

Scripture: Mark 12:28-40

Text: Mark 12:28-34

What is Love, Really?

Beloved in Christ, love, today, is seen as tolerating and accepting everything anyone believes and does because it feels good and it feels right to me. So, for example, if we accept the homosexual agenda, or embrace medically assisted suicide, this is seen as love. It's easy; it feels good; do it.

Is this what love really is? What is the standard of love? Who defines love?

We turn to our text. It is about love, love of God and love of neighbor. In that order. It's about love which involves heart, soul, mind and strength. All of it. It focuses even more clearly on Jesus. As one author says, all the various alternative approaches are seen to be inadequate to save – Israel, the temple, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and Herodians, the Sadducees, legal regulations, the rites such as burnt offerings and sacrifices. These are all inadequate to save.

We need salvation to love.

The stage here is being cleared for the final act of what love really is, fulfilled in Jesus Himself. We turn to Mark 12:28-34. Though it doesn't say here, we know from Matthew's gospel (22:35), that the Pharisees once again decide to put Jesus to the test. They send a certain scribe, an expert of the law of Moses to Jesus. Scribes were interpreters of the law. They were scholars.

And the question has to do with the foremost commandment, the commandment which is before all else. In answer to the scribe's question, Jesus reveals

1. The command to love (vv.28-31)
2. The depth of love (vv.32-33)
3. The grace to love (v.34)

1. The command to love

We read in **verse 28** that "*one of the scribes came.*" He had heard Jesus' conversation with the Sadducees about the resurrection (vv.18-27). He perceives that Jesus had answered them well. What is surprising here is that this scribe whom the Pharisees sent to test Jesus is a friendly scribe. Generally, the scribes were opposed to Jesus.

Maybe the Pharisees did not really know this scribe. Was his heart now becoming soft? We don't know. Perhaps this question with which he was sent to test Jesus was a question really bothering him. He seems sincere and honest. He asks Jesus, "*Which is the first commandment of all?*" In other words, which commandment comes before everything else? Which commandment supersedes all others?

The Jews had 613 commandments, and this scribe wants to know which of the 613 commandments is foremost of all? It's the kind of question scribes would debate among themselves – lengths of time. They thought they had to earn heaven by keeping the commandments.

Jesus responds to his request for one commandment by giving two. See verses 29-31, *"The first of all the commandment is: Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."*

These two commandments, "love the LORD your God" and "love your neighbor as yourself" are summarized by one word, "love." Jesus cites both Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. They are a unity. You can't properly love your neighbor unless you first love God. When you love God, this love will show to your neighbor. You can't divide or separate the two. What can be said for marriage can be said for the two tables of the law. What God has put together, let not man separate.

So how are we to love the LORD our God? The first four commandments show us how to love Him -by worshipping Him alone, according to His Word, with the right attitude, and on His day, the Lord's Day. *"Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one..."* This is how Jesus begins. This God is the one and only God and He wants to be loved in this way. Worship is essential -even more essential than keeping our groceries stores open. He relates to us through His love in Christ and He commands us to express our love to Him in worship. Worship is the greatest expression of our love for Him and it impacts all our relationships.

And how are we to love our neighbor as ourselves? The next six commandments show us how to love our neighbor concretely: honoring authorities, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness and not coveting. This is the content of love for neighbor. We are being told to love our neighbor by distancing and isolating ourselves. But, look at the number of suicides... the number of marriage break-ups . . . the number of physical abuse cases...the number of drug overdose...the number of unemployed...the number scared.

So, where is the love? Love begins with God, not with ourselves. It begins with being restored into a right relationship with Him. This brings us to our second point,

2. The depth of this love (vv.32-33)

Notice, the depth of this love that God requires loving *"the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."* Notice the four times: all, all, all, all. He wants our love, the totality of our love, the love of our entire being: heart, soul, mind and strength. Yes, from the depths of our being.

This love is not first of all a feeling but a commitment, an act of obedience from the heart and soul, from the depth of our being. Jesus says, *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"* (John 14:15). It means loving Him with our mind. It means thinking Christianly – more than just with church and in our Bible reading and prayer. It means to love Him with our mind in all aspects of life – in our work that we do, in how we vote politically, in educating our children. His Word ought to shape our thinking in every area of life.

The word for 'love' Jesus uses here is a love that only God's children in Christ have. It is a sacrificial love, a self-denying love, a love whereby we reject our sin. In this way we see its depth as well. This love which Jesus speaks about shapes God's children in their response to Him – in loving Him and loving our neighbor.

Why does God command our love? Because God loved us first. God's children in Christ know His love for them; they confess the immeasurable depth of His love. *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He*

loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). This sacrificial love is seen in giving His only beloved Son. Romans 5:8 says, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Such love! He was willing to suffer pain for it! But look at its results!

This is where we see the depth of God’s love for us – in the sacrifice of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The scribe is now standing before Him. Jesus already pronounced judgment on the temple by cleansing it, preparing a place for Himself as the final sacrifice. The temple would rise in Him. Here He proclaims the double law of love which surpasses all other law. It is fulfilled in Him. He loved God like no other, giving His life in perfect obedience to Him. He loved us like no other, paying the perfect sacrifice for our sin. All the burnt offerings and sacrifices point to the sacrifice of His life for us.

Even this scribe acknowledges that love is more than burnt offerings and sacrifices. He speaks well of Christ, *“So the scribe said to Him, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (vv.32-33).*

The love He requires is our response of thanks to Him who gave Himself for our salvation. By believing in Christ, we find the grace to love God and our neighbor. This brings us to our third point.

3. The grace to love (v.34)

In verse 34, we read that Jesus saw that he answered wisely, and He says to him, *“You are not far from the kingdom of heaven.”* Was this man hostile at first, and did his heart now begin to melt in the presence of Jesus because of His beautiful summary of the law? We don’t know. But we find him warmly responding to Jesus’ answer.

Jesus encourages him by saying that he is not far from the kingdom. But he is not in the kingdom.

So where do we find the power and grace to love? By coming to Jesus! Not hiding behind correct answers, or a faithful tradition but by coming to Jesus in faith! In Jesus, we come to know God’s love for us, for sinners. This comes at the price of repentance, giving up my own way, coming to the end of myself and surrendering my life to Him. And by His grace and Spirit’s work in us, we find we are able to love Him above all and our neighbor as ourselves. Love for God should flow into loving your neighbor – red, yellow, black and white – they are precious in His sight.

This past week, it was reported that Nancy Russell, a 90-year-old long-term care resident, who was not chronically ill or dying, died last month by euthanasia (MAiD) to avoid living through another COVID-19 lockdown. (a CTV News Medical Correspondent, Avis Favaro). Mandating isolation, brothers and sisters, is not necessarily demonstrating love for neighbor. Those who don’t know God, don’t understand this! They don’t understand that man is made in God’s image – to live in relationship with God and with one another!

Moreover, is shutting down churches showing love towards God and love towards neighbor? More than ever, in this time of anxiety, fear and isolation, people need the fellowship of love in Christ and with one another in worship, in singing and in praying together -- running into the loving arms of Jesus. All the while, we may exercise precautions towards the vulnerable – even in coming together for worship. 1 John 3:14 says, *“we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his*

brother abides in death.” (example, pagan visiting church). It means loving them- for those who are lost, confused, misguided and who need help.

Jesus in Mark 12:35-40 calls us to beware of the scribes, “who desire to go around in long robes . . . love the best seats . . . who devour widows’ houses . . . They will receive the greater condemnation.”

If this particular scribe would now, by the grace and power of God, take one more step; that is come to Jesus and believe in Him as his Savior and Lord, he would go ‘from not being far from the kingdom’ to ‘being inside the kingdom of God.’ In these words, ‘you are not far from the kingdom of God’, Jesus, in His love, is urging him to enter that kingdom!

Look how Mark 12:28-34 concludes, “*But after that no one dared question Him (Jesus)*”. Jesus has completely crushed the opposition; that is, the arguments of His opponents. And in the process of doing this, we even see Him, in His love, drawing a member of the largely hostile group closer to His side, a scribe. If he believed, would his life be safe?

Love for God and neighbor is the churches’ witness to a despairing world. Do we stand with Christ or with the world – in the call to love? The power and grace to love God and neighbor we find in Christ who crushed the hateful powers of Satan, sin and death for us on the cross. By His resurrection, He has gained eternal life for us. “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him, shall not perish but have everlasting life*” Amen.