

Our God is the Only God

Mark 12:28-34

Key Verse: 12:29

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’”

We are in a truly amazing section of Mark’s gospel in which Jesus has been “debating” the Jewish religious leaders (28). We can think of it as a kind of battle for supremacy in the temple courts. Jesus claimed the temple courts for God as a place of prayer and Bible study. Jesus drove out the temple merchants, who were agents of the religious leaders. Then the religious leaders tried to reclaim their territory by trapping Jesus in difficult questions. Their questions could have made any brilliant professor stumble. Yet, Jesus defeated them with nothing but the truth of God. Jesus is the greatest Bible teacher who ever lived.

In today’s passage Jesus handles the last of a series of questions put to him by Jewish leaders. It is this: “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” What a challenging question. Yet Jesus replies in four short sentences. Shakespeare said, “Brevity is the soul of wit.” Only a true master can give a brief and complete answer. Jesus mastered the law. Jesus teaches what is essential. There are three main parts: The Lord is one, love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself.

#### I. The Lord is one (29)

Look at verse 29. “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’” Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:4, which is the beginning of what Israelite people called the Shema. (The full Shema includes Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and 11:13-21, as well as Numbers 15:37-41.) The Shema was read at the opening of each service in the synagogue. It was a definitive statement of faith, like the Apostle’s Creed. It was essential. So God commanded the Israelite people to talk about it constantly--while sitting at home, while walking along the road, when they laid down and when they got up. They were to impress it upon their children. They wrote it on cards carried in phylacteries, and they wrote it on the doorframes of their houses (Dt 6:7-9). This neighborhood, West Rogers Park, has had a strong Jewish presence over the years. In many of the houses there are little scroll symbols in the doorframes. They were put there by Jewish people who wanted to remember the Shema constantly.

Shema is the imperative of the Hebrew verb “to hear,” from the first word, “Hear, O Israel.” It carries the idea of listening to something important that must be obeyed, such as when a parent tells their child, “Listen to me: Don’t cross the road alone.” Then, what is so important? It is the essence of what we must believe about God. This comes from God’s mouth. We must hear what God says about himself to know him truly. However, there is a tendency for people to invent their own god. People take smatterings of teaching from various religions, mix them together, and

make a god of thier own liking. To be honest, this is really idolatry. Our concept of God must be based on what God himself tells us in his word. What does God say?

In verse 29 Jesus quotes, "...the Lord our God, the Lord is one." In this verse "the Lord," appears twice. In the original text of Deuteronomy 6:4, "the LORD" is in all capital letters. This means it was translated from the Hebrew "YHWH," the name God revealed to Moses when he met him at the burning bush. This seems to be the first time God revealed this name to anyone on earth (Ex 6:3). It was an intimate, personal revelation of God to Moses and the people of Israel. In English, it means, "I Am Who I Am" (Ex 3:14). It means that God is pure Being, and the source of all being. In addition, by his actions, the Lord revealed himself as their Redeemer. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, driven mercilessly to work hard without pay. They had no health care, no retirement plan, no vacation days and no sick leave. If they died, they were just thrown into the garbage. They could not help themselves; the Egyptians were just too strong. But the LORD intervened and carried out mighty acts of judgment against the Egyptians. The LORD set them free from bondage. So the Israelite people knew the LORD as their Redeemer. Likewise, many of us first came to know the LORD through the grace of deliverance from bondage to sin. After experiencing this marvelous grace we begin to know who he really is.

The essential thing God reveals about himself is: "the Lord is one." Simply speaking, this means that there is only one God, and the God of Israel is that one God. The teacher of the law understood this when he said to Jesus, "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him" (32). God revealed himself in many ways, as the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the "I Am," the Redeemer, and their Victory. But all of these names and manifestations came from the same being. There is only one God, and the God of Israel is that one God. This is the most important truth for us to believe and retain, absolutely and constantly.

The one true God made a plan of salvation for mankind which runs through the Scriptures. This plan culminated in the coming of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Jesus fulfilled all of the promises and prophecies of the one true God. In doing so, Jesus became the one way of salvation provided by the one true God. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Acts 4:12 says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

When we know the one true God, something marvelous happens. Jesus said in John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." The only true God gives us eternal life as a gift through his Son Jesus Christ (Ro 6:23). In order to do so, the one true God offered his one and only Son Jesus as the sacrifice of atonement for our sins. The one true God raised Jesus from the dead. The one true God crushed Satan's head to win eternal victory. The one true God restores the kingdom of God, paradise, and brings us there to live with him forever. The one true God has done all of this for us freely by his grace. Whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish but have eternal life. God did this because he loves us. Romans 5:8 says,

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” When we accept this love, the love of God begins to sprout in our hearts. We become children of God who live forever in our Father’s kingdom. When we know God through Jesus we have everything. We are truly happy as his children. The Lord our God is the only true God; there is no other.

John R. Mott led the Student Volunteer Movement about 100 years ago. In a message titled, “The Power of Jesus Christ in the Life of a Student,” (London, 1905) he compared a sinner’s condition to that of man cast into a lake who cannot swim. Then he suggested what the major religious leaders might say to this man, and I quote: “What is the best word Confucius has for this man who is sinking? ‘Profit by your experience.’ What is the most hopeful message that Buddha has for the sinking man? ‘Struggle.’ What is the most encouraging teaching of Hinduism for the sinking man? ‘You may have another opportunity in the next incarnation.’ What does Mohammed say? ‘Whether you sink or whether you survive it is the will of God.’ And what does Jesus Christ say? ‘Take my hand.’ There is all the difference in the world between his answer and that of other religions and so-called saviors. It is the difference between sinking and being led onto solid rock.” The truth is: only Jesus saves. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only true God.

## II. Love the Lord your God with all your being (30)

As we have studied, when we know the one true God and his Son Jesus Christ we find unconditional, eternal, absolute love. The Bible says that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. The Bible says that in all things God works for our good. We have the salvation of our souls. We have true peace and joy. And the love of God begins to sprout in our hearts. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” As one beautiful hymn says, “Love grew where the blood fell.” Therefore, we can say that in Mark chapter 12, verse 30 flows out of verse 29. Let’s keep this in mind.

Verse 30 says, “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 word “Love” in this verse comes from the Greek word “agape.” This means the love of God. This love is not primarily a feeling, but a decision to put God first in our thoughts, words and deeds. It begins by loving God from our hearts. However, God is Spirit. We cannot see God. How can we love God? Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt 5:8). We can see God and love God from our hearts when our hearts are pure. We can enjoy a love relationship with God that is real and vital and has substance. But we must keep our hearts pure to love God. So Proverbs 4:30 warns, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”

If we love the world, or harbor sin in our hearts, or yield to the devil’s temptation, our hearts become as cold as ice and we cannot love God from our hearts. One young man seemed to be growing as Jesus’ disciple. Then, through a woman’s flattery and attention, Satan entered his heart and tempted him to doubt God’s love. Since then his heart

has been sick and he could not love God. But God restores our hearts through the cross of Jesus when we repent and accept his blood. The blood of Jesus cleanses us so that we can serve the living God (Heb 9:14). If our hearts are hard, we must cry out to Jesus and accept his blood shed for us.

In verse 30, Jesus mentions all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. We must love God with everything we are. This sounds burdensome. But in fact, it is the way to complete happiness. Wherever we are, whatever we do, when we love God completely, we can offer spiritual worship to God. What we do has absolute meaning and gives us real satisfaction. Augustine said, "Love God, and do as you please." One young man noticed that there was a hole in the wall of his church. Considering it God's house, he did his best to repair the hole. Later he confessed that he had a shout of joy in his soul because he expressed his love for God. The best way to express our love for God may be to share the word of God with others. God eagerly desires to restore his lost world, person by person. There is great rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents and begins to love God. Jesus said to Peter, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

God's "love language" is obedience. God is moved by obedience and he acknowledges those who obey him as those who love him. Jesus said in John 14:23, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." When we obey what Jesus teaches us in the Bible, we are loving God. In setting our life direction, it is important to find out what Jesus wants us to do. Then we must do it with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. When we achieve excellence in our God-given vocation and mission, Jesus is pleased. A doctor must be the best doctor he can be for the glory of God. An engineer must be the best engineer; a teacher the best teacher. In addition to this, we must share the life-giving word of God with those around us.

I never intended to be a pastor. I studied Business Administration in the hope that I would be a CEO someday. However, as a college student, God saved me from sin through the blood of Christ and called me. Consequently, I wanted to love God by serving the word of God, by serving God's sheep and by being an effective manager for his work. But when I think about loving God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind, and with all my strength, I feel convicted of falling far short. I can only repent and ask God's mercy. He cleanses me by the blood of Jesus and helps me grow. The Bible says that by our own effort, we all fall short of God's standard. However, God wants us to accept his standard and to grow. In his grace, we can grow up to be like Abraham, who offered Isaac to God, and even like Jesus, who offered himself to God. Let's accept Jesus' teaching to love God. God blesses those who love him. Exodus 20:5,6 says, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

III. Love your neighbor as yourself (31-34)

In verse 31, Jesus said, “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” This is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18. It was not part of the Shema. But Jesus put it together with the Shema intentionally. It is to show us that we do not love God in isolation, while ignoring all of our fellow human beings. Of course, loving God is first, but it is also essential to love one’s neighbor. When we truly love God we will love other people as well. Again, the word translated “love” in this verse is “agape” in Greek, which refers to the love of God. Out of our love relationship with God, love flows to other people. If we say we love God, but hate others, we are not telling the truth (1 Jn 4:20).

The question arises, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers this for us in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:30-37). Our neighbor is anyone whom God brings into our path who needs help. Actually, we have many neighbors near us. A neighbor may be a fellow passenger on an airplane. In recent years, airborne evangelism has one of the highest success rates, especially during times of heavy turbulence. We meet people at our working places, schools, even at the supermarket who need help. Sometimes a show of godly and genuine friendship opens the door to a person’s heart so that we can share Christ with them. Just down the street are Pakistani and Indian people. I would guess that most of them are Muslim or Hindu and do not know Christ. They are in danger of eternal condemnation. We have been praying for Muslim evangelism. God brought many Muslim people to our doorstep. Have you ever tried to love them and perhaps share the gospel with them? May God bring some of them to salvation through our church.

Another question is “How much should I love my neighbor?” Jesus says, “as yourself.” One young man was trying to buy a Christmas gift for his parents. He wanted to give them a digital camera. He also wanted to buy a digital camera for himself. At first he wanted to buy a better camera for himself and a cheaper camera for his parents. Then he remembered Jesus’ words and bought the same camera for both. In this way he practiced loving his parents as himself.

How did the teacher of the law respond to Jesus’ words? He accepted them and agreed with Jesus. He demonstrated that he understood the essence of faith in God, and in loving God and others. However, Jesus did not give him an A+. Jesus said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Knowing is one thing. Doing is another thing. We must practice the love of God and the love of others. We must do this. It is a command to be obeyed. There are no hypocrites in the kingdom of God. Only those who truly love God and others will be in the kingdom of God.

Today we have thought about the greatest commandment. First and foremost, we must know God, the only true God, as our Redeemer through the precious blood of Christ. We must know his unconditional love and saving grace. We must love him with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, and all our strength. And we must love our neighbor as ourselves. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with each of us to do so.