

Ethics of Grace

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 12:28-34

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For those of you who are joining us, perhaps for the first time visiting with us, we have been this year largely in the Gospel of Mark. We are reaching towards the end of the Gospel of Mark, and this morning we're in Mark Chapter 12. This marks a change in the Gospel, in that Jesus is now turning towards his destination of the cross. It also marks a turning point, because up until this particular conversation with this scribe that he has, it has been a debate. There have been those who are trying to trap Jesus, trap him into teaching about the resurrection, trap him into considering about taxes. These are ways in which they've tried to catch Jesus in the hopes that they will have a reason to have an accusation against him.

But this question comes from one who is not ready to trap Jesus, but rather is inquiring. He's interested. He desires to know. And it gives Jesus an opportunity to respond to what my professor and former president of Covenant Seminary calls "The Ethics of Grace." What are we called to do and to be as believers. Jesus gives us this answer. Again, Mark Chapter 12. I'll begin reading in verse 28 to verse 34.

²⁸ And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.' ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Please pray with me. We ask you now, Lord, that by the power of your Holy Spirit working through the power of your living word, that you would open up our minds and our hearts to the call of grace—not to merely be those who receive it, who experience it, but rather add to that receiving to give it away, to extend it. Help us, we pray, O Lord, as we stand before your word, as we sit and are taught. May your Holy Spirit apply it to us where we are this morning. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So I shared with some of you, and perhaps I've referred to it over the last few months, but it is still a rite of passage, a moment in my life and in my daughter's life. She is learning to drive. And as is the fortunate requirement in the state of Maryland she needs sixty hours and nine months to do it. And I still can't believe they ever allowed us on the road in South Carolina at age fifteen with much less training. But it's an opportunity to give her the opportunity to learn independence, to learn the rules of the road, the obligations.

Now what's interesting is, is that when she's not driving and I am—particularly after she took the class, that two weeks where they drilled through all the rules and obligations. Some of you know where I'm going. And she was sitting in the passenger seat. I will not forget the first time we pulled to the stop sign on our street. She says, "Well, that wasn't a very good stop." And of course, I'm like, ah well, you know. . . But I'm like, no, it's very good that you're very strict here at the beginning of your driving career. And of course it goes on and you know, and then when she's driving and she's doing the speed limit, but it feels rather slow. You say, that's okay, honey, just knock it up a little bit. "No, no, no, no, no, no no!" And so it's a lesson in the ethics of driving. And you're reminded of all the things you were familiar with, and you're now being reacquainted with the rules of the road.

They had been debating the nature of the law, the requirements, in disputing what is this Jesus teaching. And so a scribe. . . Now, a scribe's job is to know exactly what the word says and to know it backwards and forwards. But he comes in the middle of this dispute and he's asking for a summary. He's actually asking Jesus to do something even scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees—nobody did this—to ask the question, "What is the most important commandment." So as we look at what Jesus's answer is and at what the question is, you'll see in your outline he asks an appropriate, but yet **A Legal Question**. Jesus, however, gives **A Relational Answer**. **A Legal Question and A Relational Answer**.

Let me show you what I mean. **A Legal Question**. Verse 28. He comes up and he says, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" This question, first and foremost, demonstrates he has in his mind legal ramifications. That is, the law of God—as it has already been read this morning—he has first in his mind. . . As a subset of it being a legal question, first and foremost, he's wondering how am I standing. What is my standing before a holy God? That's his primary question. He's wanting to understand, first, does he even understand what the import of the law is. And second, not only is it a question of standing, not only of what he understands of what he's taught, it's also secondly a question of performance. So once he knows, perhaps, what the summary is, what the most important law is, not only he is able to understand where he is, but also how is his performance.

This is important, because first and foremost, there were 613 separate commands in the first five books of the Bible according to the scribes and the Pharisees. 613 separate commands. So here's what they did do. They had sets of laws that they considered "heavy" and then laws that were considered "light," but they did not prioritize them. And so it's unusual for the scribe to ask it in this way: What is the most important one? Of the 613, please help me to understand how am I performing.

There is nothing more humbling than driving with your sixteen-year-old who remembers more about what you're supposed to be doing and not to be doing on the road, than me who's teaching, who's been driving for way too long—and I've forgotten. It's humbling. And as I'm watching her follow the rules, I begin to see where I cut corners. Literally cut corners. And so it is a humbling experience. And I was curious as to what's going to happen next week when she begins her in-driving course with her teacher, because she's going to say, "Who taught you that?!"

And so it's a reminder that this scribe is asking what would be a natural question to ask. This doesn't make him bad. This doesn't make him overly performance-oriented. He understands.

He's been studying the law—613. He wants to know, “How am I doing?? Caroline will be tested, and my teaching of her will be tested. He knows he will be tested. And so he believes. So this legal question is surrounding, “Where's my standing? How's my performance?”

And so on one level, if we left it there, it would seem like this guy is, he's really far away from where he needs to be with regard to where Jesus is. Except this legal question also demonstrates there's a change happening in this man's life. Because he's the only one of his ilk who goes to Jesus and asks a question like this with this posture. He goes to him as a teacher, not to catch him, not to trap him, but to learn. Because we recognize that he's going, at least, to the right person to ask.

And in some sense what happens in this interchange is a picture of what, as one writer said, what might have been, had what is happening in the heart of the scribe spread throughout his colleagues, had they come to Jesus simply asking, “Please teach me.” What this man is experiencing, if your whole life you've learned and been taught: you pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you need to help yourself, you need to work hard, you need to achieve these expectations, no one else will achieve them for you. Here is the external rewarding you will receive if you work hard enough. If you've had your life built on this idea of incentives—if I do what is right, then good will happen to me. If I do what is wrong, then my hand will get smacked. If I drive between the ditches I will not end up in trouble. If your whole life is predicated on your understanding of the law, your performance in it, and now you're going to him and asking these questions—this man is very much like you and me.

In our heart of hearts none of us like being recipients of grace. We want to know that we've shown up with what is necessary to provide for ourselves. We don't like to be in need. We want to know how we're doing. I recall an author several years ago explain this experience of what it was like to be in the line at a grocery store. As he was waiting with his groceries to go to the cashier, the person in front of him was having trouble figuring out if they had enough food stamps to pay for their groceries. And as they were going through their pockets, as they were going through their wallet, he was becoming uncomfortable. He wanted to look away. He tried to figure out if...Okay, look at my list, make sure I got everything I wanted. And he talked about how it was hard for him to see someone else in need, trying to figure out if they had enough, because he recognized the problem wasn't them. The awkwardness was what was going on in his own heart. He didn't ever want to be thought of as someone who needed grace.

I've got what I need. I'll pay in full. We live much of our lives predicated on what our performance and our standing is. Just like this man. But he comes to the right person to ask the question.

[A Relational Answer]

Now let's look at Jesus's answer. Jesus says, “ ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall 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: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no the commandment greater than these.”

Now I want to state at the outset, before looking at Jesus's answer, is that over the years in pastoral ministry I have had the opportunity to meet Christians from lots of different walks of life and backgrounds. And it is not unusual to hear somewhere in the mix, when you ask someone to define the gospel, that this is how they define the gospel: The gospel is to love the

Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps some of you've heard that. Perhaps some of you have believed that this is what the gospel is. This is not the gospel. If this is the gospel, this is really bad news. Because guess what, it exposes our hearts for where [they] really are. If this is what I have to do, then I'm in trouble. I don't know about you. What this does do is, it demonstrates why these ethics are ethics of grace, they're not a means to grace. There an outworking of grace. What do I mean. Well, let's look at it.

First of all, Jesus's answer demonstrates his relationship to orthodoxy, meaning, why he is to be considered 'The Teacher.' Because Jesus does something that nobody else does. There is absolutely no precedent for how Jesus answers this question. Why? First, in the first commandment that he says is the most important he says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is one," which heretofore had been the preamble to the Shema, which was read earlier in the service, from Deuteronomy Chapter 6. This was to be recited every day in a Jewish household at meals, at the beginning, and at the end of the day. It was often written down on a small parchment paper and affixed to the door frame of the house when you enter in, because you were to remember it. You were to affix it where you live. In our house in New Jersey when we are redoing it, I discovered inside of one of the closets one of these Shemas that had been rolled up very, very tightly and placed in a very small metal capsule and then nailed just over the door frame. I removed it and scraped off the paint and took it out and unfolded it, and in Hebrew was the Shema. So Jesus takes the preamble and makes it a command. The Lord your God, O Israel, is one.

But then Jesus says this. After he says to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—just as it says in the Shema—he then says the second commandment, which is to love your neighbor as yourself. That's not included in the Shema. It's all the way over in Leviticus 19. So what Jesus does is, he demonstrates that he has the ability not only to know the word, but as "The Teacher" he's able to then bring them all under one simple rubric. To be orthodox, to be a teacher, is to understand that the greatest commandment is love. Love to God, who is one, with all of your being, and to love your neighbor.

But secondly, not only does this answer demonstrate Jesus's orthodoxy, it demonstrates Jesus's practice. Jesus' practice has been just these things. Jesus has demonstrated grace and compassion on those who have need. On those who confront him, try to trap him, he still responds—though directly with truth, he does so with mercy and compassion. Jesus has demonstrated loving his neighbor, but he has also demonstrated his love to the Father by his practices and the way in which he has lived his life. The shaping of his prayer life and of his passion and desire for the temple to be a place, a house of prayer for the Lord. Jesus has demonstrated that this is his practice.

So, so far, Jesus understands that in his answer he's showing first his relationship inferred here: the relationship he has with orthodoxy, the Old Testament, how it's being brought into the new, and Jesus's advent. But he's also demonstrating what is his practice, and now he's teaching the scribe. But there's one more, and this is the most relational aspect. Jesus's answer demonstrates the context of our practice of love to God and love to neighbor, which is a context that if we miss it, we turn we turn Christianity into legalism. What do I mean.

Our practice, our understanding, our relationship, is all based on a prior relationship, and that relationship is a covenant relationship, that relationship with God the Father. Why do I say

that? Because Jesus's quotes, as he demonstrates one of the most important laws, he does so quoting from the context of God establishing his covenant with Israel. What came first was not the law. Grace preceded the law. Relationship preceded the law. God's love to Israel preceded the law. God's mercy to humanity preceded the law. And then even bound up within the law—and this is key—there was grace in the law. Why? Because if we failed to follow the law we had the ability to go and make proper sacrifice for sin. But the context in which Jesus is answering this question about the law, he grounds it in the context first and foremost. You cannot apply this law, you cannot pursue it, unless you first understand it's built upon the rock of God's love and grace. It is God's love for us, it is God's grace to us that is the ground of practicing love to him and love to neighbor, not the other way around. Because if it is the other way around, then we have no ground for grace. The only ground we have is our performance.

This astounded the scribe. Though you can't see it, you can hear it in his answer. What does he say? "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and that there is no other besides him. And to love him with all heart and with all understanding with all strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself..."—and this is the stunning part—"...is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." In essence, he just said, "What you have just established is more important than all of the rest of the law added together." And if there was a heavy and a light set of laws, the heavy was definitely the sacrifices. And the scribe is now seeing whoa, what is most important is actually what he ought to have remembered—what the Lord desires is not our sacrifices and our offerings, but our hearts. This is what the Lord desires, and the scribe recognizes it, and he says this is the most important thing.

And Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Now in that statement Jesus is establishing—if he hadn't already established it—that he is a very different teacher. He is a very different prophet. Jesus is now saying where someone is vis-à-vis the kingdom. All through this teaching Jesus is coming out from all the disputes and all the arguments, all the attempted traps, and he's coming forth as a teacher. And he is coming forth more and more as the Lord, because the cross is looming ever closer.

So the question is this. If the Lord has loved us and his love is eternal—because Jesus teaches that God is love—if God knows the beginning from the end, if he is the Alpha and the Omega, and this one has loved us so completely—and Jesus is getting ready to demonstrate just how complete that love is. If that love is inexhaustible, then what that does is the gospel. That's the gospel. It comes right in, and it begins to change our hearts. Now we begin to see loving the Lord with all that I am is in response to all that he is. Let me say it again. Our love towards the Lord and all that we are is all based on all that he is. If his love cannot be exhausted, then what does that do? That pulls forth our love. If God has said I will never leave you nor forsake you, then what does that do? That means we are safe in his hands. We are not performing; we are not trying to make it all look good. We are safe—safe in his love and safe in his mercy.

But then, if while we were yet his enemies, God demonstrated his love for us in giving of his Son, if Jesus is now walking towards the trial and the crucifixion and he has loved us in the midst of our sin, how does that change our hearts in the way in which we love each other. If we cannot love and forgive each other—I've said it before, I'll say it again—we are absolutely wasting our time this morning. There are better places to go and hear music. There are more beautiful buildings. There are cooler places to be, more lovely places to be than Howard County—yes, believe it or not. All this is great, all of it's wonderful. But if we do not see that

God's grace and his love isn't just for us, but it's for giving away, we will have missed the heart of the gospel. Why? Because if you have been forgiven, we forgive others.

It is the ethics. This is what we are commanded to do—not to earn favor, but to recognize we've been shown favor. We forgive, not because we're trying to be magnanimous or to be better or to have some leverage over someone else, but rather we recognize we've been made low because we have been greatly forgiven. If we fail to do that we miss the heart of the gospel. And it is not good news.

Jesus grounds his answer in relationship. The most important commands: yes, love the Lord your God with all that you are, and to love neighbor as yourself. Because God has loved you with all that he has in his Son, who has loved you as his neighbor and has called you sinners friends, and has drawn us close into the power of his body and his blood given for us, so that we might turn around and say: Who isn't my neighbor? So as we give to storm relief, we do so as neighbors. As we give food to the hungry, we do so as neighbors. As we care and relate to those in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, in our own homes—as we seek to extend forgiveness and receive forgiveness, we do so as neighbors.

Love as I have loved you. Forgive as I have forgiven you. This is the heart of the gospel, and it is that which motivates and animates our response to Jesus. May the Lord transform our hearts first. May Jesus be more beautiful to you today than ever before. May his Spirit demonstrate to you, in the deep places of your heart and mind, of just how great and big and beautiful is his love. But then may he make us a people ready to love him in response and to give love away.

Let's pray. Now we ask you, O Lord, to make us those who hear your word, these commands. But help us to hear these commands in the context of your love towards us in Jesus Christ. And may that animate us in our worship. May we love you more fully, more willingly, more generously—and may we seek to love others as we have been loved. So Lord, we ask you by your Spirit, make us a people you desire us to be. It is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.