

The Wise Scribe.

Mark 12:28-35

2 Kings 23:1-25

Matthew 5:1-20

Responsive Psalm 136 1-9

As we have been working our way through Chapter 12 here, each week we have taken a segment where Jesus is reacting to, or responding to a line of questioning from some of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Now I had mentioned last week that these accounts that we have covered here Mark seems to link them together in a sort of rapid fire succession giving the appearance of them happening back to back, but the reality is it was more than likely over the course of a few days, or maybe even weeks. But I don't think that is the case with our passage that we are looking at today, it would appear that as Jesus was talking to these Sadducee's who had come to attempt trap him in a logical quandary about the issue of Marriage and the afterlife that there were some scribes in the area who had been listening now come forward to ask Jesus a question.

So let us start out this morning by reading this account here in Mark chapter 12, and we will be looking at verse 28-35. So right off the first thing that I think stands out here is the question of the scribe, and the manner it was asked. This man, whoever he was did not seem to have an agenda behind his question as all of the others previous, but may have seriously been asking out of his own curiosity. In the discourse that Jesus had with the Pharisee's, and the Sadducee's there was no such pleasantries, or courtesy given as we see given by this scribe. And his line of questioning is a legitimate theological, doctrinal question, not some devised hypothetical posed as a question to try to discredit, or trick Jesus.

And as we see at the end of this discourse, even Jesus response to him is not like the responses to the previous members of the Sanhedrin who had come to question him. He tells the scribe, he is close to understanding, he is not far from the kingdom of heaven. So how is it, that this scribe is not far from the kingdom of heaven, how can he be close but not in? What is holding him back? These are some of the questions that we will look at as we work our way through this passage this morning.

Another thing to note about the scribe's question, and Jesus response is the answer itself. Later on we see the Apostles teaching this very doctrine, and it is from these teachings that New Covenant Theology derives its stance on the law and the Christian's response to it. There is a misconception that the New Covenant understanding of the law, and scripture is some newer thing that has only arisen in the past few decades and has been largely bolstered by the internet. But what do we see here? We see this scribe, this Jewish man with this basic understanding of the law and the commandments of God. That it is more than the temple the traditions and the sacrifices, all of those things have their place, and serve a purpose but they all serve to point to one thing, and that is God, and his redeeming work.

So as we see here in verse 28, that this scribe overheard his discourse with the Sadducee's and perceived that Jesus had answered them well, not falling into their trap, and seeing that Jesus was a man of wisdom he is intrigued and approaches him. This is the first time that we see recorded in the gospel at least that an individual has come up to Jesus in such a way instead of it being a group of men sent from the Sanhedrin. So in our translation the question he asks is Which is the first commandment of all, the NIV translates it to say, Of all the commandments, which is the most important. While neither of these translations are inherently wrong, because the point that is intended comes across, it is not an entirely accurate translation of the original Greek text. In the Greek, the word here for all, which is *Panton* does not actually modify the word commandments such as we see in the NIV and in the NKJV.

So really the question isn't which of the laws and commandments are the most important, or which one out of all of them is the most important, but rather they are all important, but which commandment supersedes everything and is duty to all of mankind.

It is a small nuance, but an important one for this law is not one given just to Israel, but it is one that all of mankind falls under, both the Jews, and the Gentiles. As we know the scribes main concern and their reputation was that of being ones who were an authority over the proper exposition of the law and were considered to be experts in the translation and application of the old covenant laws. The rabbinic tradition held to 613 commandments in the Torah. And those 613 could be broken down into prohibitions, of which there was 365, and positive commands which of there was 248 that they observed. And among these commandments, the rabbi's would further differentiate between those they called, "heavy commands" and others they called "light" commandments. The difference that defined these 2 groups, between the heavy, and the light commands was that the the heavy commands dealt with lifes uncompromising essentials, they were the most serious and when broken were met with the most serious of penalties.

The light commandments were ones with less of an impact, there was less of a demand on ones own will, or personal possessions. Even Jesus himself used this distinction in the beatitudes that we read in Matthew this morning. Verse 19, "Whoever therefore breaks on of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." This question that this scribe asks Jesus was not actually an uncommon question that they would discuss among themselves, often the scribes would be asked to describe the Torah in a nutshell and this would be the focus of their response. Even 20 years before Jesus arrived on the scene such things were being discussed, recorded in the Mishnah, and the Talmud there are a number of Rabbis who have answered the question, how would you summerize the teaching of the law.

Rabbi Hillel who was 20 years before Jesus said something that every single parent tells their children. "What you would not want done to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah, everything else is interpretation." Then 100 years after Jesus Rabbi Akiba said that the Torah can be summed up as such, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Later, in ad 260, rabbi Simlai quoted Habakkuk 2:4 which says, "the righteous shall live by faith." All of these rabbis seeking to sum up the Torah, seeking to find the central, most important thing that all other things hang on. So we see Jesus here in his answer essentially doing this very same thing, of all of the Torah, from all of the laws and commandments which is the central, which does all others build from. Verse 29 "The first, the most important, the one that supersedes all others is this, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord 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. " Jesus response, is a quote from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4 and 5. This passage was known to the Jews as the Shema, which is Hebrew meaning, "To hear" and it was something that was recited each morning and evening by pious Jews as a sort of creed, just like many Christians do today with the Lord's prayer, or the Apostles Creed.

The Shema was the very thing that Josiah one of the greatest reformer kings in Israel's histroy was judged by as being a righteous King. Which is why we read the account of Josiah this morning, verse 25, that we read this morning, "Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses, nor after him did arise like him." So as we can see this quote from Deuteronomy is not only central to the Jewish faith, but it is central to faith in God period.

IN verse 30 here, in Mark chapter 12 we see that the word All is used 4 times as well. All your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. This is putting a heavy focus and emphasizes upon the necessity of a total and complete response of love to God. God is one, he is the only God not of just Israel, but of every individual and as such, as God, and Lord of all he lays a rightful claim to every facet of our lives and personality. In the greek, each of these commandments is prefixed by the Greek preposition EX, meaning from the source of, rather than the understanding of by the means of. Once again a small nuance, but very important one, we are commanded to love God not merely with our whole heart, but from the heart. These 4 distinctions here, completely encompass every facet of the human personality, we are to love God from our heart, our emotions are to be those of love toward God, from our soul, our spirit cries out for a love for God, and our mind, our intellect worships God, knowing that all things come from him, and that he is worthy of all praise and all glory. And lastly our strength, dedicating our wills, and our lives to seek after God.

The love for God that is required demands every aspect of our being, complete and total submission in love to our Lord and Creator. Which we all know we can not do, in and of ourselves but it is only through the blood of Christ that we can be accounted as such, and it is only by the gift of Faith given to us that we are able to even strive for this mark.

When Jesus answers the Scribe here, notice he doesn't avoid the question? Or answer it with a question? In fact he goes even one step further. The scribe asked him what is the most important, the central commandment and Jesus gave 2. The reason, is because the 2nd is like the first..first love for God, 2nd, love for the people around you. As we all know that this is very important for our conduct is the first aspect of our ministry. How are we to preach about a loving and forgiving God who is gracious and merciful if we are not? And just like our Love for God is not because of ourselves but because of what he has done for us, because he first loved us.. it is the same with this command to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is not a natural tendency of mankind, he isn't just talking about showing love, and loving those who are our friends and family, but everyone who is around us, even our enemies.

Luke 6, verse 27. "But I say to you who hear: (remember the distinction, of those who hear, is those who have been given the ability. He is talking to believers) Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either, give to everyone who asks of you, and from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. (as I was saying about our conduct being our first line of ministry to the world, we see it in these next few verses for Jesus here outlines how the world normally reacts.) verse 32, "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners.. (those on the outside, those unable to hear, those who are not believers) even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same? And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return and your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High. For he is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. We are to be a light, and an example of God's grace and mercy to the world and it starts by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Our love for one another, for other believers reflects the love we have for God, and it is just the same with the command to love our enemies, it is a reflection of God's love toward sinners, his patience, for he causes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust. We have no excuse, no reason to walk around with our heads held high using our faith as a tool to boost our own self worth, for we are no different than the others except by the grace of God, and the hope is that through the love and mercy we show, by God will stand as a stark difference to what is seen by the rest of the world and will open the doors for the opportunity to witness and minister to the lost.

Up until this point, these 2 commandments were not grouped together like this. Both of these commandments were given in the old covenant, but only the one, love your God with all your heart, soul, heart, and mind was attributed to being the central one. But Jesus links these 2, for they indeed go hand in hand, as one is the expression of the other. That being said, Jesus does not link both of these into one encompassing commandment, but rather the distinction of the 2 still exists, loving God, and loving neighbor. I think of it like James wrote about works and the law. Show me your faith without your works and I will show you my faith by my works. The love of neighbor is subsequent, it is a result of the first, loving God. 1st John 4:6, "We are of God, He who knows God hears us, he who is not of God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent his only begotten son into the world, that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. IF we love one another, God abides in us, and his love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and he is us, because he has given us his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, and God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love of God has for us, God is love, and he who abides in love also abides in God."

So we see in the following verses the scribe is actually in complete agreement with Jesus on this issue. One would think that the scribe who was associated with the Sanhedrin which was seeking to destroy Jesus one way or another to argue for the superiority of the Temple, and the sacrifices and worship traditions but he doesn't. It is interesting that he recognizes as well that the temple, the traditions and worship practices serve a purpose but that purpose is secondary to the love of God and the love of others. Verse 32, " 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 ones neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." This is a man who understands the message of the old testament, who understood that these things were to teach about God, it was not the sacrifices and offerings and temple worship that was paramount, but rather it is the love of God.

There are some who proclaim the name of God who would do well to study and understand this simple truth. So many are focused on the outward deeds, one the things that one can do to become holy, or to appear holy, whether it be living by a strict list of do's and don'ts that have been devised and created by either themselves, or some pastor, or teacher seeking to control the lives of his congregation which I argue is unnecessary for those who have the spirit, know right from wrong and have the convicting work of the spirit in them making them feel miserable for their sin driving them to repentance. We don't need anyone else to set up boundaries, or rules for us, for we know full well ourselves those things which tend to cause us to stumble. And it goes the same for religions who are seeking to use works to gain favor, as this rabbi said,

“The love of God, and love of ones neighbor is more then all of the sacrificies and offerings, it is more then the works, it is a heart given to God.” Our works can not give us a heart for God, but our heart for God can give us works to glorify God.

So that brings us to the conclusion today, to the final verse, verse 34. The scribe had answered, in agreement, and this scribe understands the position of the temple practices in the grand scheme worshipping God, sounds pretty good eh? But look how Jesus answered. “ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him. You are not far from the kingdom of God. But after that no one dared question him. Remember our questions? How is it that he can be close to the kingdom of heaven, but not be in it, what is holding him back? Well it is simple, he rejects Jesus as the messiah, as the son of God the savior of the world. While he may have a grasp and understanding of the old covenant, and even sees that the temple worship and the practice and rituals of feasts and sacrifices are secondary to the command to love God, he rejects the one that God has sent to pay for his sins. I am reminded of the passage that I think is one of the most frightening in scripture. Matthew 7, verse 21-23. “Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast our demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me you who practice lawlessness!” “you are not far from the kingdom of God” What a horrible place to be, and I am afraid that there are many who will fall into this category.

That is why it is so important to as the apostle says, To be diligent to make your call and election sure, and how do we do that? 2 Peter 3, As his divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be the partakers of the divine nature having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. But also for this very reason, giving all diligence add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self control, to self control perseverance and to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness and to brotherly kindness love. For these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins, Therefore brethren be ever more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble. For so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength, but you can not do that without first the blood of Jesus Christ being applied, repent, believe, and become a new creature in Christ. Do not be like this scribe, who is close to the kingdom of God, or those we read in Matthew who believed the work, the things that did in God's name should justify them. It is only Christ, it is only through Christ, I wil close today by reading Hebrews 3, startign in verse 7. “Therefore as the holy spirit says, Today if you will hear his voice do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness where your fathers tested me, tried me, and saw my works for 40 years. Therefore I was angry with that generation and said, They always go astray in their heart and they have not known my ways, so I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.

Beware brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” Do not wait, do not stand on the outside close to the kingdom of God, but instead repent, believe and enter..while it is still called Today.