

The Main Thing

Mark 12:28-32

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A week ago, after watching Wisconsin beat Nebraska in football, I was thrilled to hear that Michigan lost to Michigan State. During a commercial break, a promo for Michigan came on the screen. The voiceover described a wounded wolverine and then showed clips of players tackling, running, passing and scoring. As the 30-second spot was wrapping up, this tagline came on the screen: *“Every game is everything.”* This made me LOL because Michigan had just lost. If every game is everything, what happens when you lose? Does that mean you are nothing? If we put our sense of security and significance in sports, as if it is everything, we will be let down...especially if you're a Michigan fan.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing because only God is everything.

Please turn to Mark 12:28-31 where we're introduced to a man who was trying to figure out what was everything: ***“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?’ Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, ‘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 other commandment greater than these.”***

Here's the setting. It's the last week of Jesus' life and He's just cleared out the temple and chased away the moneychangers. As a result, his enemies have unleashed a hurricane of hatred toward Him. After disposing of the Pharisees and the Herodians and making the Sadducees sad, a scribe was drawn to Jesus because he heard that Jesus ***“answered them well,”*** which means, *“admirably or beautifully.”*

The title *scribe* describes the work these men did to hand copy the Scriptures. They were also called *teachers* because they taught the Torah to young men. In addition, they were known as *lawyers* since they often ruled on disputes.

This is the first time since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem that a solitary individual comes up to Him. This seeking scribe had a question: ***“Which commandment is the most important of all?”***

He wants to know which one has the most weight. The phrase, ***“most important”*** means, *“foremost.”* This was an often-debated question among the religious leaders. They liked to count and categorize the commands, arguing about which ones could be blown off and which had to be kept.

If I were to ask you, *“How many commandments are there?”* you might say, *“Ten.”* But if you asked a first-century Jew, he would say, *“613.”* The Pharisees had actually counted them – 248 were positive: *“do this”* or *“do that”* and 365 were negative: *“don’t do this, don’t do that.”* For them, a *“don’t a day”* kept the devil away!

As Dr. Seuss put it, *“Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple.”* The answer Jesus gives is simple and yet summarizes the entire teaching of Scripture: *Love God and love your neighbor.*

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing because only God is everything!

Notice that this time Jesus doesn’t answer a question with a question because this scribe is sincere. His answer is immediate and direct in verse 29: ***“The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’”*** The top priority, the consummate command is so important that Jesus quotes “The Shema,” which literally means, *“to hear”* and comes from the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4: ***“Shema, Israel...”*** The greatest commandment starts with listening to the Lord.

We might say, *“Listen up!”* The *Shema* is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to the Almighty. It was said when arising in the morning and when going to bed at night. It was the first prayer that a Jewish child was taught to pray and it was the last thing a Jew would pray prior to death.

Notice that Jesus goes right to Scripture as He establishes three truths:

- **God is powerful.** The name “*Lord*” is Yahweh, the self-existent one. The name “*God*” is Elohim, the creator. This name is in the plural, which is early evidence for the Trinity.
- **God is personal.** Do you see the phrase, “*our God*”? God is powerful *and* He is personal; He is majestic *and* He is mine; He is other *and* He is ours. Warren Wiersbe points out that Jesus’ answer reveals that we are to live “*not by rules but by relationships.*”
- **God is preeminent.** We see that Yahweh is unique, “*the Lord is one.*” J. Vernon McGee translates it this way: “*Jehovah our Elohim is one Jehovah.*” We could render it, “*The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.*” The Israelites are about to enter a land with more than 40 people groups, filled with polytheism and pantheism. In the midst of all this pluralism, they must not forget there is only one God. That’s a good word for us.

The answer Jesus gives is two-fold.

1. Love God with all you have. Verse 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.*” The phrase, “*And you shall love...*” is the language of law. It’s a command that’s actually in the future imperative. It can be translated like this, “*You will love...*”

- **Love is more than a feeling.** Love is principally an action; not primarily an emotion. Jesus could have chosen one of four Greek words for love. *Eros* refers to romantic love. *Storgh* speaks of the love of things. *Phileao* is the love between brothers. But this verse uses the verb *agapao*, which speaks of a never-ending, unchanging, unconditional, all-consuming love that is loyal.
- **Love is to be comprehensive.** The word “*all*” is used four times, and literally means, “*the entire, the whole.*” God’s whole-hearted love for us cannot be answered with half-hearted commitment from us. By describing the heart, soul, mind, and strength, no area is left out. We’re to love Him with everything we have – with devotion in our hearts, with passion in our souls, with thoughtfulness in our heads, and with passionate energy through our hands and our feet.

We’re to love Him ahead of everything else and love Him fervently with every faculty of our being. We’re to love Him emotionally, intellectually, volitionally and physically. Note that we’re to not just be emotional in our

expression of love but neither are we to only focus on the intellectual. As Jesus said in John 4:24, we're to worship Him in spirit *and* truth. God's limitless love for us should drive out any lukewarmness that we may have for Him. If God does not have all of my heart he will soon not have any.

I love these words from Isaac Watts: "*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*" And I like this honesty from William Cowper: "*Lord, it is my chief complaint that my love is cold and faint; yet I love Thee and adore; O for grace to love Thee more.*"

I've been pondering a quote from Charles Spurgeon this week, "*If Christ is not all to you He is nothing to you. He will never go into partnership as a part Saviour of men. If He be something He must be everything, and if He be not everything He is nothing to you.*"

The first part of the answer Jesus gives covers the vertical dimension and now He describes love on the horizontal level.

2. Love your neighbor as yourself. True to form, Jesus goes to Scripture again and this time in verse 31 He quotes Leviticus 19:18: "***The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.***" The people standing there that day didn't see this one coming because these two commands were never linked together before. No rabbi had ever said that the sum of Scripture is to love God and love others.

Notice again that *agapao* love is used. We're to love our neighbors with limitless and unconditional love. We're to love our neighbors with the same kind of love we have for ourselves by giving others the attention we give ourselves.

I like how the Believer's Bible Commentary puts it: "*We are to love God more than ourselves, and our neighbor as ourselves. Thus, the life that really counts is concerned first with God, then with others.*"

In the heart of the Book of Leviticus, a book that deals with laws and sacrifices, we see the call to love our neighbor.

Listen to all of Leviticus 19:18: "***You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.***" That means that we must give up our grudges and

grievances and refuse to take vengeance on someone who has wronged us. And we're to love our neighbors *because* God says, **"I am the LORD."** I sat down this week and read Leviticus 19 and discovered that the call to care for others is linked *16 different times to the identity of God!*

Here's just one example from verses 33-34: ***"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."*** This is the word for refugee or foreigner. He wants His people to care for strangers because they themselves were once strangers in the land. Abraham was a migrant; Naomi migrated to Moab and Ruth the Moabitess eventually immigrated to Israel. Joseph was a victim of human trafficking and then an alien in Egypt. The whole nation of Israel had immigrant status in Egypt for 400 years. Jesus was a refugee as well when He and his earthly family had to flee to Egypt.

Beth and I attended the World Relief banquet on Thursday night. World Relief is one of our Go Team partners. We were reminded of the call to serve the suffering and stand for the vulnerable. We're to love the little, the least and the lost because God is the Lord our God.

Since He is Lord, I must love Him and I must love those whom He loves. His self-declaration of who He is creates within me an obligation to love Him and to love others. And how I treat others is inseparably linked to how I view God. If I'm not obeying the second commandment I'm disobeying the first. We must keep the order straight – our priority is to love God and then proceeding from that, we love others. If we just love others, we can fall into humanism. If we only focus on God, we'll become disconnected from people.

Jesus then states: ***"There is no other commandment greater than these."*** It's interesting that though this man asked for the one greatest commandment, Jesus actually gave Him two. He did so because loving others is the practical outworking of loving God. And yet, He uses the singular ***"commandment"*** to show that these two commandments are complementary and integrally related and therefore cannot be separated. *The main thing we must do is to keep the main thing the main thing.* And that main thing is to love God and love our neighbors.

If you think of the 10 commandments, loving God covers the first four and loving our neighbor summarizes the last six. In Matthew 22:40 Jesus says, ***"On these two***

commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” One pastor puts it this way: *“Everything that God has said, and everything God will ever say is supported and suspended by these two commandments.”* The King James says: *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

We have a storm door on the back of our house that needs to be replaced. Every time I open the door, the top hinge pops out. The bottom hinge is OK so far but the door no longer closes correctly. Loving God is like the top hinge of a door and loving others is like the bottom hinge. You need both in order for everything to work correctly.

It's pretty easy to say that we love God; it's another matter to say we love our neighbors. I like the honesty of one guy who said, *“To love the world to me is no chore; my big trouble is the guy next door!”* Someone else remarked, *“To dwell above with the saints we love will be grace and glory but to live with the saints we know, well that's a different story.”*

Did you notice that Jesus is not saying that we should just tolerate our neighbors or to just be nice to them. We're not just to be polite and pleasant. He's telling us to *love* them.

A bit of background is helpful here. There was a raging debate back then about whom a neighbor really was. The religious wanted to know who was *in* and who was *out*. Our word **“neighbor”** comes from two Anglo Saxon words ‘neah’ – from which we get our word near – and ‘boor,’ a farmer. A neighbor was literally the farmer whose field was next to your field. The Jews typically interpreted **“neighbor,”** as *“one who is near,”* that is, a fellow Jew. The Pharisees tended to reject “ordinary people” while a smaller community at Qumran excluded everyone who was not part of their group.

A neighbor is someone whose needs I see, whose needs I can meet. The question is not *“Who is my neighbor”* but rather, *“Am I being neighborly to everyone, even my enemies?”* To ask *“Who is my neighbor?”* is to look for a loophole by focusing on what claim others have on my time and energy and resources. To ask, *“Whose neighbor am I?”* is to focus on what I owe to the suffering people all around me. *A neighbor is anyone in need that God brings in front of me.* That's the message of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus concludes that narrative with these words in Luke 10:28: **“Do this and you will live.”** Loving our neighbors is life-giving.

It would be helpful us to begin praying something like this: *“Oh, God, don’t allow me to come into contact with anyone in need and leave him or her no better off than they were before I met them.”*

In his book, *Discover Your Mission Now*, Dave Ferguson recounts reading a doctoral thesis entitled, “Blessers versus Converters.” The researcher looked at two teams of short-term missionaries to Thailand with distinctly different strategies.

The team referred to as the “blessers” went with the intention of simply blessing people in practical ways. The “converters” went with the sole intention of converting people. Here’s a summary of what they discovered: *The “blessers” had a greater impact than the “converters,” with 50 times as many conversions as the “converters.”* Friends, let’s bless those who are in a mess. What if God meant we’re to love our actual neighbors?

Here are a couple practical questions: *How can I get better at what Jesus says matters most? How can I be the best neighbor I can be?* Here’s another: *If we moved out of our neighborhood, would anyone care? Would anyone even notice?*

Let’s turn the noun neighbor into a verb as we look for ways to be involved in neighboring. The simple acronym **BLESS** is a helpful guide.

Begin with prayer: *“God, how do you want me to bless the people in the places you’ve sent me to?”*

Listen with purpose: Take the time to listen to the needs, struggles and pain of people around you. Be present. Make yourself an easy person to bump into.

Eat together: Look for ways to have a cup of coffee, a meal or dessert.

Serve in love: Look for ways to respond to the needs, struggles and pain of people. When you see a need, meet that need. 1 Corinthians 10:24: ***“Let no one seek his one good, but the good of his neighbor.”***

Share your story: When the time is right, share the story of how Jesus Christ has changed your life.

We could summarize our responsibility this way: *Love where you live.*

A couple weeks ago, The Aspen Group, our ministry partner helping us to maximize our facility for greatest possible ministry impact, met with four different focus groups from Edgewood. These groups were made up of multiple generations and genders. Some have been at Edgewood for over 50 years and others for just five months. We had a mix of those who are married and those who are single. It was very encouraging to hear our people describe what comes to their minds when they think of Edgewood. Here are ten responses I wrote down:

1. Reaching community and the world
2. Missions-minded
3. Speaking into racial and cultural issues
4. Pastoral team connected in community
5. Involved with evangelical ministries in the QCA
6. People are living on mission
7. Burden for lost people
8. Engaged with neighbors
9. Passionate for the Word of God and for the world
10. People knew our vision statement: Gathering, Growing, Giving and Going

Aspen was very moved with all the ways Edgewood is living on mission and is encouraged by all the ministry that takes place in this facility and out in the community. They're excited to consider what will happen when we remove some of the barriers our building presents.

This made me think of another question: *What would happen in the QCA if we simply got better at the two things Jesus said matter most?*

Here are two simple prayers that we could pray every day:

1. God, help me to love you better today than I did yesterday.
2. Help me to love my neighbors better today than I did yesterday.

Close But Far Away

Let's go back to this close encounter. In verse 32, the scribe responds to Jesus: ***"You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him."*** It's comical that this guy is telling Jesus that He's right, isn't it?

The man then adds: ***“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.”*** He knew his Bible for he is making an allusion to 1 Samuel 15:22: ***“To obey is better than sacrifice.”***

Jesus responds to the man in verse 34: ***“And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’”*** The phrase, ***“not far from”*** is emphatic in the Greek. He was close, but not in the kingdom. He was good, but not good enough. He was not far from, and yet he was far away. He was on his way but had not yet received Jesus as the only way.

Jesus wanted him to see that even though he was close, there was still a chasm between him and the kingdom. He was religious, but did not yet have a saving relationship with the Savior. He was quite literally a few feet away from the King of the Kingdom. *Not far is still too far if you don’t make it to where you need to go.*

Right answers alone don’t get us to heaven; the only way in is by repenting of our sin and receiving Jesus Christ as substitute and Savior. To be close to the kingdom of God is not the same as being in the kingdom of God. You can be close but still not converted. You can know a lot and not be in the kingdom. Orthodox doctrine is good but it alone is not enough to keep you from damnation. You can be like the scribe and copy the Scriptures and still not be saved by the Savior. You could be an inch from heaven and still go to hell.

Let me be clear. Jesus is not saying that the way in is to love God and love other people. Why do I say that? Because no one can meet this standard of perfection. We all fall short. And that’s the point. We’re to recognize that we don’t love God with everything we have and we don’t love our neighbors as ourselves. God’s commands show us that we can’t keep them. But Jesus did. After we enter the kingdom of God, we can then love Him with everything we have and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Here’s the good news today. God is not far from you! Acts 17:27: ***“That they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.”***

I love how this encounter ends: ***“And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.”*** This is a double negative, meaning that absolutely no one, not even

one dared to ask any more questions. Why is that? Because some of us don't really want to hear the answers that Jesus gives. And yet, I wonder if some of you are not far from the kingdom right now? Could it be that today, right now, is the day that you enter the kingdom of God?

We don't know what happened with this scribe but we have no indication that he put his faith in Christ and followed him. How sad to be so close to Christ and not be converted. There was another religious man who had a close conversation with Christ in the Gospel of John. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 that he must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven. In John 7, in his capacity as a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus stood up for Christ. And in John 19, Nicodemus assists with the burial of Jesus and is called one of his disciples in verse 38.

We must move from just having some good feelings about Him to putting our faith in Him and following Him. Are you ready to do that right now? Turn from how you've been living. Repent of your loveless life. Recognize that through the death of Jesus, all your sins have been paid for...but you must be born again and receive Him by faith as your Lord and Savior.

Are you playing games, thinking that *every game is everything*? Do you love anything more than Christ? Are you giving your priority to a possession, a person or a pleasure? As part of Peter's restoration after bailing on Christ, Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him. Listen to the first question found in John 21:15: "***Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?***" Do I love the Lord more than everything else? Do you?

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing because only God is everything! Will you commit right now to follow Him so that you can love Him and love your neighbor?

Closing Song: "I will Follow"

*Where You go I'll go
Where You stay I'll stay
When You move I'll move
I will follow You
Whom You love I'll love
How You serve I'll serve
If this life I lose*

I will follow You

Closing Announcement – Pastor Brown preaching next weekend (live on Saturday)