

October 31, 2021
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 12:28-37 (Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Hebrews 9:11-14)

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Mark, the 12th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – and love your neighbor as yourself. If you had a nickel for every time you heard these commandments, you would have quite a pile of nickels. You hear it taught in the Catechism and in Bible study. You hear it preached from the pulpit. You *hear* these commandments over and over, but do you really **HEAR** them? Do the Greatest Commandments shape your thoughts and actions and lives in the vertical relationship between God and you – and – the horizontal relationship between you and your neighbor? Or, have they become so routine and mundane that you simply parrot them back as if stating your name, address, and birthdate at the doctor's office?

What would the world look like if everyone followed these commands? You could start watching the news again. Our government would start operating the way that it was intended to. People with opposing opinions would finally get along and tolerate each other. Which is why God calls His people to love like this. And He still expects it.

The setting for our Gospel is in Jerusalem just a few days before Jesus would be brutally crucified. The religious leaders are looking for a reason to arrest Him, perhaps by trapping Him in His words (cf: Mark 12:12-13) when a scribe heard Jesus debating with the leaders. And seeing that Jesus had answered all their questions well, he came forward and asked Him:

“Which commandment is the most important of all?” (Mark 12:28)

The scribes were a class of scholars who teach, copy, and interpret the Jewish Law for the people. At that time the rabbinic tradition counted 613 commandments in the Torah, that is the first five books of the Bible. There are 248 commands that say ***“thou shalt do this,”*** and 365 commands that say ***“thou shalt not do that.”*** It is possible that this scholar figured that regardless of which of the 613 commands Jesus picked as the greatest, he could find a way to dispute Jesus and accuse Him of teaching false doctrine. But as Jesus usually does, He does not answer in the precise way He is asked.

Without hesitation, Jesus gives a three-part answer. He first points the scribe back to the basics in the Torah. The answer to his question was written long ago by Moses in the book of

Deuteronomy, which you heard in our first reading. It is where God is addressing the people of Israel through His prophet Moses as they prepare to cross over the Jordan River and take possession of the Promised Land. (cf: Deuteronomy 6:1-9)

Jesus quotes Moses, saying:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4; cf: Mark 12:29)

It is a confession of faith known as the **Shema**. **Shema** is the Hebrew word which is translated as **hear**. (BDB. 1033) **Hear** O Israel! **Hear** all of the **Lord’s** children! In the Hebrew language, the word **Lord** is pronounced **Yahweh**. It is the most holy name for God in the Old Testament. It is so holy that orthodox Jews, even today, will not verbalize the name **Yahweh** out loud. They instead say **Adonai** or **Lord**.

The **Shema** is a confession of who **Yahweh** is, who **the Lord our God** is. It is the first prayer a Jewish child is taught to pray and observant Jews still pray it twice a day today. **The Lord our God, the Lord is one**. There are not many gods but only **the Lord**, the one true God. It is a sin to substitute the name of Allah or Confucius, or the names of a hundred other false gods in place of the most holy name of **the Lord**. **Hear** O brothers and sisters in Christ – **the Lord our God** is one God. There is no other besides him. (cf: Mark 12:32) **The Lord God** is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His name is personal. His name is the very essence of the Gospel and there is power in **hearing** the Gospel Word of **the Lord**. Scripture teaches that:

“... the gospel... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”
(Romans 1:16)

“... faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”
(Romans 10:17)

The Lord God alone is able to make and to keep an eternal covenant of salvation for mankind, which He fulfills in His Son, the God/man Christ Jesus. **The Lord God** is love. (cf: 1 John 4:8) **The Lord God** alone is able to save people from their sins. (cf: Matthew 1:21) **The Lord God** alone is able to sanctify you and keep you in body and soul unto life everlasting. (cf: 1 Thessalonians 5:23) You and I have the ability to love others **only** because **the Lord God** first loved us. (cf: 1 John 4:19)

In our Old Testament reading, through Moses, God Himself has confessed the Gospel to His people. And He next adds the Law – for this Gospel supplies the **supreme motive** for the keeping of the Great Commandment of the Law, which in part is:

“⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your [strength].” (Deuteronomy 6:5; cf: Mark 12:30)

Depending on your translation, back in our Gospel text, Jesus quotes Moses word for word, but also adds **“with all your mind.”** These four words: heart, soul, mind, and strength, describe your **whole self**. You are to love God with every fiber of your being. He is to be loved on the basis of His prior love for you.

Having stated the first part of the Greatest Commandment, Jesus secondly, connects the **Shema** with the ancient Levitical Law concerning one’s relationship with their neighbor saying:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:31; cf: Leviticus 19:18)

In the second part of His answer, Jesus upholds **Yahweh’s** moral Law recorded in the book of Leviticus (cf: Leviticus 19:9-18) that **Yahweh** wants **His** holiness reflected in the lives and conduct of **His people**, thus making them holy on the basis of His **prior** love toward them. You love your neighbor through **Yahweh**, who first loved you.

While attempting to enforce the 613 commandments in the Torah, the religious leaders of the day used the Law as a way of binding the people in a system of works that was completely devoid of love and empty of the Gospel. So Jesus is pointing them back to who God is. God is love and love is from God. (cf: 1 John 4:7–8) You are to love God with every fiber of your being. And you are to love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. The love of God and the love of others cannot be separated. You and I have the ability to love others **only** because **Yahweh** first loved us.

The love that Jesus is referring to in our text is **agape** love. It is a self-sacrificing love for others with no regard to self. You catch a glimpse of this love in the mom or dad who returns time and time again into the child’s room at night to calm their fears and wipe their tears. You see it in foster parents who attempt to restore normalcy into the lives of children who have been neglected, abused, or traumatized. You see it in memory care units where one spouse visits and cares for their partner, even though their partner no longer remembers who they are.

But we only catch glimpses. Because of our sinful nature, you and I cannot imagine loving this way all the time. It would be too exhausting. It would be too much work. When we catch the glimpse of self-sacrificing love in action, we wonder how those loving sacrificially can keep it up as long as they have. Because of our selfishness, we have no “**self**” left over to offer self-sacrifice.

In Jesus life and death, He demonstrates what **agape** love looks like. What self-sacrificial love looks like. Christ loved **Yahweh**, the Father, with every fiber of His being, submitting His whole Self to the will of the Father. (cf: Mark 14:36) He didn’t **have** to leave the glory of heaven. He didn’t **have** to take on human flesh. He didn’t have to be nailed to the cross. He could’ve prayed to the Father to send more than twelve legions of angels to save Him, but He knew the Scriptures must be fulfilled. (cf: Matthew 26:53–54) Jesus loved you – *literally* – to death.

And this is also how Jesus loves His neighbor. Who is His neighbor? It is those religious leaders who sought to arrest him, those who mocked Him and spit on Him, those who crucified Him and rejected Him, even you and me Christian who don’t love God above all things and don’t love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus put **their** well-being, and **yours**, above His own, dying your death, so that when you die, you will pass through death into eternal life. His blood, which is greater than the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices of centuries of goats and bulls, has secured eternal redemption for all who believe. (cf: Mark 12:33; Hebrews 9:12-14)

[point at the crucifix] This is what love looks like.

“... Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:5-8).

[point at the crucifix] This is what grace looks like. You can write it out as an acrostic. Grace is:

God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense

It is a love which can only be found in the heart of God. It is how God loves His children. And it is shown fully and purely in the work of Jesus for you. God calls you to love Him – and – your neighbor: your family, friends, coworkers, and those whose paths you cross. You are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance, that you should love your neighbor with them⁸⁻³⁷. (cf: Ephesians 2:10) But for that kind of love to happen in your life, you must first receive it from God.

This is what happens as you hear again and again that Yahweh, the Lord our God, who is one with the Father, *has loved* and *continues to love* you divinely. He has forgiven your sins and continues to forgive you for false and misguided love toward Him and toward others. He is gracious to you and provides for all your needs of body and soul without any merit or worthiness in you. And in doing so, He prepares you to live in love toward others – especially those nearest to you.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.