THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Mark 12:13–44

Key Verses: 12:29–31

“‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no commandment greater than these.’”

Today’s passage continues the debate Jesus is having with the religious leaders on Tuesday of Passion Week. As we’ve seen, they’ve challenged his authority to come into the temple to change things and to teach. In this passage there are more challenges. But in his responses we also see what’s in the mind and heart of Jesus. We see how he views these religious leaders, how he views people, and especially, how he views God. And we get a glimpse into Jesus’ own motive in being there, facing his own rejection, suffering and death. The various parts of today’s passage may seem disconnected, but actually they all fit into a major theme. In each of these parts we see what it really means to love God and to love others, how we can do so, and why it’s so important. May God speak to us through his living words today.

**First**, “Give to God what is God’s” (13–17). The religious leaders know they can’t stop Jesus outright—people are amazed by his teaching and really love him. So they try to undermine Jesus with tricky questions. The first one is about taxes. But it's really a political question. Verse 13 mentions that Pharisees and Herodians were sent to catch Jesus in his words. Pharisees and Herodians may have been as different as Republicans and Democrats today, but in trapping Jesus they were willing to collaborate. It says they were “sent,” meaning they didn’t come on their own—the highest religious leaders put them up to it. In verse 14, they try to use flattery to butter Jesus up before asking their question—to lure him into saying something courageous. The tax they mention is a poll tax, meaning a set amount per person, regardless of one’s income or resources. Rome levied this tax on colonial people to pay for the Roman army and Roman roads that were supposed to advance local business and make everybody feel safer. Purist Jews hated this tax, because it symbolized being subjugated by Gentiles. In A.D. 6 Judas of Galilee had already led a Jewish revolt because of this tax. He rebuked his people for being cowards for paying it. In A.D. 66 the party of the Zealots would eventually use this approach to rebel against Rome. In this case, these Pharisees and Herodians seem to expect Jesus of Galilee to say the same thing, that paying taxes to Caesar is spiritual compromise. If he does, they can have him arrested as challenging Roman authority. Though they’re saying nice things about Jesus, he knows their hypocrisy. He calls them out on trying to trap him. And then he gives his answer.

To begin, Jesus says, “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it” (15b). At first it may seem like a stall tactic. But it’s much more. So what’s a denarius? It’s a small silver coin minted by the Roman government, and it’s the most commonly used coin in the empire. The inscription read, “Tiberias Caesar son of the Divine Augustus.” On the other side was a picture of Tiberias’ mother Livia and the inscription “High Priest.” In Jesus’ day it was worth about a day’s wages (Mt20:2; Jn12:5), at minimum wages today, around $100. It was the coin used to pay this imperial tax. But to strict Jews this coin was offensive, because it had a graven image on it, plus a reference to a man as if he were a god. In daily life ordinary Jews avoided such idolatry by using copper coins made locally that had no image. Jesus didn’t have such an idolatrous Roman coin, but those questioning him did. That in itself sent a message.

Read verses 16,17. In a sense Jesus is saying, “Give that idolatrous coin back to the man who made it, and give to God what is only God’s—real worship and loyalty.” It's the most brilliant answer; people are amazed. His answer not only foils their plot; it teaches us how to live. The Bible teaches that as Christians we have to pay taxes to the state, honor our political leaders, and fulfill our civic duties (Ro13:1–7; 1Pe2:13–17). But it especially teaches us that we should be giving God what is due him—our true worship, our whole hearts, even our lives. These duties are not necessarily contradictory. It’s only when the laws of the land contradict what God clearly tells us in the Bible that we no longer need to obey those laws (Ac5:29). In history many inspiring, conscientious Christians struggled figure out how to live by what Jesus taught here. Some joined armies and fought in wars in a sincere desire to please God. Others disobeyed evil laws, risking their own lives, in order to love and obey God. Jesus’ basic principle here is not to get more coins and hold onto them, avoiding taxes, but to give: Give to Caesar and give to God. Giving is how we love God.

**Second**, “He is the God of the living” (18–27). First it was Pharisees and Herodians; now it’s Sadducees. Sadducees were a sect from the upper social and economic echelon of Jewish society. They were a major group in the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. They focused on the Jerusalem temple and tended to occupy the high priesthood. And they were against the Pharisees on a number of issues. It says in verse 18 that they did not believe in the resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did; they also did not believe in angels or spirits (Ac23:8). They only believed in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The rest they thought was compromised. They'd been heavily influenced by Greek rule and civilization and thought they were way more sophisticated than their fellow Jews. These Sadducees come to Jesus with another question, and this time it's a theological one.

Read verses 19–23. This hypothetical situation was based on a law God had given (Dt25:5,6). God gave this law because he was mindful of widows in their society; he didn’t want families to discard their widows and avoid their responsibilities to them. But the Sadducees took this law to an extreme case. Their point was to make the resurrection look ridiculous. They were sure Jesus believed in the resurrection, and that by luring him into this question, they’d make him look ridiculous, too. Their story reveals how dark they were. All they were thinking about was marriage and death. They also objectified women, so the big question in their minds was, “Who gets to get her?” How pathetic!

How does Jesus answer them? Read verse 24. It's a scathing rebuke. Though Sadducees prided themselves on knowing the Scriptures, Jesus says they didn’t. They also didn’t know the power of God. In light of the power of Almighty God, raising our bodies from the dead is no problem. We too fall into error when we don’t know the Scriptures or the power of God. Read verse 25. Here Jesus explains that at the resurrection, we’ll all be changed. There’ll no longer be any need for marriage because there’ll be no more procreation. We’ll be like the angels, totally happy worshipping, serving and loving God with our all. Then Jesus gives them an example of what part of Scripture they didn’t really know or understand. Read verses 26,27. Jesus takes a most famous passage of Scripture, when God called Moses from the burning bush, and explains from it that there must be a resurrection. It’s a passage of Scripture the Sadducees claimed to accept as legitimate. It says that God wanted to be called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Those three men were long dead when God called Moses. Jesus is saying, “Why would God want to be called by the names of dead men?” It means these men were still living. Those who live by faith in God and truly love him never die. God loves to be called their God, and the Bible says that he's prepared an eternal city for them (Heb11:16). It tells us that to love God means to know his word, believe his power and have living hope in him. Jesus tells the Sadducees, “You are badly mistaken!” Their self-confident, sophisticated question leads them to fall flat on their faces.

**Third**, the most important commandment (28–34). Mark’s account of this next event puts this sole teacher of the law in a positive light. This man has been listening and likes Jesus’ previous answers, and he likes Jesus’ answer to his own question. He’s an anomaly among the teachers of the law who mostly despise Jesus. He reigns in the discussion, from peripheral topics like taxes and a contrived argument, to what’s most important (28). He's finally asking a real, practical question. It was a hotly debated subject among the Jews in Jesus’ time. There were so many commandments from the Bible they were taught they had to obey—so many burnt offerings and sacrifices they were supposed to make. But what's most important? It’s still a big question. There are so many things we should be doing. So many things seem so important. But what’s *most* important?

What does Jesus say? Read verses 29–31. Here Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4,5 and Leviticus 19:18. These two commands basically summarize the Ten Commandments. The first command is known as the “shema,” and it was part of the Jewish evening and morning prayers. Jews reminded themselves of this command so often because they knew how prone the human heart is to idolatry. There's only one God. And we have only one heart. The most important commandment, Jesus says, is to love God, and based on these verses, that love has to be genuine. We all know it’s true: either we love someone, or we don’t. Love can’t be faked. It can’t be half way. In the same way, if our hearts are divided, we can’t love God. If we love ourselves and love the world, we can’t love God (1Jn2:15–17). As we’ve seen in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has been teaching us to have faith in God. But here he’s teaching that to have faith in God ultimately means to love God. Who or what do we really love? Do we even know? Is it really God?

How can we really love God anyway? 1 John 4:7–21 explains that it’s when we first *receive* God’s love. When we come to know God, who is love, and receive his love personally, we can’t help falling in love with him. It’s not a duty or a chore; he captures our hearts. We rely on his love and begin to love him back. We experience that there’s nothing else like the love of God. Because of this love, we *want* to obey him. We *want* to serve him with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds and all our strength. Such full-throttle devotion shows that the love is real.

Why is Jesus even there, having these conversations with such difficult people? Why would he stay there to endure what they'd put him through, even dying on a cross? It's because he loves God and is doing his best to obey him. Sometimes love for God still puts us in really hard situations. But we serve him there wholeheartedly simply because we love him.

The second command is closely related to the first. Again, 1 John 4:7–21 explains why. If we really love God, we will love others, because God has so loved us, and he so loves them. So many people think being religious means being strict and judging others based on strict religious, theological and moral grounds. But real religion is about loving others. We love others even with all their sins and flaws and failings because God loves us, even with all our sins and flaws and failings. 1 Corinthians 13 says that we may be able to speak in tongues, have the gift of prophecy and wisdom, have a faith that can move mountains, give all our possessions to the poor and endure great hardship, and still be without love. And without love, all those seemingly great things are meaningless. Christianity is based on faith, hope and love, but it says, “the greatest of these is love.” God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (Jn3:16). Jesus loved his neighbor so much that he was willing to lay down his own life on the cross for us, for our sins. Jesus perfectly embodied the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But we need to remember that loving God comes first. If we really want to love others, we first need to grow in our love for God. Why? It’s because when we grow in a real love relationship with God, we have real love to give to others. But without God’s love, our love for people is based on our human love, which is fundamentally self-centered. If we try really hard to love others, but without God, in the end we only find ourselves burned out and bitter.

Loving God and loving others to some people might sound good; but to many people in this world, it’s just dumb. “What about me?” they ask. “Why would I be such a dummy just loving God and loving other people and totally neglecting myself?” But living for self ends up making our lives meaningless and ugly, whereas living for God and others ends up making our lives meaningful and beautiful. God wants us to learn to love like him. Are we growing in love? Are we loving one another as we love ourselves? That’s real maturity.

**Fourth**, “Sit at my right hand” (35–37). Finally, Jesus turns the tables and asks his own question. It’s based on Psalm 110. Everybody viewed the Messiah as the Son of David. But Jesus pointed out that in his psalm David calls the Messiah his own Lord. So how could the Messiah be David’s son? Notice that nobody can answer Jesus’ question. Why is he asking this? It’s because he could see that all of them—Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, teachers of the law—had a human view of the Messiah. They thought the Messiah would be great, a royal son of David. But they didn’t realize how great. In light of Psalm 110, the Messiah is actually David’s Lord—way more than a mere man. Jesus became David’s Lord when God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his own right hand. Jesus is the Son of David, but he’s also David’s Lord—he’s the Son of God (1:1; Ro1:4). It’s interesting that Jesus was holding onto this verse from Psalm 110 personally. All these enemies were trying to knock him down, but Jesus was holding on to God’s promise that he would raise him from the dead, exalt him to his own right hand in heaven, and bring all his enemies under his feet. None of the experts could answer Jesus’ question, but the large crowd there was loving what Jesus was saying. Loving God may seem dumb, but just as with Jesus, it leads to spiritual victory.

**Fifth**, “Watch out” (38–40). In these verses Jesus is now talking to the ordinary people there. He warns them to watch out for the teachers of the law. Why? Because though they seem to be such experts in the Bible, know how to pray long and eloquent prayers, and always sit in the most important seats, their motives are all wrong. It’s for their own glory, not God’s. Their knowledge, their clothing, even their prayers, are all to impress people, not God. They’re honor junkies; without grabbing honor all the time, they feel like they’ll die. Jesus says they devour widows’ houses. It means they love to prey on widows’ devotions and receive material support from them until they bankrupt them. Jesus says they’re total phonies. He also says that they’ll be punished most severely by God. Why does he warn this? He wants people not to be deceived by, or spiritually dependent on, such people. He’s also, in a sense, warning his disciples and us about how easy it is to fall into self-glory seeking, and how harmful it is. Love for God can’t be a show; it has to be for real, even if it's very quiet.

**Sixth**, “this poor widow” (41–44). In this last part Jesus sees an illustration of what he’s just been teaching. Many rich people are throwing large amounts of money into the offering box. One could hear the clanging of heavy bangs of coins. Then there's the sound of a tiny tinkle of two really little copper coins. Read verses 43,44. Jesus says the rich are giving out of their abundance, literally meaning out of their leftovers. But this poor widow, perhaps with a recently deceased husband and children of her own to feed, nonetheless is giving "all she had to live on." Why does she do such a foolish thing? It's simply because she loves God. She loves God with all her heart, all her soul, all her mind and all her strength. To Jesus, this poor widow and her tiny offering are more valuable than all those rich people with their huge offerings. Jesus wants his disciples and us to really learn this value system. God is looking at the heart. He values real love, not wealth.

Let’s read our key verses again, verses 29–31. May God help us experience his great love, and help us live a life of wholehearted love for him and for others as the best life to live.