

**Introduction**

1. If you could ask Jesus one question from a sincere heart seeking truth, what would it be?
2. In today's passage, one of the teachers of the law asked Jesus a question about the greatest commandment in the Law.
3. **Read Mk 12:28-34.**

**A. Third Tricky Question (28)**

1. In the context of Mark's narrative, remember that Jesus had already been confronted by the Jewish leaders about His authority for clearing the temple and for His teaching there.
  - a. Remember that Jesus said that He would answer their question if they answered His question of them about the source of John the Baptist's authority. They refused and so did Jesus (cf., Mk 11:33)
  - b. Jesus then told them the Parable of the Tenants to reinforce the fact that these Jewish leaders had ultimately rejected God's authority! (cf, Mk 12:1-12)
  - c. Jewish leaders asked a series of three tricky questions (cf, Mk 12:13-34) in an attempt to trap Jesus in His words. Jesus then asked them a final tricky question (cf, Mk 12:35-37).
2. Also remember this insight from William Lane, "The sequence of questions proposed corresponds to four types of questions recognized by the rabbis: questions of wisdom, which concern a point of law (cf. Ch 12:13-17); of mockery, which frequently bear on the resurrection (cf. Ch. 12:18-27); **of conduct**, which center in relationship to God and men (cf. Ch. 12:28-34); and of biblical exegesis, which often concern the resolving of an apparent contradiction between two passages of Scripture (cf. Ch. 12:35-37). It is only in the Passover eve liturgy that the four types of questions appear in this particular order, and there the first three questions are posed by a wise son, a wicked son and a **son of simple piety**. The fourth is posed by the head of the family himself. This arrangement shed light on the sequence of questions in Ch. 12:13-37)" (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 421, underlining/bold mine).
  - a. The Pharisees and Herodians played the role of the wise son asking the first question of wisdom about the law—"Should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" Jesus wisely replied, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (cf, Mk 12:13-17).
  - b. The Sadducees asked a second tricky question about marriage in the resurrection. Jesus wisely answered that there would be no marriage in the resurrection as our new spiritual bodies would experience new and even better intimacy than that found in earthly marriage. (cf, Mk 12:18-27).
  - c. In today's study, "one of the teachers of the law" plays the role of the son of simply piety by asking the third question of conduct regarding the greatest commandment of God.
3. Who were the teachers of the law?
  - a. teacher of the law (Gk., *grammateon*) is often translated as "scribe."
  - b. They were generally a part of the Pharisees, the most righteous and pious of the Jews who attempted to keep the Law completely. Keeping the Law was the most important focus of their lives.
4. The Teacher's Question
  - a. The teacher noted that Jesus had given a "good answer" to the two tricky questions already asked.
  - b. Since he uses no insincere flattery this time and simply asks his question, he may have asked this question in a genuine search for wisdom from Jesus.
  - c. He asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (28)
  - d. Daniel Akin notes that this question ". . . is not as easy as it sounds. The rabbinic tradition had identified 613 commands in the first five books of the Bible. Of these, 365 were negative, and 248 were positive. Some were 'light,' making less demand, while others were viewed as 'heavy,' with severe repercussions for disobedience. So this scribe asked Jesus to 'declare Himself' (Daniel Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Mark*, 287).

## B. Jesus' Wise Answer (29-31)

1. This time, Jesus answers the question directly.
  - a. Previously, Jesus asked a question in return, which was commonly done by Jews in debates.
  - b. In this case, I believe that Jesus sensed this teacher asked his question sincerely and not in a deceitful or hypocritical manner as with the previous two questions.
  - c. When we ask God a sincere question, He gives us a sincere answer.
  - d. Even though this is a sincere question, it is still tricky.
  - e. Jesus must answer it clearly and carefully as others were listening and might try to use His answer against Him if they can.
2. Jesus answered, "The most important one . . . is this 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord our 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" (29).
3. Jesus quoted first from the Law in Deuteronomy.
  - a. "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 strength" (Dt 6:4-5).
  - b. This passage, Dt 6:4-9, is known as the *Shema* and is recited by devout Jews every morning/evening.
    - 1) To them it is like our reciting of the Lord's Prayer.
    - 2) The word *Shema* comes from the first word in Dt 6:4, "Hear" (Hb., *shema*)
    - 3) Jesus' recitation of these opening two verses would have called to mind the entire passage.
    - 4) The rest of the *Shema* reflects on the importance of passing on knowledge of God to one's children and meditating on God's word throughout each day of life.
  - c. This passage is central to the Jewish monotheistic belief—There is one God.
    - 1) Hear it in Hebrew: *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad*.
    - 2) The name Lord (Hb., *Adonai*) is substituted for *Yahweh* in reverence of that holy name.
    - 3) The name "our God" (Hb., *eloheinu*) appears between the two occurrences of *Yahweh*.
    - 4) There are two names but only one God who is one, a unity (Hb., *ehad*).
  - d. The command to love God reminds us of the first table of the Ten Commandments which focuses on our relationship with God. Moses reminded Israel of these commands in the verses preceding the *Shema*.
    - 1) "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 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 parents 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. You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day" (Dt 5:6-15).
    - 2) We love God by honoring His uniqueness, by not worshiping anything or anyone but Him, by not misusing His name by doing or saying anything to dishonor Him, and by resting and reflecting on our relationship with Him weekly.
  - e. Jesus said that we must love God with our whole being, with all we that we are and have.
    - 1) with all of our "heart" (Gk., *kardias*) – We are to love God with our emotions.
    - 2) with all of our "soul" (Gk., *psuches*) – We are to love God with our spirit, our conscious life.
    - 3) with all of our "mind" (Gk., *dianoias*) – We are to love God with our intelligence and thought life.  
Jesus added this way of loving God to the original list of three ways in the *Shema*.
    - 4) with all of our strength" (Gk., *ischuos*) – We are to love God with our physical strength and body.

4. Jesus then quoted from the Law in Leviticus 19 and added a second corollary commandment to the first.
  - a. “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord” (Lev 19:18).
  - b. The command to love yourself should not be misconstrued as a selfish love. The word Jesus uses points to a self-sacrificial love not a selfish one.
  - c. This command to love our neighbor reminds us of the second table of the Ten Commandments which focuses on our relationship with other human beings.
  - d. “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Dt 5:16-21).
5. The key word in both commands is “love” (Gk., *agape* – self sacrificial love for the other).
  - a. This is the kind of love that God has for us.
  - b. Our response to God’s love for us is to love Him in return.
  - c. Our love for God overflows by showing love for others, whom God also loves and created in His image. We are to love what God loves!
  - d. James Brooks notes that one of Jesus’ greatest teaching contributions was “. . . to bring together and virtually merge the commands to love God and to love fellow human beings. Some deny that Jesus was the first to relate the two . . . [but] no one else put such great emphasis on the combination and made it essential. Jesus showed that it was impossible to really love God without loving neighbors. Love for God is expressed by loving others” (James Brooks, *Mark*, 198).

### C. The Teacher’s Response (32-33)

1. The teacher responded, “Well said (Gk., *Kalos, didaskale*) . . . You are right (*ep’ aletheias*)” (32).  
This may be a locative form indicating that Jesus’ saying is within the sphere of truth)
2. The teacher echoes Jesus’ answer and confirms it as the truth.
3. Warren Wiersbe writes, “When he started this conversation, the scribe was only the tool of the Pharisees who were trying to get evidence against Jesus (note Matt. 22:35). But after he heard our Lord’s answer, the scribe stood and dared to commend the Lord for His reply. The Word has spoken to the man’s heart, and he was beginning to get a deeper spiritual understanding of the faith he thought he understood. . . . [He was] facing truth honestly and is not interested in defending a ‘party line’ or even personal prejudices” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent*, 142-43).
4. The teacher concludes from Jesus’ teaching that having love for God and love for others is “. . . more important than all burnt offerings (Gk., *olokautomaton*) and sacrifices (Gk., *thusion*)” (33)
  - a. The two terms used by the teacher summarize and represent the whole Jewish sacrificial system.
    - 1) The Pharisees believed tithes, offerings, and keeping the ceremonial law was most important.
    - 2) Jesus confronted them on this issue as recorded in Mt 23:23: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (Mt 23:23).
  - b. A whole burnt offering (Gk., *olokautomaton*) was offered at the temple every morning and evening as a fellowship offering to God. The Jews believed that these daily burnt offering ensured their on-going relationship with God. But did they?
  - c. God said from the beginning that He was not pleased with sacrifices but with demonstrations of love through doing what is right.
    - 1) Amos declared God word on the matter when he said, “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Am 5:21-24)
    - 2) Hosea also proclaimed God’s will when he said, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Ho 6:6).

- d. Akin concludes, “Real religion ultimately is a matter of the heart. Religious rituals always must give way to the superiority of a right relationship with God and others. . . . entering the kingdom of God is a matter of heart devotion not hard duty. Obeying rules and regulations will never get me into the kingdom because I can never measure up to God’s perfect standard. . . . One draws near and enters the kingdom not by religion but by a relationship with Jesus, a relationship that results in loving God supremely and others genuinely” (Akin, 290-1).
4. The teacher is on the right track with his thinking.
5. The Parable of the Good Samaritan follows this dialogue in Lk 10:25-37. In it Jesus shares that everyone, even those we dislike, are our neighbors and ones we should love self-sacrificially.

#### **D. Jesus’ Conclusion and the End of the Debate (34)**

1. Jesus acknowledged that the teacher had answered “wisely” (Gk., *nounechos* – “a mind-having way, i.e. prudently, discreetly”).
  - a. Jesus said to the teacher “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”
  - b. Remember that Jesus came proclaiming “The kingdom of God is at hand. . . .” (Mk 1:15).
  - c. This teacher heard and understood Jesus’ teaching with his mind, but his heart was not yet there.
  - d. Jesus encouraged him to go the rest of the way by giving his heart to God by having faith in Jesus.
  - e. All that was need for him to enter the kingdom was a repentant heart and faith in Jesus.
2. “And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.”
3. Next week, Jesus will ask a final tricky question of those listening—the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and teachers of the law. We will explore that question next week in our study of Mk 12:35-37.

#### **E. Questions/Thoughts for Reflection**

1. How is obedience to Jesus’ two great commands different from observing religious ritual?
2. Is loving God by obedience to Jesus’ commands in this passage easier or harder than loving God by observing ritual?
3. Why did God command Israel to observe sacrificial rituals, such as those commanded in Leviticus? Why don’t we keep that part of God’s Law today?
4. How did Jesus exemplify perfect love for God and neighbor with His life?