

Loving God, Loving Others

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 28:18–22

Background Scripture: Romans 15:1–7; Philippians 2:1–8;
Colossians 3:12; 4:1

Mark 12:28–34

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ 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.”

³⁴ 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.

James 2:14–17

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.



Key Text

“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.” —Mark 12:33

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 3: The Church and Its Teachings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the two greatest commandments according to Mark 12:28–34.
2. Give examples of practices inspired by James 2:14–17 that embody these commandments.
3. Make a plan to see and address the immediate needs of your surrounding community.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Keep the “Main Thing” the Main Thing
- B. Lesson Context

I. Right Belief (Mark 12:28–34)

- A. Inquiry for Jesus (v. 28)
- B. Explanation of the Law (vv. 29–31)
All In
- C. Expansion of the Reply (vv. 32–33)
- D. Evidence of Wisdom (v. 34)

II. Right Action (James 2:14–17)

- A. Rhetorical Question (v. 14)
- B. Obvious Example (vv. 15–16)
- C. Confident Assertion (v. 17)
More Than Just Bumper Stickers

Conclusion

- A. The Most Important Thing
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Keep the “Main Thing” the Main Thing

When I was in college studying theology and biblical studies, it was common for me and my peers to get into discussions about matters of biblical interpretation. Occasionally these got rather heated, with advocates on either side of an issue growing vehement as they tried to convince the others of their position. While we continued to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, I would be lying if I said it wasn't a struggle to remember to “keep the main thing the main thing.” Learning lots of exciting things about our faith each week through various readings and lectures, it was all too easy to fall into “majoring on the minors” when we got into discussions. Often we were tempted to see each other as opponents to shoot down with arguments and ideas, rather than as fellow believers worthy of love and kindness. But love should always take first place in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Today's lesson texts remind us how to live out our faith from a center of love for God and others.

B. Lesson Context

The setting of Mark 12:28–34 is the temple in Jerusalem during Jesus' final week. He spends much of that week teaching in the temple environs (Mark 11:15–17, 27; 12:35; etc.). Earlier, Jesus expressed his opposition to the economics of temple practices when he drove out the money changers who had turned the temple into a commercial center rather than a place of prayer (11:15–17). This, along with his teaching, enraged the temple authorities (11:18).

Consequently, those authorities sought to undermine Jesus' credibility with the people by questioning his allegiances and debating him publicly. Should his popularity wane by being discredited, the authorities could act against Jesus without incurring the people's anger. If his answers questioned the authority of Rome, he could be handed over to the Romans for execution. Either way, the authorities wanted to undermine Jesus' credibility because they perceived him as a threat to their own powerful positions (compare John 11:48).

Concerning the book of James, there are four or five men named James in the New Testament. The author of the book that bears his name is the James of Matthew 13:55. Thus, he is the half-brother of Jesus. We see the influence of this James in Acts 15:13–21.

James writes his letter to a group we call the “diaspora”: religiously and ethnically Jewish people who are dispersed and scattered, many of whom have come to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the hope of Israel (James 1:1). He is evidently concerned with his readers’ actions. In providing a solution to the areas of concern, he exhorts his readers to live in light of the gospel they profess (James 1:21–22, 27; 2:8, 24). James’s identification of the “royal law” is the same that Jesus quoted in Mark 12:31: love your neighbor as yourself (James 2:8).

I. Right Belief

(Mark 12:28–34)

Just prior to our lesson passage, a succession of inquisitors had peppered Jesus with questions in order to cast doubt on his authority and discredit his ministry (Mark 11:27–33; 12:13–27). These opponents represented all elements and levels of Jewish religious authority in Jerusalem—chief priests, teachers of the law, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees.

A. Inquiry for Jesus (v. 28)

28. One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

One of the teachers of the law seems impressed with how Jesus has been answering his interrogators. The man approaches Jesus with respect; the parallel account in Matthew 22:36 includes the use of the title “teacher” (compare Mark 12:32, below). He wonders how Jesus might answer a question often debated among the rabbis: Of all the commandments, *which is the most important one of all?*

Traditionally, rabbis counted over 600 com-

mands in the Law of Moses. It is not surprising, then, that a debate might arise concerning which ones were the most important. If one were to create a “top ten” list, the task might seem easy: the most important ones are the Ten Commandments, of course! Some Jewish scholars, like the first-century Philo of Alexandria, thought those 10 summarized all the commands in the law. He believed they articulated two primary responsibilities: one pertaining to God (piety) and the other pertaining to people (justice).

Categorizing those commandments in this twofold way is not uncommon at the time. But does the Law of Moses suggest a hierarchy of importance whereby one commandment can be singled out as being the most important commandment of all?

B. Explanation of the Law (vv. 29–31)

29. “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’

Given his straightforward reply, Jesus recognizes that this is not a trick question designed to trap him (compare Mark 12:15). There is no hesitation in identifying *the most important* commandment as Jesus quotes the opening words of Deuteronomy 6:4. This is often called “the Shema” (the Hebrew word for “hear”). This is ancient Israel’s foundational confession. As evidence of its centrality, some devout Jews in Jesus’ time recited the Shema twice a day.

Just before voicing the Shema to the Israelites, Moses charged them to follow God as they

How to Say It

Adonai (Hebrew)	Ad-owe-nye.
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Diaspora	Dee-as-puh-ruh.
Elohim (Hebrew)	El-o-heem.
Herodians	Heh-roe-dee-unz.
pantheon	pan-thee-on.
Pharisees	Fair-ih-seez.
Sadducees	Sad-you-seez.
Shema (Hebrew)	Shih-mah.
Yahweh (Hebrew)	Yah-weh.

entered the promised land. This included fearing God and keeping his commands, so that things might go well with them (Deuteronomy 6:1–3). The Shema proclaims God’s singularity. Following the Shema, Moses reminded the people of how God had delivered them from Egyptian bondage. This deliverance emphasized the importance of remembering the Lord their God and keeping his commands (Deuteronomy 6:12–25).

The Shema is the foundation of obedience to God’s commands. There is not a multiplicity of gods (a pantheon; compare Deuteronomy 6:14). The one, true God has more than one designation in the Hebrew language (*Elohim*, *Yahweh*, and *Adonai*), but he alone is God.

30. “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’

Jesus continues the quotation as he moves to Deuteronomy 6:5. The word *mind* is not in the original “with all” list, and so it has been added by Jesus (compare Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). While each of these aspects of the human person is distinct and unique, they also overlap in various ways. These terms collectively emphasize the whole person. This realization is more important than carefully defining each one to distinguish it from the others. The primary theme of Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; and Luke 10:27 is just this: we are to devote our whole selves, everything we are and have, toward loving God.

What Do You Think?

What examples in your life point toward a life wholly devoted to loving God?

Digging Deeper

Name characters from Scripture whom you admire because of their devotion.

All In

Before I met my husband, I went on a few dates with a guy in college. I worked at the college bookstore at the time, and he would often come in to talk to me while I worked. Sometimes, he’d purchase a piece of chocolate and slip it to me before he left. I thought he was wonderful.

Before long, I realized it had been quite a few days since he’d called me or stopped by my work. Just as I began to think the relationship was over, he came into the bookstore to chat and slip me another piece of chocolate. I was enthralled once again. Soon, however, the pattern of silence continued. The roller-coaster ride of emotions involved was difficult to navigate, and I finally told him it was over. It became evident that he was not “all in.”

Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to be all in regarding our love for God. In the past, I have been like that college guy, stopping in to talk to God and slip him a little praise once in a while. But he is worthy of all the love of our hearts, minds, souls, and strength! Are you “all in” in your love for the Lord? How will you show him today that you are? —B. R.

31. “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

The teacher of the law asks which commandment is most important. But Jesus provides two answers. While distinct, the second commandment is intrinsically connected to the first. One cannot truly *love your neighbor as yourself* without first loving God. In practice, they form one commandment. The intrinsic connection is seen in the fact that our fellow human beings have been created in the image of God, just as we have been (see 1 John 4:7–12, 20).

Jesus’ statement here matches Leviticus 19:18. Within the book of Leviticus, this commandment appears as part of the Holiness Code, which is found in Leviticus 17–26. Some commentators suggest that Leviticus 19:18 serves as a kind of summary statement for the Holiness Code. To love one’s neighbor is to treat them with the respect and holiness demanded in the legislation recorded in Leviticus 17–26.

Together, these two commandments provide the foundation for the rest of God’s commands. Those who fail at keeping these two have no hope of fulfilling the rest of the law. An anecdote notes an occasion when a Jew known as Hillel the Elder (lived about 40 BC–AD 10) was challenged by a Gentile to summarize the entirety of the Law of

Moses in a single sentence. His reported response was, “What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor; this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”

Inherent in the command of love toward our neighbors is to love them as we love ourselves. Rather than grounds for selfishness, love of self here carries the sense of seeking our own good (compare Ephesians 5:28–29). We don’t harm ourselves; we take care of ourselves. Just so, we ought to treat others as we would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). When Jesus gives this charge in his Sermon on the Mount, he adds that this is a summary of the law and prophets (Matthew 7:12).

What Do You Think?

Which part of Jesus’ twofold answer do you find most difficult to obey?

Digging Deeper

In what ways are the two parts of the greatest commandment interconnected?

C. Expansion of the Reply (vv. 32–33)

32–33. “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but 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 burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

While agreeing with and restating the answer Jesus gives, the teacher adds something to what Jesus said: the man claims that loving God and neighbor is more important than *all burnt offerings and sacrifices* of the Levitical system. Jesus’ declaration, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7, quoting Hosea 6:6), wasn’t intended to suggest doing away with the Levitical system but to ensure that people understood which command was relatively more important.

A relativizing of the sacrificial system makes sure that it doesn’t take precedence over loving God and loving neighbor. There was always a danger of inappropriately prioritizing the temple and its sacrifices (Isaiah 1:11–17; Jeremiah 7:4–

11; etc.). During Jesus’ final week, he condemns the Pharisees and teachers of the law for missing “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23).

What Do You Think?

How does one’s motive affect the meaning of one’s actions?

Digging Deeper

Whose actions in Scripture came from poor motives? Whose came from good motives?

D. Evidence of Wisdom (v. 34)

34. 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.

Jesus is apparently impressed with the teacher’s answer and affirms what the man perceives. As Jesus informs him that he is *not far from the kingdom of God*, Jesus is not saying that the man is *in* the kingdom of God. He is near to it but not yet there. This implies that he still lacks something. He has grasped something essential, and he very well may be closer to the kingdom than others within earshot.

The series of questions the religious leaders asked Jesus comes to an end with this dialogue. Jesus’ response is profound and unassailable. Those looking to undermine him are silenced.

II. Right Action

(James 2:14–17)

Verses prior to our printed passage tie this section of the lesson to the passage above from Mark 12. James 2 begins with a discussion of favoritism. James indicts his readers for showing preference for the rich over the poor, even citing the “royal law” as Jesus did in Mark 12:31 (Leviticus 19:18). James claims his readers will do right to “love your neighbour as yourself” (James 2:8). On the contrary, if they show favoritism, they are law-breakers, failing to love their neighbors as themselves (2:9). This discussion continues as the writer

digs deeper to drive home the points just made in 2:1–13.

A. Rhetorical Question (v. 14)

14. What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?

James raises two rhetorical questions that introduce the larger question of when faith becomes ineffective. When is faith unable to save? James says there is no profit in *faith* when it does not have works—when it lies inactive. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, the highest priority is faith working through love. A faith without works is a faith that is failing to love God and our neighbors. Examples of such works follow.

What Do You Think?

In what ways does this passage from James challenge your understanding of faith?

Digging Deeper

How does Hebrews 11 inform your understanding of James 2:14?

B. Obvious Example (vv. 15–16)

15. Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.

This verse begins a second hypothetical example in this chapter. In the first one, in James 2:2–4, the writer condemned favoritism based on economic status. His second example focuses on someone in abject poverty. More specifically, this is someone in the congregation—a *brother or a sister*—who is without adequate clothing or food. What does saving faith do in such a situation?

16. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

James highlights the sort of callousness of heart that neglecting the poor entails. The example is so embarrassing; it’s difficult to imagine such a reality being an issue among believers. Yet this seems to be the situation among those to whom James writes his letter. The rich are honored, but the poor are despised. The rich are loved, but the poor are

neglected. Instead of showing love as they ought, certain people have become lawbreakers while ingratiating themselves to the rich (James 2:6–9).

The apostle John writes similarly (1 John 3:17–18). James calls the second commandment as noted in Mark 12:31, above, the “royal law” (James 2:8). Honoring the royal law means loving others enough to include feeding and clothing brothers and sisters in need. When we fail to do so, we fail to love our neighbors. Faith that does not result in such works does no *good*. Another way to say that comes next.

What Do You Think?

Where is your faith, or your community’s life of faith, characterized by a lack of action?

Digging Deeper

What specific opportunities exist to shift in the direction of a more active faith?

C. Confident Assertion (v. 17)

17. In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Here, James offers an initial concluding statement in response to his rhetorical question in James 2:14, above. Faith that is void of good *action* is not authentic faith. Such a faith is *dead*.

It is important not to misread James here. He is not contradicting what is affirmed elsewhere in the New Testament, namely, that we are saved by grace through faith—not by works, as the apostle Paul establishes in Ephesians 2:8–9. Christianity is not based on salvation by faith plus works, but is instead a system that requires a faith that produces (or results in) works. In other words, salvation is not “F + W,” but is “F → W.”

We were created to do good works, “which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). What Paul stresses in this passage to the Ephesians is that our salvation is not of our own doing, but a gift of God. Rather than contradicting this, James adds clarity to what that faith entails. It is a faith that is alive (rather than *dead*) and united to good works. James 2:26 restates these ideas, driving

home this point as crucial: “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”

Having an active faith is a theme throughout the book of James. He charges his readers to be not just hearers but doers (James 1:22–25). He expresses that wisdom and understanding are evident in deeds done in humility and characterized by mercy and good fruit (3:13, 17). Failing to do the good we know we ought to do is sin (4:17). He highlights prayer as an example of faith working itself out in action (5:13–16).

More Than Just Bumper Stickers

Our church in Mississippi gives out bumper stickers to all of its members. The bumper stickers include the church’s name and this declaration: “We love people.” I have one on the back of my car. It’s easy to spot other members of our church out on the roads when we all proudly display the same sticker on our vehicles.

That phrase “We love people” is a mission statement for our church. But the statement alone does not mean anything unless it is followed by action. The way our church loves people is by serving them. For example, we feed hundreds of food-insecure children every summer through our lunch initiative. We find ways to love the service members of our community by showing up with meals and gifts of appreciation. We clean the bathrooms in our local schools and offer snacks and treats to the teachers several times a month. Our hope is that our neighbors will know we love them as we seek to love them well.

Just displaying the bumper stickers on our cars is not enough; a hollow, inactive faith is a contradiction in terms. We have to prove the validity of our faith with meaningful, loving action. —B. R.

Conclusion

A. The Most Important Thing

The Law of Moses established many specific things that God desired of his people living under that covenant. But the people were pleasing to God only when those required actions were motivated and accompanied by love for God and love for those created in his image. Having these pri-



Visual for Lessons 9 & 13. *Point to this visual as you conclude, tying together both Scripture passages in this lesson.*

orities rightly aligned enables us yet today to live rightly in other, subsidiary matters. Jesus made this abundantly clear in Mark 12.

Similarly, James 2 reveals that as critical as faith is, it means nothing if it is void of proper action. Bringing these passages together, true faith and right response to God comes down to love lived out daily.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he gave a twofold reply. That’s because one cannot be the case without the other. The two replies are interlinked in an inseparable way. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor, and we cannot love our neighbor properly without loving God first (1 John 3:16–17). True faith is expressed in such good works.

To love God and neighbor is the best sacrifice we offer to God; it is the gift of our whole selves to God and to others. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices worked out in love for God and others—even our enemies (Romans 12:1, 9–11, 20–21).

B. Prayer

Blessed are you, Father, for pouring your love upon us through Jesus’ payment of sin’s price on the cross. Fill us with your love that our whole selves might love you and love our neighbors. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Love God and love others.