

## First Mark 12:28-34

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. *The Mezuzah & Phylacteries*

1. If you visit an Orthodox Jewish home, you'll see a curious little box attached to the doorframe.
2. Called a "Mezuzah" - it contains a tiny hand-written scroll with 3 passages on it; 2 from Deuteronomy & 1 from Numbers'
3. These 3 passages comprise what is known as the Shema, the most important belief of Judaism.
  - a. the Shema is the heart & soul of Jewish religion.
  - b. it's so important the observant Jew will repeat it out loud several times every day.
  - c. it begins the synagogue service.
  - d. it's placed, not only in the mezuzah at the front door, but in orthodox homes, on every doorway in the house.
  - e. and it's found in the phylacteries worn by Jewish men at worship.
4. The phylactery is a small box attached to a long, thin leather strap.
  - a. one box is tied in the center of the forehead,
  - b. the other to the back of the hand.
5. When we visit the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, the most sacred site in all Judaism, we watch while dozens of Jewish men wearing these phylacteries, stand in front of the wall & pray, rocking back & forth to some internal rhythm.
6. They've been doing this for thousands of years.
7. Why? What's the basis of this practice of the mezuzah & phylactery?

#### B. *The Shema*

1. It comes from the text of the Shema itself, that little scroll found inside them.
2. Deuteronomy 6:4-9

**4"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! 5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**
3. This passage is known as the Shema.
  - a. it's called that because the first word is "Shema — Hear!"<sup>[1]</sup>
  - b. this is the bedrock truth, the primary principle on which all Judaism rests.
  - c. it's the first lesson a Jew learns.
    - d. parents cradle their infants in their arms, whispering these words to them, again & again.
4. It's the heart & soul of Judaism.

### **C. The Debate**

1. Despite the importance of the Shema, there was a raging debate between Jewish scholars at the time of Jesus.
2. The debate was over which of the 613 commandments found in the scriptures was the most important — IF one could be singled out.
3. You see, in the schools of Judaism at this time there were two tendencies that went along side by side.
  - a. one was the tendency to develop more & more rules & regulation in HOW to observe the commandments found in the Law of God.
  - b. the other tendency that ran right along side it was the attempt to find which laws were weightier & more important.
  - c. some rabbis said that by careful study, they could find the one law that was the most important — the one on which all the rest of the Law was built.
  - d. then they debated each other over which commandment it was.
4. One day, one of the religious scribes who was caught up in this debate among the scholars was passing through the temple grounds when we saw a crowd & went to investigate.
5. There was Jesus, the rabbi from the North surrounded by some Pharisees & Sadducees.
  - a. they were asking Him questions that were obviously more than questions — they were traps!
  - b. it was obvious they were challenging Jesus, trying to get Him to say something that would get Him in trouble.
  - c. the Pharisees asked about paying taxes, the Sadducees about the resurrection.
  - d. as the scribe listened, thinking there was no way Jesus would be able to avoid the traps laid for Him, he heard Jesus answer with such wisdom & grace, he marveled.
6. Realizing Jesus' awesome grasp of spiritual things, he decided to pose the question that was so troubling him.
7. While the Pharisees & Sadducees had been insincere in their inquiries, he was completely sincere — he really wanted to know what Jesus thought.

## **II. TEXT**

### **A. Vs. 28-31**

**28**Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, **“Which is the first commandment of all?”** **29**Jesus answered him, **“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. 30And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. 31 the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

1. In the debate over which was the greatest commandment, different rabbis had suggested one or another of the Ten Commandments.

2. Others said it was the Shema, this passage from Deuteronomy Jesus quoted.
3. When Jesus said that the Shema was the first commandment, the one on which the rest of the law rested, He wasn't saying anything that hadn't already been accepted by many in the debate.
4. But Jesus didn't just quote the Shema. He added another passage, Leviticus 19:18, & linked the two together in such a way as to make them one.
5. This was unique; no one had done this before. <sup>[2]</sup>

### **B. Vs. 32-34**

**32 the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.**

1. No one dared bring any more challenges because in one simple response, Jesus had settled a debate that had raged among the best minds of Israel for decades!
2. This scribe, because he'd been sincere in his inquiry, when Jesus answered, heard the truth for what it was, and gladly embraced it.
3. How very different was his response from that of the Pharisees & Sadducees who were only trying to trap Jesus.
4. When Jesus answered them, instead of rejoicing in the wisdom of the answer, they were disappointed & went away angry.
5. This scribe — because his questions were sincere, because he was seeking truth, when he heard it, received it.
6. When people ask questions, they're driven by 1 of 2 motivations:
  - a. some are like the Pharisees & Sadducees —
    - 1) their questions aren't posed in order to gain an answer so much as to defend their unbelief.
    - 2) as skeptics, they've already decided there isn't an answer & use the question as a statement that justifies & enforces their unbelief.
    - 3) when an answer is given, they don't really listen to it because they've already determined it can't be valid — it can't be right.
    - 4) unbelief often hides behind a mask of pseudo-intellectualism.
  - b. but others are like the scribe in this passage —
    - 1) they pursue truth & are willing to follow where ever it leads.
    - 2) they have questions, concerns, honest doubts & voice them.
    - 3) when the answer is given, they listen & rejoice at the discovery of truth.
7. I want to challenge those of you here today who aren't Christians to consider honestly which category you fall into.
  - a. are your questions just fronts to justify your unbelief -
  - b. or are they sincere attempts to discover truth? Are you willing to follow where ever the answers lead?

### **C. The First Commandment**

1. Let's turn now to look at Jesus' answer to the scribe's question about which was

- the first, the greatest commandment.
2. All over the world today, people are searching for the one thing that will make them successful.
  3. Every week, there are countless business & management seminars in which some expert is sharing the latest research findings & theories on what it takes to be successful in business.
  4. People attend marriage & family life conferences to discover what they can do to gain success at home.
  5. Every year, hundreds of new books hit the shelves promising the reader “the secret for success.”
  6. The fact that more books are written every year making the same promise & more seminars & conferences are staged, is proof the so-called experts can’t deliver on their claims.
  7. Jesus isn’t just one more expert.
    - a. He doesn’t do research, cull the results, analyze the findings, & develop a 5-step plan for success.
    - b. He doesn’t conduct interviews with those who’ve made it & distill their collective wisdom down to some witty slogans.
  8. Jesus is the Creator. It is He who made us - We exist for Him!
  9. What we find here isn’t an opinion, a theory, a mere idea on how to be successful at the challenge of living — This is the Roadmap to life as the Creator designed it.
  10. What Jesus says here is nothing less than the Absolute Truth! This is Life - with a capital “L”!
  11. So let’s take a look at what He said. V.29...  
**“The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.**
  12. The first & foremost thing is to hold fast to the truth that there is a God, & we are not Him!
    - a. this may seem obvious, but unfortunately many people stumble right here.
    - b. intellectually they acknowledge the existence of God & that they are only human —
    - c. but practically, when it comes down to the daily decisions of life, they act as if there is no center to their lives & choices than their own desires.
    - d. their reference point isn’t God — it’s self
    - e. step one has to be the moment by moment realization that God is the reference point for all of life.
  13. This is what the first temptation was all about — it was an attempt to knock Adam & Eve off the central & first premise of their lives.
    - a. what did the devil suggest — that they were gods!
    - b. that they didn’t need to hold the Lord as the center of their existence.
    - c. they could assert themselves & live for their own desires without answering to God.
  14. Many people today think that what merits them eternal life is just believing in the existence of God.
    - a. but that’s not it — the devil believes in God; a lot of good it does him!
    - b. Adam & Eve still believed in God after they sinned — but that didn’t alter

- the fact that they were lost.
- c. it isn't believing God exists that is the issue — it's how you see yourself in reference to God that's the crucial issue.
15. There can only be one sovereign, one ruler, one God.
- the first premise, the greatest command is to lay down the rebellion we were born in to as the sons & daughters of Adam & Eve —
  - to pull self off the throne of dominion in our hearts, & surrender to God as God.
16. Then Jesus said -
- 30 And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.**
17. When we've given God the throne of our lives — when He truly reigns as God, He becomes our passion.
18. When self rules, we're consumed with our own pleasure. We're madly in love with ourselves & will do anything to heap to ourselves what we think is our due as the masters of our own lives.
19. But when God is our God, He becomes our passion, our all-consuming desire.
20. Jesus said we're to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind & strength.
- don't set these 4 things into neat little categories.
  - Jesus doesn't mean us to think of these as 4 separate ways we are to love God.
  - the 4 are meant to be taken together & to refer to our whole self
  - God is to be God over every aspect of who & what you are.
  - love Him without reserve — hold nothing back.
21. When the Crusaders set out on their mission to conquer the Holy Land, many of them who had not been baptized submitted to a mass baptism.
- they were taken to the local river where they went by the dozens into the water while the priest stood on the bank, pronouncing the words of the baptismal vow.
  - but many of the soldiers did a curious thing — as they dunked themselves under the water they held their sword hand high so it wouldn't get wet.
  - they didn't want to submit it to the Lordship of Christ because they intended to use it to kill, rape, & pillage, things they knew were incompatible with the nature of God.
22. Such hypocrisy!
- but how many do the same today.
  - they embrace Christ as Lord in going to church & singing songs, maybe even putting a bumper sticker on their car.
  - but Jesus isn't Lord over their sex-life or over their wallet.
  - His mastery of their lives falls short of their conversation, the words of their mouths.
  - He's not invited into their marriage & is left at the door of their office when they go to work.
  - they've got a religious station playing on the radio in the car, but they are scofflaws.
23. When Jesus says that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind &

- strength, He means with EVERYTHING we have & are, & in all we do.
24. Either He is God of all, or not at all.
25. But Jesus isn't finished — He adds . . .
- 31 And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'**
26. Then He finishes with — and note it carefully -
- There is no other commandment greater than these."**
- He didn't say, "There are no other commandments great than these."
  - it's singular — "There is no other commandment greater than these."
  - Jesus attaches Leviticus 19:18 to the Shema and makes them one.
27. His point is that when God is our all-consuming passion, the evidence, the proof, the out-working will be a love for others that is manifestly like the love we have for ourselves.
28. John says it this way in 1 John 4:20-21
- 20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? 21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.**
29. Jesus leaves no room for a fake religiosity that wraps itself in sham piety & withdraws from the world so it can remain aloof & distant, guarding its supposed holiness lest it be tainted by all the sin & corruption of the world.
30. The other gospels tell us that it was at this point someone cynically asked Jesus, "Well yes, but who is my neighbor?"
- Jesus answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan.
  - a man traveling along the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was mugged by thieves & left for dead.
  - you know the story - some super "religious" men passed by but excused themselves from helping the man. Though his life hung in the balance, they were too busy with the things of God, pursuing their own ideas about what it means to be holy, to stop & help.
  - then along came a Samaritan, a guy such super-religious types considered as pretty much worthless as far as holiness was concerned.
  - this Samaritan understood the heart of God far better than they.
  - he tended the man's wounds & took care of him, saving his life.
31. A true passion for God will manifest itself in a consistent love for those God loves.
32. And the proof of that love is that it works itself out in acts of practical kindness, just as God demonstrated His love by sending His Son to save us.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

#### **A. The Greatest Sin**

- Jesus says that this is the first & greatest commandment.
- If this is the greatest commandment, doesn't it make sense that to violate it is the greatest sin?
- Today, most people would consider the greatest sin to be something like murder or

- child abuse.
4. And as heinous & terrible as these things are — the greatest sin of all, the most terrible crime a man or woman can commit is to violate the greatest command — to not place God on the throne of our lives & give Him ourselves.
  5. Murder, child abuse, theft, & all the rest are nothing more nor less than the fruit of rejecting God.
  6. Let me use this illustration:
    - a. I am deeply in love with my wife & we have a great marriage.
    - b. but what would your reaction be if I came up here, stood here & confessed to you that I had violated my marriage covenant & had committed adultery?
    - c. I suspect you would be utterly shocked & angry.
    - d. marriage is a sacred bond, and as a pastor, you expect me to remain faithful to my wife, to love & honor her above all others.
    - e. what if instead I said that lately I've found way more satisfaction & interest in wake-boarding than in my relationship with the Lord?
    - f. I suspect most people would hear that & while being surprised I admitted it, would probably think it was no big deal and just a phase I was going through.
  7. But which relationship is higher, the one with God or with my wife?
    - a. which covenant takes precedence, my marriage or my salvation?
    - b. who has the greater & prior claim on my love and loyalty, Lynn or Jesus?
  8. In the OT, when Israel strayed from God & worshipped idols, God called it adultery.
  9. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that adultery wasn't just the act of having sex with someone other than your mate. The heart that wanders from loyal love is committing adultery.
  10. When my heart wanders from the Lord — I'm cheating on God.

### **B. Consider**

1. Let's end with that — with an honest reflection on & inspection of our hearts.
  2. Is God really our God?
  3. Is He the all-consuming passion of our entire lives or is there something we're holding from Him, something where self still rules — our sex-life, our finances, our time, our work, our marriage, our pursuit of romance & love?
  4. And is our passion for God being translated into daily, practical acts of compassion & service toward others?
  5. The outworking of our love for God must begin with those who are the closest to us; no one is a closer neighbor than the members of our own household.
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[1] Deuteronomy 6:4—9, 11:13—21, Numbers 15:37—41

[2] The Gospel of Mark. 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.