

Thanksgiving Eve; November 23, 2022
+ Mark 12:28-34 +
“All for Our One”

One of the experts in the law approached after he heard their discussion. When he saw that Jesus had answered them well, he asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?”

Jesus answered, “The most important is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The expert in the law said to him, “Well said, teacher. You have spoken correctly on the basis of the truth that he is one, and there is no other beside him. 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 whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

A bunch of Jesus’ enemies have just tried to trip him up. They have asked him a question about the resurrection and life in heaven to try to demonstrate that the resurrection and heaven are impossible nonsense. Jesus’ response is simple: You don’t know the Scriptures and you don’t know the power of God. And then Jesus uses the Scriptures to prove them wrong.

Standing in the background during that discussion is an expert in the law (an Old Testament scholar). We do not know if this expert’s initial motive is to trap Jesus, to evaluate him, or to learn from him. Operating on the principle that we should take words and actions in the best possible way, we should assume his motives for questioning Jesus are pure. And the track of the discussion will seem to confirm that his heart is in the right place when he asks Jesus: **“Which commandment is the greatest of all?”**

Jesus’ answer is one that will delight a Bible scholar. The Old Testament, which this expert knows extremely well, is full of commandments. Some of its commandments addressed the worship and government of God’s chosen people, the Israelites. There are also commandments that God expects all people of all time to keep; that’s his moral law.

Jesus quotes a commandment from the book of Deuteronomy. “Deuteronomy” literally means “Second Law,” because most of the book is Moses reading the entire law of God to the Israelites for the second time. He read it to them once at Sinai, when he received it from the Lord. Now, forty years later, before the Israelites march into the Promised Land, Moses reads the whole Law – all of God’s commandments – to a new generation of Israelites.

And – oh my gracious! – there are so many commandments in God’s law. There are the Ten Commandments, which is his moral law for all people. But then there are so many other commandments, just for the Israelites. Commandments about tithing, releasing indentured servants, how to celebrate Festivals like Passover and Shelters, how and when and where to make sacrifices, how to handle unsolved murders, laws about caring for widows and orphans and immigrants, and more. And more. And more. And more.

So, how could anyone ever know, **“Which commandment is the greatest of all?”** How to choose? Well, why not start at the beginning?

The very first commandment that Moses gave the Israelites when he read God’s law to them for the second time was: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your wind, and with all your strength.”** And that’s why Jesus answers that this commandment is **the most important.**

God’s most important commandment is to give him your entire existence. Give him all of yourself. Let the love of the Lord drive your every thought and every action, so that everything is thought and done in service to him and to the neighbors he places next to you. As Jesus says: **“The second [most important] commandment is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”**

The problem was that for most Israelites, most of the time, that was just too much. Giving God and their neighbor all of themselves was too much. So instead, they’d move on past that first and most commandment and pick and choose from the rest. A sacrifice here, sure. A festival there, okay. A word of praise once in a while, fine. But not all of me.

But “give God all of yourself” is the commandment that comes first. The expert Jesus is speaking to gets that, too: **“To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength...is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”**

God wants you first. All of you. Not just a few outward motions. All of your heart, soul, and strength.

But giving God a little motion is just so much easier than giving him all of ourselves. It was so much easier for the Israelites to make sacrifices and sing a psalm and keep a festival than it was to give God every second of their lives, to dedicate their entire existence to him. Just bring a sacrifice and then go back to me for me. Just sing a psalm but then devote my strength and heart to myself.

And it still is easy to do that. It is so much easier just to come to church and speak some words, to write a check, to do some motions for the Lord but then go and live mostly for me. My heart and soul and strength for my pleasure, my safety, my wealth, my reputation. God’s people still prefer to move on past that first and most commandment and give him a sacrifice here, some outward motion there. But not our whole being. Not our all.

Which is why, before he read the whole Law of God to the Israelites, starting with that first and most important commandment, Moses said something else first. And this was not a commandment. It was not a law. It was simply a statement of fact. But this simple factual statement is our reason to keep the first and greatest commandment, to give God our all.

We do it because he is our one Lord and God. Moses said this to the Israelites before giving them any commandments, and Jesus quoted it to the expert: **“Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one.”** This sentence, known as the *shema* (the word “hear” in Hebrew), comes before any command to give the whole self to God. The Israelites were surrounded by nations who worshipped multiple gods. Not only were their gods divided from each other, but they were not gods anyone would really want to call theirs. These gods were cruel and capricious and unpredictable, always demanding and taking and only giving grudgingly. They were gods who belonged to no one, because no one would want to call them “ours.”

But the Lord God of Israel was different. Moses and Jesus call the Lord **“one.”** He is singular and unified, as the name “Lord” teaches. The word “Yahweh” or “Lord” is singular. Unlike all the other gods, he is the One. (Interestingly, even as the word “one” and “Lord” teach that God is singular, the word “God” is technically plural, which hints at the truth that this one Lord is also somehow more than one at the same time. He is three: Father, Son and Spirit, yet he remains one Lord.)

Besides being one Lord, the true God is **our God**. This is the God you want to call yours, I want to call mine, we want to call ours. Because he does demand; he demands all of ourselves. He does command sacrifices and obedience. But he gives infinitely more.

God calls himself “the Lord.” That name, “Yahweh,” is the name God uses to connect himself to his gracious, saving promises. Yahweh watches over his people and protects them. Yahweh gives his people life and sustains it.

And Yahweh saves. He is the God who seeks out his fallen creatures in the Garden and promises them a Savior. He is the God who holds his chosen nation by the hand and keeps them close to him with all these laws, all the while repeating his saving promises. He is the God born in a manger, as one of us. He is the God who dies for the sins of the world, and rises to save from death. He is the God who calls his people home to be with him, to see him face to face and serve him for eternity.

The Lord is the One God. And he’s the One we want to be ours. He’s our saving God.

Why did Moses remind the Israelites that the Lord is one, and he is ours? Why does Jesus repeat that reminder before nailing down the first and most important commandment?

Because God does not just command us to give our all. He commands us to give our all to our all to our one Savior-God.

All our heart to our One. “Heart” in the Bible is synonymous with sincerity. When I come to worship him, my heart will be in it. When I help the neighbor he has given me, it won’t be out guilt of obligation, but because I actually want to. “Soul” is commitment and drive. Rather than thinking in terms of the minimum I can do in service to God and others, my mind will move toward maximums. “Strength” is the capacity of our brains and bodies. Whatever mental and physical gifts God has given me, all of them work in his service.

To live in thanksgiving to God, we start with the most important commandment of all: to give him all of ourselves. But in order to keep it, we must listen first: **The Lord, our God, the Lord is one.** God is one. He is the gracious and saving “Yahweh,” the Lord. And he is ours. Though faith in his Son Jesus, our sins are forgiven. We are his, and he is ours.

Now, having heard that the Lord is our One who saves, may we love him with all of ourselves. All for our One. Amen.