

Session 5



The Greatest Command

THE POINT

Our obedience to God is seen in our love for Him and others.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

“What’s the one thing?” That’s the beginning of many questions asked of those who are successful or at the top of their given profession. Whether it’s in business, marriage, athletic performance, or just general success and happiness. The question is usually asked like this:

- “What’s the one thing you did, knew, or felt, that got you to where you are?”
- “What’s the one thing I need to do, know, or feel, to get me to where you are?”
- “What’s the most important piece of advice you’ve been given or can give to someone who wants to be successful?”

Sometimes the answers are a treasure, while at other times they can be trash, depending on the person’s values and worldview.

Jesus was asked that “one thing” question.

An expert in the Old Testament law witnessed Jesus verbally sparring with religious leaders. Impressed with how Jesus handled His accusers and their questions, the expert had to know something for himself.

He approached Jesus and asked, “Which command is the most important of all?” (Mark 12:28). Jesus perceived his sincerity and gave the man a clear, concise answer. Their interaction has fascinated preachers, philosophers, princes, and paupers since it occurred.

QUESTION 1:

When people ask you for advice, what’s the one thing you like to tell them?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

MARK 12:28-30

²⁸ One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which command is the most important of all?”

²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

The honeymoon was over. Just a few days removed from making His triumphal entry into Jerusalem amidst the cheers of the people, Jesus was again at odds with the religious elites. They were seeking to trap Him in an error so they could bring charges. This time it was the Sadducees. They were trading verbal blows over the resurrection, something they didn’t even believe in.

On the periphery, witnessing the inquisition, was a scribe. Scribes were scholars and experts in the Mosaic law. Their role was to copy, interpret, and write rules and regulations for how the law should be lived out in each generation. While these experts wrote the Mosaic law’s procedure manual, they also attempted to summarize the entirety of the law in as few words as possible.

After witnessing Jesus’s resounding victory, the scribe approached Him alone. He inquired which commandment was the most important. His tone was different. Three things point to the man’s sincerity:

- **The type of question.** The scribe asked Jesus to summarize the whole of the law in a

nutshell. That’s a question a sincere person wanting to know the heavier matters of the law would ask.

- **The man came alone.** Since Jesus’s arrival in Jerusalem, He was usually approached by groups of religious leaders.
- **Jesus’s answer.** When Jesus perceived ill motives, He would answer questions with questions, or even reply in parables. This time, however, His response was a direct recounting of Old Testament Scripture, and He plainly answered the question.

Jesus quoted The Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. The *Shema* is so named because it begins with the Hebrew word ‘shema’, which means “hear.” The Shema was first delivered to the people of Israel, as they were about to enter the promised land. It was recited morning and evening by the Jewish people and was also the opening words of temple services.

It’s a commandment to know God and to remind His people that He is One. The Lord is the only One. He alone is God; there is no other. He has no equal, no rival; He stands alone.

“All” is repeated four times to highlight the total response of love that’s to be given to the Lord (Mark 12:30). In His covenant, God gives Himself totally to Israel; He expects it to be reciprocated. We’re not to love God casually or half-heartedly, but in full measure with our every thought, emotion, feeling, word, and action. We are to pursue our love for Him in every aspect of daily life, with all that we are. The call is to love God with all your:

- **Heart.** To love God exclusively. We should have no other gods before Him. He alone has our heart’s allegiance.
- **Soul.** To love God with all our soul means we find our purpose and meaning in Him alone. Our love for God must surpass our love for others and for all things.

- **Mind.** We love God with all our mind by choosing obedience because we know what He says is true. Jesus said we are to worship God in truth.
- **Strength.** To love God with all our strength is to love with perseverance. It keeps its commitment through all the trials and suffering of life lived in a broken world.

QUESTION 2:

How can you tell what our culture loves most?

MARK 12:31

³¹ The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other command greater than these.

QUESTION 3:

What are some practical ways we can love others as we love ourselves?

Isn’t it just like Jesus to go the extra mile for someone who is truly seeking? Not only does He give the scribe a straightforward answer, but He also expands on it and introduces something revolutionary that may have never been done before.

The Old Testament commands us to love God and to even love our neighbor, but these are separate commands. Until that moment no one had ever put them together and made one commandment out of two. Jesus put into practice what He was speaking.

Jesus demonstrated His love for the Father by showing His love for the scribe. He genuinely answered the man’s thoughtful and sincere question and by doing so pointed him toward the kingdom. By linking love for God with love for our neighbor, Jesus called true religion out of the ivory towers and into the streets. You can’t separate love for others and love for God; they’re now forever linked.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 31) is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18 and is found at least eight times in the Scriptures. Religious leaders of the day had not modeled obedience to this command well. Jesus quoted the command without any limiting boundaries. He took an old law and illustrated it with a fresh perspective.

The question must have lingered in the air: Who is my neighbor? In His parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus defined our neighbor as anyone who was in need. “Neighbor” was no longer limited by:

- **Geographic proximity.** Your neighbor is more than someone who lives next door, works in the next cubicle, or shares the same zip code.
- **Social affinity.** Your neighbor is more than someone who runs in the same circles as you, goes to the same restaurant, and works out at the same gym.
- **Racial similarity.** Your neighbor is more than the people who look like you and talk like you.
- **Religious solidarity.** Your neighbor is more than those who worship at the same place, in the same way, and are called by the same religious title.
- **Political affiliation.** Your neighbor is more than the person who votes for the same ticket and supports the same party.

Jesus summarized the totality of the law as love God and love others. The Ten Commandments define how to love God and others. The first four focus on love for God, while the remaining six emphasize love for others.

“Love others as yourself?” Loving ourselves doesn’t sound Christlike, does it? If love means sacrificially working in another’s best interest, shouldn’t we also do that for ourselves? Jesus’s command to love others as ourselves implies that we won’t love *others* in the right way unless we love *ourselves* in the right way. Think about it this way: God loves you, so you can love yourself. God accepts you, so you can accept yourself. God treasures you as His unique creation, so you can treasure yourself. Loving yourself like that isn’t just okay, it’s what Jesus commands.

We are to love others “as” ourselves, not more than and not less than, not better than or worse than, but we are to love others like we love ourselves. Could this also mean that as we love others, we *are* loving ourselves? When we act in our neighbor’s best interest, we’re obeying God, and therefore nurturing our relationship with God, which is also acting in our best interest.

Jesus took two separate Old Testament commands, linked them together, and answered the scribe’s question. The first, greatest, and most important commandment, the one commandment that captures the essence of the entire Mosaic law is this: Love God with your whole being *and* your neighbor as yourself.

QUESTION 4:

How does our love for God and love for our neighbor work hand in hand?

Engage

LOVE FOR GOD AND OTHERS

Choose one of the following images that represents an opportunity you have to show love for God and others. Then make a list of ways you can demonstrate that love this week.



My Plan:

MARK 12:32-34

³² Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him. ³³ And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to question him any longer.

What began as possibly the old proverb “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” ends in mutual respect, admiration, and possibly an authentic friendship. The scribe was as pleased with how Jesus answered his question as he was with how Jesus had schooled the Sadducees. The scribe responded to Jesus, “You are right, teacher” (v. 32).

The scribe’s response to Jesus reflected a deep knowledge of Old Testament Scripture, which would be expected from a scribe. It’s clear that he knew all the right doctrines and beliefs. He agreed that burnt offerings and sacrifices must take a back seat to a right relationship with God and others—one characterized by love and obedience.

Jesus implicitly revealed His identity. When He witnessed the scribe’s understanding and insight into spiritual matters, He declared him “not far from the kingdom of God” (v. 34). That judgment went beyond his understanding of the law; it was a judgment on the state of his eternal soul. Only God can judge eternal matters of the soul, yet Jesus revealed His authority to pronounce judgment on matters of eternal importance. When humans dare to sit in judgment of Christ, they find instead that Christ sits in judgment of them!

Jesus saw that the scribe answered respectfully, and He was clearly pleased with his response. This must have been a breath of fresh air, as many displayed little biblical understanding. Jesus seemed to commend the scribe:

- For his sincerity as one who wanted to learn, not entrap;
- By encouraging him to continue with his journey because he wasn’t far from the kingdom of God;
- For understanding what is truly most important.

What became of this scribe is unknown. We can only hope that he took Jesus’s advice and continued his journey to become a citizen of the kingdom, a child of God by creation, and a follower of Jesus by choice. To be “in the kingdom” you must do more than approve of Jesus’s teachings—you must receive Him as your Lord.

QUESTION 5:

What do our life choices and commitments say about our love for God?

LIVE IT OUT

Our obedience to God is seen in our love for Him and others. Choose one of the following applications.

- **Put God first.** What areas of your life rival the place that only God should occupy? Check your calendar and your bank statement. Where do you spend your time and money?
- **Seek God always.** To love God with your mind means you seek truth. What are you reading that helps you love God with your mind? Consider reading a book like *You Are a Theologian* by J. T. English and Jen Wilkin, which will sharpen your understanding of biblical truth.
- **Love God with your strength.** Find someone in need in your church or community, and gather a group to help meet that need. It could involve yard work, maintenance, or even errands that the person is unable to complete.


