

Jesus' Final Exam: Question #4 - What is the most important commandment of them all?
Mark 12:28-34

OPENING QUESTION:

The Most Important Question

If your only hope of pleasing God amounted to obedience, to doing your duty; if your entire future hinged on getting obedience right, and you had 613 different rules and regulations to follow, what might you want to know more than anything else? Wouldn't you want to know, among those 613 life making commandments, which ones were more important? Which ones must be followed to the letter? Which ones allow NO wiggle room? Which ones were so important that if you failed at them you were unredeemably lost?

Would you not want to know, for the sake of your life practice and eternal destiny, what is the most important commandment of them all? Which one ranks first and foremost? Which one demands and deserves diligent compliance and careful completion? If your life depended on it, wouldn't you want to know which command you **MUST** do as compared with those you only **SHOULD** do?

A Scribe Asks That Question

The Beginning of a Changed Heart

A scribe is standing and listening to the debate between Jesus and the Sadducees. He is part of the original group, the Sanhedrin, who have sent various people to Jesus to test him. He is monitoring their progress, watching for the outcome, awaiting Jesus' crucial mistake, the failure that will get Him killed.

But, as the man stands listening and watching, his attitude toward Jesus begins to soften and change. There is little that surprises us in this, is there? I know a man who was determined to prove to his Christian friends that Jesus was fake and the Bible a cesspool of inconsistencies and falsehoods. He undertook in anger and arrogance to read the Bible cover to cover. He would show them what is real and what is not.

That man came back to his friends a changed man. The more he encountered Jesus in the word, the more his heart softened and changed toward Jesus. In the end he came back to his friends as a follower of Jesus, as one who had seen Him for himself and was convinced that Jesus is the Savior sent from God to die on the cross in our place and on our behalf.

This is why we keep telling you to know Jesus and proclaim Jesus with your words and lives and choices and actions and intents. This is why we are spending the time we are spending in the gospel of Mark. This is why we encourage you week after week to study God's word and to put it into practice: **because the more and the better you know Jesus for yourself, the more amazing and true you will find Him and the more deeply you will love Him.**

Many in the world today do not actually reject Jesus. They reject a Jesus they have heard of, or a Jesus they have assumptions about, or a Jesus of their own imagination. They have never taken

the time to know Jesus for themselves so they reject a figure they don't like based on ideas they do like.

Church, the world needs to know Jesus as He is because if they will come to know Him as He is, he will draw them to Himself. And very, very often, the first genuine, authentic glimpse someone in the world gets of the true and faithful Jesus are the followers of Jesus, the people like you and me who make up the church. **Nothing you do or say in your life will have greater impact on the world and the lives of others than the depth and degree your life reveals the truth about Jesus to the world!**

What is the *chelal* principle?

But, let us move on. The scribe is impressed with Jesus and the answers He gives to the questions with which He is confronted. He is moved to set before Jesus a question the rabbis had pondered and discussed for generations. Assuming all 613 commandments included in the Torah, they would ask, which is the premiere commandment? Which is the most important one? Which is *chelal*, ultimate perfection, "numero uno"?

This is a heart question for the scribe. This is his own personal question. This is the question he wondered and pondered for much of his life as one who handles the word of God and holds the responsibility of making sure everything that comes from him relative to God's word and covenant is accurate to perfection. If there is one underlying principle upon which the entire Law of God is based, he has a personal, professional, and eternal need to know it and get it right.

This is what the scribe asks Jesus: What is the one principle from God that establishes the entire Law of God? What is the essential principle underlying all the others? He asks Jesus to reduce the entire Law, the entire scope of God's covenant relationship to His people, to a single statement, a single principle. And he asks, not so much as a challenge, as a quest. Jesus has answered the others wisely, and this man wants to draw upon Christ's wisdom.

Friends, this is a good thing. **Oh that more of us would take our questions to Jesus and draw upon His wisdom.** Paul declares that Jesus is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. He writes,

1 Corinthians 1:24 (ESV) *but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

1 Corinthians 1:30 (ESV) *And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption . . .*

We need to be wise with God's wisdom in our day and that wisdom is found in Jesus Christ! Jesus reveals not only the evidence of God's wisdom but the substance and content of God's wisdom. We see the world through fallen, limited, finite, human senses and understanding. God knows the world through sovereign, infinite, limitless, omniscient, perfect glory. God knows what is going on with us and with the world. He knows the journey we have been on, where we

have come from, where we are going, how we will get there, and when we will arrive.

Jesus reveals God's wisdom in salvation. Jesus reveals God's wisdom in sending His one and only to accomplish on behalf of lost and sinful humanity what none of us or any of us could accomplish for ourselves. Jesus reveals God's wisdom in separating love for God which is life from love for the world which leads to death. Jesus reveals the wisdom of being all in for God and attaining His glory rather than being all in for self and appropriating His justice and wrath.

This man, seeing the wisdom of Jesus sets before Jesus the question of His heart. "I know so much," he seems to say, "so tell me what I really need to know. Tell me what matters most."

Jesus Identifies the *Chelal* Principle

Jesus then answers the scribes question by tying together two ideas that were individually recognized but had never actually been bound together in Jewish thinking. He combines Deuteronomy 6:4-5 with Leviticus 19:18. Let's read those two passages.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (ESV) ⁴ "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Leviticus 19:18 (ESV) 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.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 might be called the Jewish national anthem. It was repeated twice daily, once in the morning when getting up and once in the evening when laying down. These are the verses that Jews wore on their foreheads and wrists in their phylacteries, and these are the verses included on the little mizuzah nailed to the doorposts of their homes.

Of these verses someone has said, it does not take much of a man to love God, but it takes all of a man. To love the Lord our God, the one and only true God, is to love Him with all that we are and all that we have: to love Him with all our heart, (all our affections, our emotions, all our thoughts and desires). It is to love Him with all our soul, the essence of our existence, that part of us most thoroughly like Him. To love the Lord our God is to love Him with every fiber of our being and with all the intensity and integrity we can muster.

Jesus says this is the principle that undergirds the entire covenant Law: love God. Let your every inclination and action toward God, intentional or not, determined or not, premeditated or not, be love. And note, this is not love as we define it that God requires of us. The love required is love as God defines it, therefore, we must love God with the love that God is.

James tells us that to fail at any of the Law is to fail at the whole Law. To fail to love God with the quality of love He deserves and possesses is to fail at the whole Law. And what is failure to keep the Law? Sin. And what is the consequence of sin? Death.

We haven't even gotten to the second commandment yet and already we face the condemnation of God's righteous justice. Who can love God like this? Who can love God with the quality love with which God loves His own glory? Only God can love like this! What shall we do?

And then, then Jesus adds the second commandment of ultimate importance: love your neighbor as yourself. And look, the Law in Leviticus makes bearing a grudge against someone "unloving." If someone in the church, among the people of God, hurts you, offends you, disappoints you, and you respond by bearing a grudge against them, you are not loving them, according to God's word. And if you are breaking God's Law, then as a Lawbreaker, you are guilty before God and worthy of what? God's justice and righteous punishment.

Please don't think you can get away with sin. You cannot. You will not. Either you will carry your guilt with you to the throne of God for judgment, or someone else must carry it for you. Unless there is someone willing to take the burden of your guilt before God, you must bear that burden yourself. What shall we do?

The Scribe Reacts to the *Chelal* Principle

The scribe answers Jesus with great admiration. The way Mark records his response in the original language suggests a hearty and heartfelt congratulations! "Bravo! Teacher." He then goes on to provide not only a personal evaluation of Jesus' response, but a personal owning of Jesus' words. "Yes, you are right. The underlying principle of the law is not repetitive ceremony but genuine love for God and for others."

NOT FAR IS NEAR BUT NEAR IS NOT IN

Jesus Invites the Scribe Into the Kingdom

Jesus, seeing that the scribe answered wisely, congratulates him back: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Take careful note of something here. "Not far" is "near," but "near" is not "in." It is possible to be "near" the kingdom of God but not "in" the kingdom of God. It is possible to know God's word, lead God's people, participate in God's worship; it is possible to do all the right things that look for all the world like godliness, and still not be in the kingdom of God.

You see, there is one thing necessary to enter the kingdom of God: faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior and a commitment of your life to follow Him. Peter, preaching on the day of Pentecost, answered the plea of the people when they cried out, "What shall we do?" He responded:

Acts 2:38 (ESV) *And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

And later, standing before the very Sanhedrin who crucified Jesus Peter declares,

Acts 4:11-12 (ESV) ¹¹ *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. ¹² And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we*

must be saved.”

It is not enough to know about Jesus. It is not enough to marvel at His wisdom or be impressed at His demeanor. It is not enough to acknowledge Him as a teacher or stand in awe of the power of the miracles He does. All of those things, though they may bring us near the kingdom of God will not bring us in the kingdom of God. Entry into the kingdom of God--the condition of grace and glory where God forgives sin and removes guilt, fills us with His Spirit and leads us to eternal life--**entry into the kingdom is through faith in Christ and through faith in Christ alone.**

How to Enter In to the Kingdom of God

We must see ourselves as God does, as those, no matter how nice or mean we are, as those who have failed to meet the first and second commandments to love. We must see ourselves as culpable for judgment on account of our sin. We must embrace our guilt as real and as a real threat to our soul. And then we must come to God, confessing our sin and accepting that Christ has loved God and loved our neighbor in our place and on our behalf. We must own that Christ alone is the Savior, the One who has accomplished in His life and death all that God requires of any of us.

The Work of Christ on Our Behalf

Jesus took our sins on His body and bore them to the cross. He lived the life we are commanded by our right and perfect and holy and glorious Creator to live, a command we cannot fulfill. He died for us the death our sin and guilt deserve. And God has declared that if we accept the life and death of Christ as our own, He will forgive our sin, remove our guilt, and swing wide the door of the kingdom. Through faith in Jesus we move from near the kingdom to in the kingdom. There is no other way in.

The Plea for Faith

Do not stand outside. Don't settle with pitching your tent on the wrong side of the wall, leaning on the door but not opening it, making reservations but not showing up for the feast. Don't settle for "near" when God has made a way for you to be "in." Put your faith in Jesus today. Trust Him with your life. He's given His life for you to make a way in for you.

"A miss is as good as a mile," the saying goes. Almost is not all in. Jesus response to the scribe was not a final assessment. It was an invitation. We don't know what the scribe did. The kingdom of God was sitting right in front of him, talking to him. He was so near. Did he go in? We don't know about him, but this morning, you can know about you. "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Put your faith in Jesus.