION WITH GOD.

TO LOVE GOD WITH OUR MIND IS TO LOVE WITH OUR THOUGHTS, OUR UNDERSTANDING, OUR INTELLIGENCE, AND OUR REASONING.

FINALLY, TO LOVE GOD WITH OUR STRENGTH INVOLVES OUR ALL OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABILITIES.

ANOTHER WAY TO EXPLAIN THIS IS FOUND IN "THE MESSAGE" WHICH OFFERS A MODERN TRANSLATION OF MARK 12:30 SAYING:

"THE LORD YOUR GOD IS ONE; SO LOVE THE LORD GOD WITH ALL YOUR PASSION AND PRAYER AND INTELLIGENCE AND ENERGY."

BEING PASSIONATE ABOUT GOD IS AN INTERESTING WAY TO TRANSLATE LOVING GOD WITH OUR HEART.

PASSION IS MORE THAN MERE DESIRE, IT IS A DESIRE THAT COMPELS US TO SEEK WHAT WE ARE PASSIONATE FOR.

UNFORTUNATELY, OUR SOCIETY DOES NOT OFTEN VALIDATE A PASSION FOR GOD, BUT RATHER SHUNS IT.

ONE REASON FOR THIS MAY BE FEAR OF RELIGIOUS FERVOR DUE TO SOME PEOPLE, INCLUDING CHRISTIANS AT TIMES, WHO SEEK TO HARM OTHERS FOR RELIGIOUS REASONS.

BUT THOSE WHO ALLOW PASSION FOR GOD TO MOVE THEM TO HATE OTHERS, OR SIN AGAINST THEM -HAVE FAILED TO REALLY LOVE GOD.

ANOTHER DIFFICULTY WE MAY HAVE IN BEING PASSIONATE TOWARDS GOD COMES FROM THE FACT THAT GOD HAS A LOT OF COMPETITION WHEN IT COMES TO OUR PASSION.

PEOPLE BECOME PASSIONATE ABOUT MANY THINGS: ANOTHER PERSON, A CAUSE, A CAREER, A HOBBY, FASHION, SPORTS, ETC.

PURSING OUR PASSIONS REQUIRES TIME, ENERGY, ATTENTION, AND OFTEN MONEY AND OTHER RESOURCES.

IT ALSO INVOLVES SACRIFICE, ESPECIALLY IN THE SENSE OF MAKING CHOICES TO NOT PURSUE OR INVEST IN OTHER THINGS OR PEOPLE AS MUCH AS WE COULD OR SHOULD.

WHAT WE ARE PASSIONATE ABOUT ALSO INFLUENCES OR DIRECTS OUR LIVES AND THOUGHTS, AND CAN SAP OUR STRENGTH AS WELL.

CONSEQUENTLY WHEN WE BECOME MORE PASSIONATE ABOUT SOMETHING OR SOMEONE ELSE OTHER THAN GOD, WE ARE DRAWN AWAY FROM THE LORD.

THEN THERE IS THE STRUGGLE WE HAVE AT TIMES TO LOVE ALL OF OUR NEIGHBORS, AND IN PARTICULAR THOSE WHO HAVE HURT US, OR OTHERS WE LOVE, OR OUR COUNTRY.

SOMETIMES LOVING, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO NEVER ADMIT THEY HAVE DONE WRONG OR APOLOGIZE, DOES NOT COME EASY, EVEN WHEN WE WANT TO LOVE THEM.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT GOD DOES MORE THAN SIMPLY COMMAND US TO LOVE, GOD HELPS US LOVE.

REMEMBER THE BIBLE SAYS LOVE IS BOTH A GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND ALSO A FRUIT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

THIS MEANS THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN AND WILL HELP US LOVE GOD WITH HEART, SOUL, MIND, AND STRENGTH. THE SPIRIT WILL ALSO HELP US LOVE NEIGHBOR AS SELF.

ROBERT STRAND, WHO WROTE A SHORT DEVOTION ABOUT LOVE AS ONE SPIRITUAL FRUIT, OFFERS HIS OWN INSIGHT INTO WHAT LOVE OF NEIGHBOR IS.

HE WROTE: "LOVE IS AN ACTION DIRECTED TO ANOTHER PERSON THAT IS MOTIVATED BY OUR RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS CHRIST, AND IS GIVEN FREELY WITHOUT A PERSONAL REWARD IN MIND."

HE OFFERED AN EXAMPLE OF ONE WAY WE CAN DO THIS BY SHARING AN EVENT THAT HAPPENED ONE SUMMER DURING A VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WEEK A BOY, WHO WAS MISSING AN ARM CAME INTO THE PRIMARY CLASS, AFTER THE LESSON HAD ALREADY BEGUN.

HIS ARRIVAL WAS A SURPRISE TO THE TEACHER, WHO WORRIED THAT THE CHILDREN MIGHT STARE AT HIM TOO MUCH, OR SAY SOMETHING HURTFUL TO HIM.

BUT ALL WENT WELL, UNTIL NEAR THE END OF THE CLASS, THE TEACHER DID NOT THINK THINGS THROUGH WHEN SHE TAUGHT THE CLASS THE CHURCH AND STEEPLE GAME.

TO PLAY IT YOU MUST PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER AND WITH TWO FINGERS UP FOR THE STEEPLE. OF COURSE, THE BOY WITH ONLY ONE ARM COULD NOT DO IT.

BUT THEN A GIRL NEXT TO HIM, HELD UP ONE HAND AND SAID "LET'S MAKE THE CHURCH TOGETHER."

LOVE INDEED IS REACHING OUT TO OTHERS. WE ALSO SHARE IT RIGHT HERE BY MAKING THE CHURCH TOGETHER.

TRULY, LOVE RECOGNIZES BOTH THE VALUE OF OTHERS TO US, AND OUR VALUE TO THEM, BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY.

SO LET US-PRAISE THE LORD FOR HIS GRACE, AND FOR THE LOVE HE HAS FOR US AND GIVES TO US.

LET US PRAISE THE LORD THAT GOD SHOWED HIS LOVE FOR US THAT WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US.

LET US PRAISE THE LORD FOR JESUS TEACHING US THE GREAT COMMANDMENT TO LOVE GOD WITH ALL WE ARE, AND TO LOVE OTHERS AS SELF.

AND PRAISE THE LORD FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT WHO INSPIRES AND HELPS US TO LOVE.

LET US PRAY: GOD OF GRACE AND LOVE, WE ABIDE IN YOUR PRESENCE AWARE OF OUR HUMAN FRAILTY, AND YET TRUSTING IN YOUR LOVE FOR US. WE THANK YOU THAT THERE IS NO EXPERIENCE THAT WE MIGHT WALK THROUGH WHERE YOUR LOVE CANNOT REACH US. AND WE PRAY TO BE FILLED WITH YOUR SPIRIT SO THAT OTHERS WILL MORE FULLY EXPERIENCE YOUR LOVE THROUGH US. IN CHRIST'S NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

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