Lesson Ten

The Law Expert: Asking About What Matters Most

Focal Text
Mark 12:28-34

Background
Mark 11:27—12:34

Main Idea
Jesus taught that to love God and one's neighbor fully is at the heart of the kingdom of God.

Question to Explore
What does matter most in life?

Quick Read
If we align our lives with God's priorities, we advance his kingdom today.

Commentary
As I write this commentary, the National Football League’s Super Bowl is making headlines. The best definition of football I’ve heard came from an English visitor’s first impression: twenty-two men in desperate need of rest, being watched by 70,000 people in desperate need of exercise.

And the math only gets worse. The NFL estimates that 100 million people see by television some part of a football game on any given Sunday. They are watching the
1,696 players on NFL rosters this year (53 players per team, 32 teams). That’s a ratio of about 58,962 fans per player. They watch every mistake, every penalty, each one sure he or she could do it better. It’s no wonder the coaches look so stressed on the sidelines. You’ve heard the old adage, *Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not after you.* They believe it.

We can afford to be spectators in some areas of our lives—but not with our souls. You and I will stand personally before the God of the universe one day, asked to give account for the years he gave us to live. There are only two questions on that final exam. Two commitments that give our lives purpose, significance, and joy; two commitments that give our eternity reward and delight.

What are they? Why do they matter so much?

**The perennial question (12:28)**

Our text finds Jesus on Tuesday of Holy Week. He was in Jerusalem, and the religious authorities were desperate. After his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11), the crowds were wild with enthusiasm for him, causing the established leadership to fear riots or worse. They must do something about this Nazarene.

The religious leaders asked him to cite the religious authority by which he was teaching and acting (Mark 11:27-28), knowing that he did not possess credentials as a trained rabbi. He asked them to define the authority by which John the Baptist performed his very popular ministry. They were afraid of offending the crowds, and so they refused to answer; Jesus then refused to answer their question (11:29-33).

Next “they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words” (12:13). The two groups asked Jesus whether they should pay taxes to Caesar. If Jesus said they should, the crowds would turn on him; if Jesus said they should not, the Romans would arrest him. He instructed them to “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” and once again they were confounded (12:14-17).

So the Sadducees tried to trick Jesus with a logical question they used to deny the resurrection: a woman had seven husbands in life; whose wife would she be in the afterlife? Jesus showed them their biblical error, reminding them that God said, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (12:26, citing Exodus 3:6). As a result, “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!” (Mark 12:27).

Finally, “one of the teachers of the law came” (12:28). In our context this man would be both a trial lawyer and a theology professor. Matthew says he “tested” Jesus with his question (Matthew 22:35); the word was used to describe a lawyer’s work in questioning...
a witness on the stand. He wanted to trap Jesus in theological error. Then his fellow Pharisees could convict him of heresy. They would be rid of Jesus and his threat to their authority.

The teacher’s question seems innocuous: “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28). “Most important” translates prote, meaning the most prominent, the one that deserves first place.

Let’s understand what he was asking. The religious authorities counted 248 affirmative commandments in their Law, as many as the members of the human body; and 365 negative precepts, as many as the days of the year. The total number of their laws was 613, as many as the Hebrew letters of the Ten Commandments.

Which is most important? If Jesus chose one, he would be accused of neglecting all the rest. What would you say if a lawyer asked you, What is the most important law in America? If you answered with our laws against murder, someone will say that you endorse stealing; if you affirmed our laws against drug abuse, someone would say that you are soft on human rights. And so on. In essence, the lawyer was asking Jesus, How should we live? Out of all of God’s revelation to us, what commandment is the essential principle for life?

We’d like to know the answer today. Not because we want to trick Jesus legally, but because we need to know practically. We need to simplify our lives, to find direction in times which are too hectic.

The cost of job stress in America has been estimated at $200 billion annually. Stress-related injuries on the job have increased dramatically in recent years. A high percentage of prescription drugs are for stress disorders.

Everyone has this problem. Even librarians have a guide called Stress and Burnout in Library Service.

What is the greatest commandment in the Law? Put in our words, What is the secret to living well?

**The essential priorities (12:29-31)**

Jesus’ answer would lay the foundation for Christian faith and theology from then today. He began: “‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’”’ (Mark 12:29). His answer quotes Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema (Hebrew for hear, from the first word in the text).
This is the ancient and essential creed of Judaism. It is the sentence with which every Jewish service opens still today, and the first text every Jewish child commits to memory. Those who wear phylacteries (wooden boxes strapped to their foreheads and arms) carry it wherever they go. It functions for Jews as “Jesus is Lord” functions for Christians. In making the statement in verse 29, Jesus affirmed monotheism for all time. Every person listening to his response to the Pharisees’ lawyer would have nodded affirmation.

Then Jesus continued his quotation from Deuteronomy: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30, quoting Deut. 6:5). Because God is undivided, our love for God must be undivided as well. The “heart” (kardia, meaning inner self, place of the will) was the seat of the will for ancient Jews. The “soul” (psyches, or inner self) is the life principle itself (see Matthew 2:20; 20:28; John 10:11, where it is translated as “life”).

The “mind” (dianoias, meaning intelligence, disposition, understanding) is the place of reasoning, especially moral understanding. On the negative side, this priority means that we are to have no ungodly thoughts, or songs, or movies, or television shows, or books in our minds. On the positive side, it means to think about our faith. God gave us our minds, and he invites us to use them in loving him. God invites us to “reason together” with him (Isaiah 1:18); the Hebrew word means literally, argue it out. The “strength” (ischyos, or power, capability, might) refers to our actions and lifestyle.

Note the four-fold repetition of “all,” demonstrating the necessity of loving God with every dimension of our being. Josiah was commended for following these priorities: “Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25).

In every decision we make, in every thought we think, we are to love God. He will accept no spiritual schizophrenia, loving him on Sunday but not Monday, loving him when we’re with some people but not others, loving him when things are good but not when they are not. He wants us to love him every day, with every dimension of our lives.

All of this is what it means to “love” God. Nothing less will do.

Why love God?

Why is loving God the first priority for all Christians? For three reasons.

First, God made us to love and worship him. This is why we exist. The first commandment is to have “no other gods” but God (Exodus 20:3); the second, to worship no idols (Exod. 20:4-6); the third, to keep his name holy (Exod. 20:7). They tell us that God wants our devotion. This is why God made us, as the crown of his creation: so that we, out of our free will and choice, would worship him. It is why we exist.
The Westminster Catechism was right: “Man’s chief end is to worship the Lord and enjoy him forever.” We are happiest when we love God. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” This is why we will worship God for eternity, as Revelation 7 makes clear. God made us to love him. Worship will one day be our only passion and priority; it should be our first, today.

Second, God deserves our love. We love God because he first loved us (1 John 4:10; see 1 John 4:19). He created and redeemed us, and he made us a place in his perfect heaven forever. The theologian Karl Barth, after writing thousands of pages of his Church Dogmatics, came to this simple definition of God: “the One who loves.” Such a One deserves our worship as our highest passion and priority.

Third, God empowers us when we love him. Through worship, God empowered Isaiah to go for him, Daniel to face the lion’s den, and the first Christians at Pentecost; he shook the doorposts in Jerusalem and the prison bars in Philippi; and he gave John the Revelation—all in response to worship. The power to serve God is found in loving God. If your church would be a Great Commission church, it must make loving God its first priority and passion.

As Matthew records, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:40). The word translated “hang” means suspended from, as a mountain climber hanging from a rope. If the rope goes, we go.

Why do we pray? To talk with the One we love. Why read the Scriptures? To read “love letters from home,” as Augustine described the Bible. Why share our faith? To talk about the One we love, as a grandfather with his new granddaughter. Why preach? Because I love God and I love those who hear my words. Why give our money, time, and abilities? In gratitude, to the One we love.

The rope from which everything else in Christianity hangs is the love for God that is the heart of true worship. This is why loving God must be our personal passion and our church’s first priority, now and for all time.

You can love God in the same way you love anyone else who matters to you. You can spend the day with God—talking with God, thinking about God. Tell God how you feel, what you’re thinking. Thank God for the good things you experience, for “every good and perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). Ask God for what you need, and praise God for what he gives. Spend the day with Jesus. Love him. Worship him. This is his first commandment, his first expectation for your life and mine. For every day.
How do we prove that we love God?
The Pharisee asked Jesus to list “the most important” command in the Law. To do so, Jesus was required to continue: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these’” (Mark 12:31, quoting Leviticus 19:18). “Neighbor” translates plesion, or fellow human being. A few verses later, Leviticus 19 expands “neighbor” to include anyone living in Israel, whether Jew or Gentile: “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (vs. 33-34).

Jesus stated that requirement is “like” the first commandment; the Greek text shows that the two are of equal importance and inseparable. They are the two wings of the same airplane, the two sides of the same coin. There is no evidence that any teacher in Judaism before Jesus ever combined the two.

If we love God, we cannot help but love those God loves. How can I love you if I despise your children? Calvin said, “It is impossible for the love of God to reign without producing brotherly kindness among men.”

A pastor preached against stealing on Sunday morning. The next day he boarded a bus, paid the driver, got his change, and sat down. When he counted it he realized he had received too much. At the next stop he told the driver, who said, “I know. I heard you in church yesterday, and wanted to see if you practice what you preach.” When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we must love our neighbor as ourselves. The former requires and empowers the latter.

Who is your neighbor? In his famous parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus showed us that our neighbor is anyone we can help (Luke 10:25-37). Your neighbor is whoever happens to be near you right now. Jesus told us to love our neighbor, because that’s the only person we can love.

You are to love the person you’ll see next “as yourself,” with the same commitment you make to yourself. We have an instinct for self-preservation; we must seek the preservation and good of that person as we do for ourselves. We tend to excuse our own mistakes—after all, we know what we meant to say, or do. We must do the same for others. We think first about how this will affect us—we must think first how this will affect our neighbor. This is not a suggestion, but a command.

How obedient to these priorities would Jesus say you were yesterday?
The best response (12:32-34)
The Pharisee was suitably impressed: “‘Well said, teacher,’ the man replied. ‘You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him’” (Mark 12:32). “Well said” translates kalos, meaning well spoken or appropriately done. It is an exclamatory, a note of significant praise. This is the first instance of a scribe being depicted favorably in Mark’s Gospel.

The teacher continued: “To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (12:33). “Understanding” translates suneseos, a different word from “mind” (12:30). It means to bring together intellect and experience, denoting comprehension or intelligence (see Matt. 11:25, where it is translated “learned”).

“Burnt offerings and sacrifices” comprised the entire sacrificial system of Jesus’ day. The “burnt offerings” were given wholly to God and completely consumed at the altar; the “sacrifices” were offered to God, but part of the animal was given to the priest for his use.

The Pharisee’s statement is consistent with God’s priorities:

- “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).
- “I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).
- Because his people needed to “seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17), the Lord said of their worship, “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me? I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats” (Isa. 1:11).

Jesus made the same affirmation in criticizing the Pharisees for their legalism bereft of love (Mark 7:1-23, studied in lesson 8). After the scholar made his statement, Jesus responded with his only affirmation of a scribe in Mark’s Gospel: “When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions” (12:34).

The scribe had come to pass judgment on Jesus, but it was Jesus who rendered a verdict on the scribe. His statement shows that loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves, constitutes life and service in God’s kingdom. This is how we “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33), joining God in answering the prayer, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).
Conclusion
Those who live by the priorities Jesus taught in this passage make the greatest difference for God's kingdom today. For instance, John Wesley traveled 250,000 miles on horseback, averaging 20 miles a day for 40 years. He preached 4,000 sermons, produced 40 books, and knew ten languages. At 83 he was annoyed that he could not write more than fifteen hours a day without hurting his eyes; at 86 he was ashamed he could not preach more than twice a day. He complained in his diary that there was an increasing tendency to lie in bed until 5:30 in the morning.

What was the secret to such power and purpose? Perhaps we find it in this hymn text he quoted as he lay dying:

    I’ll praise my Maker while I’ve breath;
    And when my voice is lost in death,
    Praise shall employ my nobler pow’rs.
    My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
    While life, and tho’t, and being last,
    Or immortality endures.

Jesus would agree.

What priorities characterize your life today? What steps do you need to take in aligning your life more fully with the priorities of God? Why should you?

Think of Jesus, who died for you. He deserves our best worship and service. Doesn’t he?

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1 John Calvin, Commentaries 17.59.