

## THE FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Mark 12:28-34

**Intro:** When the Apostle Paul was instructing Timothy, his son in the faith, regarding the ministry (as he did in 1 and 2 Timothy), he said many wise things which still hold good for the ministry today. In fact, everybody in the church needs to know these two epistles, plus Paul's epistle to Titus. If these three epistles had been the handbook of church leaders, the church would not have gotten off into so many of the things that are being done today. Often I think of those words which come at the end of 2 Timothy 2, beginning with verse 23, where we find these words reading to the end of the chapter:

23 But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,

25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will (2 Tim. 2:23-26).

Notice the word "strifes" in verse 23, and the same word, but in its verb form, appears in verse 24, where we read "strive." It means *to make war*, but in a lesser sense, *to argue, to engage in controversy, to do battle*. Paul wanted Timothy to remember that he was not called to be a debater, but a preacher, one who proclaimed the truth. Some Christians like to argue the truth, but argument usually makes people stand more firmly in the position that they already hold, with minds that are closed to the truth of God's Word. And we all need to remember this. Paul told Timothy in chapter 4 of this epistle to "preach the Word." He was to proclaim the message, not argue about it—not debate it. People are not won to the truth and to the Lord by arguing.

I remember when I was a student at the University of British Columbia years ago that a speaker came to speak to the Inter-Varsity group up there, and the students arranged for him to debate one of the professors concerning the Bible. The auditorium was packed with Christians and non-Christians, but the Christians were disappointed because the university professor humiliated the speaker who was visiting on campus. Why was that? Because the visiting speaker allowed himself to be pulled down to the level of mere argument, and he departed from the high position to

which we as Christians are called, that of proclaiming the Word of God.

Now this does not mean that we cannot ask questions. We should do all that we can to make the truth clear to our hearers. People will often try to engage us in controversy. This did this with our Lord. But the Lord was an example for all of to follow in the way He answered those who were inclined to draw Him into an argument.

The passage I have chosen for my text today gives us real food for thought regarding the ministry. I know you haven't had the time to look at the context of my text, but let us take a brief look at it before we come to Mark 12:28 where my text begins.

### **I. THE CONTEXT OF MARK 12:28-34.**

We will have to go back to Mark 11:15 where we are told about the Lord coming into Jerusalem where he drove the money changers out of the temple. This infuriated the scribes and the chief priests (11:18), and they tried to figure out how they could kill the Lord.

The next day the Lord came to the temple again (11:27), and the chief priests and scribes and elders wanted to know who gave Him the authority to do what He had done. It was then that the Lord asked them about the ministry of John the Baptist. (See vv. 29-33, and read.)

Following this the Lord spoke the parable that we have at the beginning of chapter 12. (Read 12:1-11). They knew that the Lord had spoken the parable against them, and they tried to arrest the Lord then and there, but they were afraid of what the people might do. *But this began some attempts to draw the Lord into controversy.*

The first who tried were the Pharisees and the Herodians, and they raised the question of taxes. (Read 12:13-17.)

There was no room for argument there.

Next the Sadducees took their turn. They tried to catch the Lord on a doctrinal point regarding the election. (Read 12:18-27.)

It was the Lord's command of the truth which silenced the Sadducees.

Finally, one of the scribes came with his question, "Which is the first

commandment of all?” In Matthew’s account we are told that this scribe, one of the Pharisees, was tempting our Lord. The account given in Luke’s Gospel probably was an entirely different incident because there (Luke 10:25-37) the lawyer asked the Lord, tempting him, what he should do to inherit eternal life. But let us confine our attention tonight to Mark’s account. There the scribe asked, “What is the first commandment of all?”

## II. “THE FIRST COMMANDMENT” (Mark 12:29-30).

The Lord understood the scribe to be asking what was *the first in order of importance of all of the commandments of Scripture*, not the first which was ever given. The first to be given was God’s command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful, and to multiply, and to replenish and subdue the earth, with dominion over the fish, and the birds, and every living thing that moved upon the earth. The scribe would not have needed the Lord to tell him what the first commandment was that was given by God to man. What he wanted to know was what of all of the hundreds of commandments in the Word of God was *the first in order of importance*. *He wanted to know that if the Lord were listing all of the commandments of the Word of God in their order of importance, which one would he put first in the list?*

The scribe, as his name suggests, was one who spent his life copying the Scriptures. He had spent hours, day after day, with the Word of God.. He may have asked this question of others more times than he could remember. And had gotten many different answers. He had heard how the Lord had answered those who had questioned Him before, not allowing His enemies to draw Him into controversy, and so he took this opportunity to question this great Teacher Who had amazed the people whom he had taught because He taught them “with authority,” and not as the scribes were accustomed to teach.

The Lord did a very interesting and instructive thing. Without hesitating at all, He referred to Deut. 6:4-5, and quoting those verses He made a statement of doctrine, and then gave *the first commandment*.

### A. The statement of doctrine (Mark 12:29).

Commandments in Scripture are based upon doctrine. The teaching of doctrine is incomplete without the practical application. But we don’t begin with the practical application. It is the doctrine which makes sense out of the commandment.

So what is the doctrine? It is this: “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord.”

— This is not only a declaration of the absolute Deity of the Lord their God, but of His unique Deity. There is no other God except the Lord. He alone has the rightful claim to Deity. To worship any other except for Jehovah is blasphemy, and would without exception bring judgment. This is the basic truth of theology, and we know now in an even better way that when the Lord spoke of Jehovah Elohim, He was speaking of Three Persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now let us turn to the commandment, the first commandment.

### **B. The commandment (Mark 12:30).**

— It would not seem unlikely that the scribe was actually thinking about the ten commandments which God had given to Moses on the tablets of stone. For them to be preserved in that special way surely would indicate that they were very important. Besides, they spoke of two relationships. First, the people’s relationship to God, and then the people’s relationship to people. Everyone would probably be inclined to agree that commandments which have to do with our relationship with God are the most important, and that our other relationships would follow.

But I believe that what the Lord said to Moses on that occasion is full of the most important significance for all believers, from that day until this.

The first commandment could have been that you shall believe this great statement of faith, that the Lord is the only God. And that is very, very important. Some people don’t believe in any God (or at least they say that is their conviction). Others worship other gods, and there are many of them. Some people are ignorantly generous and say that it doesn’t make any difference what God you believe in just as long as you believe in some God. But the Lord did not say that you should believe in the Lord with all your heart, etc.

— The first commandment could have been that we are to trust the Lord in everyday life, and that would have been very important as well. And the Bible says a lot about trusting the Lord. Most of us don’t trust Him enough.

No, it wasn’t just to believe that doctrine, nor to trust the Lord in daily

life, as important as both of these are. But you can see that it was that the first, the most important, the commandment which tops all other commandments was, and is, “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all they mind, and withal thy strength: this is the first commandment.” By the words of God Himself, and here in our text, confirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ, there is no greater commandment, no commandment that can supercede this commandment.

Now let me go back over what I have just said, and let me ask all of us a couple of questions.

*Do we realize that we can believe in God without really loving Him? Do you realize that you can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and really be saved, without loving Him? And do we realize that we can trust the Lord for the supply of our needs, and trust Him in the difficult times in our lives, without really loving Him?* Think about these questions. Isn't there sometimes a line drawn in our experience between really knowing the Lord, and really loving Him. Do we sometimes trust the Lord because we have no other one to turn to, and because we really want to trust Him, but we would have to confess that our love has not preceded our faith, our trust.

I wonder if Peter's experience before and after His denial doesn't have a lesson for us along this line. He was a devoted follower, disciple, and apostle. And he confidently declared that if all of the others were to desert the Lord, he would never fail the Lord. And how was Peter restored to fellowship with the Lord? Did the Lord say to him, “Peter, are you sure you are saved?” Or, “Peter, do you really believe that I am the Son of God?” Or, “Peter, where is your faith—don't you trust me to take care of you?” No, you all know that what the Lord said to Peter was, “Peter, lovest thou me...?” And the Lord used both of the prominent words for love to search through and through the heart of the Apostle Peter.

How can we describe a person who loves another person? Well, if you love another person, you want to be with him, or her. If you love another person it is hard not to be talking about them, and you especially enjoy talking with them. And when you love a person, you want to please that person, and you keep trying to do anything that you can to express your love by doing all that you can to show your love.

Why was it that the church at Ephesus was in trouble in the later days of

the Apostle John's ministry? Was it because they were not serving the Lord? No, they were busier than ever. Was it because they had departed from the faith? No, they had exposed those who falsely claimed that they were apostles. No, it wasn't any of those things that normally would cause us to be alarmed. Their problem was this: the Lord said, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." One translation renders this verse (Rev. 2:4), "Because you do not love me like you used to love me."

We can be perfectly orthodox. We can be busy at work serving the Lord. We can pray, and tell the Lord that we are trusting Him to meet our needs. And at the same time, not love the Lord the way He wants us to love Him.

How does He want us to love Him?

I have chosen Mark's account because Mark included a fourth word that is not in Matthew, nor in Deuteronomy. This is the way the Spirit of God led John Mark to tell us what the Lord said:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment (Mark 12:30).

Look all through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and you will not find a single commandment which goes ahead of this one. No commandment is more important than this. No other can surpass it. It is overwhelmingly the will of God that we love Him, that we love our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we love the Holy Spirit.

How are we to love the Lord? With all of our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. Expositors have seemed to shy away from trying to explain what the Lord meant by all of these words, and I am not sure that I know exactly what the Lord meant. Ezra Gould, who wrote the commentary on Mark in the ICC, said this regarding these words:

There is no attempt at classification, or exactness of statement, but simply to express in a strong way the whole being (p. 232).

I agree that our Lord was seeking "to express in a strong way the whole being," that is, that we are to love Him with our whole being, but the Lord never used words just for the sake of filling space.

To love the Lord with all of our hearts means that He has first place in our hearts. Think of the person that you love the most in this life, and then ask yourself if you love the Lord even more. To love the Lord with all of our hearts also means that we really love Him. We believe in Him and trust

Him because we love Him. It is our love that gives meaning to our faith and to our obedience. A child can obey his parents because he is afraid not to, but what a difference there is for the child and for his parent if the child obeys out of love.

To love with our souls is perhaps the most difficult of these expressions, but I think that soul can be used here of our lives here and now. Our lives from day to day are to show that we are a people who are in love with the Lord. Our lives are built around our fellowship with Him. We live to please Him, and we delight in doing His will.

To love with our minds is to love with our understanding. We drink in the truth about God. We read our Bibles to learn of Him. And the more we know of His glorious attributes, the more we love Him for what He is. We wouldn't want to make any changes in Him. And we are never disappointed with what new insights we have concerning our wonderful God.

To love Him with our strength again means that our energies are devoted to His glory and to His will. We love Him, too, for the strength He gives us to face our trials, and to persevere in serving Him when it all seems so fruitless.

To love the Lord with all of our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, means that the Lord has become more precious to us than life itself, and that we are looking forward to that wonderful day when we will see Him, and be like Him, and be with Him forever—with everyone else who has learned to love Him as we do.

**Concl:** This scribe commended the Lord for what He said. Evidently in pouring over the Scriptures the Holy Spirit had begun to teach this scribe these great truths. I'm inclined to believe that we will meet that scribe some day. The Lord told him that he was not far from the kingdom, that is, that he was very close to being saved. And we know that no man can come unless the Father were drawing him.

If we look into our hearts and realize that our love for the Lord is not what it used to be, let us go to the Lord, confess our sin and tell Him our need, so that our love may again begin to grow, and that we may enjoy the precious fellowship with Christ which once was such a joy to us.

Whatever may be the condition of our heart, let us pray for a greater love for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.