

“WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?”

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Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Tina Turner sings, “What’s love got to do with it? What’s love but a second-hand emotion?”

She sings of human romantic love, like it’s the only kind. There’s more, so much more. And that’s what we’re going to talk about this morning.

This reading from Mark’s gospel is the unfolding of a revolutionary concept, one that will go against the grain, swimming upstream, and making a point that will be challenged then and for centuries to come.

In the verses leading up to our reading today, we are told of efforts by the teachers and temple officials to trap Jesus with words.

They ask him by what authority is he doing these miracles and healings. In response, he asks them about John the Baptist's baptism; was it from heaven or from men? They who were questioning Jesus knew that either answer would put them in a corner, so they said they did not know the answer. That sounded safe. Then Jesus said, "If that's the case, then I don't have to tell you anything about my authority."

Jesus knew their hearts were closed, but he was willing to deal with closed hearts.

So, Jesus tells a parable about the owner of a vineyard who left tenants in charge of his property and he left town. Sometime later, at harvest time, he sent a servant back there to collect some of the fruits for him. After all, it was from his property and rightfully his. The tenants beat the servant and sent him away. He sent a second servant who wound up dead. So, he sent his son, who he thought would command more respect; but they killed the son also. Jesus then tells them this is about the plot underway to undermine Jesus' ministry and, if need be, to kill him.

It was obvious to Jesus' enemies who the bad guys were in this parable. The servants were the prophets and the son was Jesus himself.

So, Jesus is challenging the local authority in a big way and so they continue trying to trap him. The parable of the vineyard was the tipping point in their anger to him.

Invigorated in their anger, the first of their plots had to do with paying taxes to Caesar. The men of the temple had divided loyalty to both the temple and to the Roman government. In their view, the answer to the tax question could only be answered one of two ways. Either pay to Caesar or to God and they could see no way Jesus could escape this one. But, Jesus had a third answer. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But he did not say which was which. In other words, he put the question right back in their lap.

This kind of embarrassing tactic would make anyone mad, back then or even today.

There was a bit of theological competition in the temple between Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees had had their shot at Jesus, so the Sadducees decided to try their hand at it. They arrived upon another question; one of marriage. The law says if a married man dies without fathering any children, the dead man's brother must take the widow as his wife and father children for the dead brother.

And so, the Sadducees continued with a hypothetical issue. Suppose a man dies, they say, without fathering any children and the next brother fills that role, as required. But he has no children and he dies also. All in all, seven brothers try and fail. They all die without children. So, at the resurrection, who will the wife belong to?

Either the Sadducees must have been very shallow-minded or they thought Jesus was. They had painted themselves into a corner before Jesus even responded. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, so their plot was flawed from the beginning and Jesus saw right through it.

Jesus goes on to tell them that heaven is not like life on earth. Basically, everyone will belong to everyone else. And furthermore, he says, God is a God of the living, not the dead. So there, Sadducees, put that in your pipe and smoke it!

Which brings us to today's reading, which would lack the intended impact if we had not heard of the previous conversations leading up to this point.

And so, here is one more question which initially sounds like a trap; a teacher of the law asking Jesus which commandment is the greatest.

This question reminds me of one aspect of the relationship I had with my mother when I was much younger. One of the things she fervently believed was that the best way to control a young teenage boy was to keep him off balance ALL the time. Just for example, she went shopping and brought back two shirts for me, one red and one blue.

She asked, "Which one do you like best?"

I answered, "The red one."

She responded, "So, you don't like the blue one?"

"No, I like the blue one, but..."

“Make up your mind!”

And on and on. It took me a while, but I soon realized that when she did such things, there was a hint of a clever grin on her face. Maybe I should have told her my preference depended on the day of the week. Come to think of it, I could have gotten seven shirts out of that deal!

So, Jesus is faced with a similar question. Which commandment do you like best? He answers by quoting Old testament scripture, which the teacher should have known and probably did.

Jesus answers first from Dt 6:4, which says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.” This expression is called by the Hebrew name ‘Shema.’ It translates to the word, ‘Hear.’ Even today, a Jewish worship service always begins with the Shema. It is Israel’s promise of allegiance and commitment that belongs to God alone.

Jesus sets the stage with the Shema and then continues by saying we should love God with all of our being and love our neighbors as ourselves. This second part about loving neighbors comes straight out of Lev 19:18. When Jesus combined these two scriptures in his answer, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, he implies that our love for our neighbor is an outgrowth of our love for God.

This time, Jesus has not dodged the question. If you look at all the ten commandments, each one can be categorized into one of two groups: love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus’ answer was bigger than the question. He knew the scripture and he knew the prophets. They had asked for a sip of water and they got a fire hose!

The prophets of the Old Testament were not blinded to the foundations of what God wanted from us. The prophet Samuel had said, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

And then there was Hosea who had heard God say, “I desire a steadfast love and not sacrifice.”

As a matter of fact, one of the most repetitive themes in the bible is the love of God for us and us for each other. Jesus had just summed it all up in a couple of Old Testament verses. The teacher of the law who had posed the question admitted that Jesus had answered correctly. That's when Jesus told him he was not far from the Kingdom of Heaven.

Because of that last statement from Jesus, there are current bible interpreters who believe that the teacher who asked the question was rightly impressed with Jesus' answer. And maybe Jesus was impressed with the teacher. I guess not everyone dressed in scholarly robes is a bad guy. Maybe it was the way he phrased the question. It sounded more benign than the ones that preceded it.

If you read all the major events of the bible from the very beginning of creation, up until the ministry of Jesus, you will notice a social developmental progression. God gives His people guidance to the level they can handle and does so in the most basic ways. Early on, I think it would be safe to say God's instructions were very simple. Do this, don't do that. Don't ask why.

Ever tried to read Leviticus? It comes with all the details about what to do and not do and what the consequences would be for not following the rules. Throughout the OT, God made many covenants, progressive covenants, with His chosen people along the way, all of which were done out of love. Noah, Abraham, David and many others all had covenants with God.

Years ago, a friend of mine earned his private pilot's license. His instructor then said, "Okay, now let's learn how to really fly this airplane." The teacher from the temple knew the law. Jesus wanted to see him peel back the cover and really see God's basis for all of it. Let's take these scriptures by the horns and see what they really mean!

This was the progressive background environment in which Jesus laid out his ministry. Jesus had a new covenant, but it would take three years and the ultimate sacrifice to begin explaining and understanding it. We are still in that phase today.

It is quite apparent that our reading today is focused on the theme of love. Jesus' words make it sound like love is a simple thing.

How many of you believe that?

Of all powers, love is the most powerful and yet most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold that is the human heart. But, it is the most powerless because it can do nothing by force alone. Although power can force obedience, only love can summon a response of love, which is the reason he created us.

St Augustine said that anyone who says they understand the scriptures but does not see how scripture supports the double love of God and neighbor just does not understand the scriptures at all.

In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, as Tina Turner says, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in a romantic Hollywood style with a cozy emotional feeling. You can produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as easily as you can show a yawn or a sneeze, and it lasts just about as long. On the contrary, we are instructed to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end.

Loving our neighbor does not mean overlooking their shortcomings. Sometimes we do this in order to avoid sounding critical. God asks us to call it as we see it. In its own way, this is also love.

When Jesus talked to the Pharisees, he didn't say, "There, there. Everything's going to be all right." From Matthew 12:34, he said, "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil!"

Christians are in a very real battle against evil. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees in this way because he loved them. I have heard it said you may not really 'Like' someone, but you can love that person the way God wants us to. I am sure if you give it some thought, you can think of real examples of that idea. How about the Good Samaritan parable?

In loving only those we like, it's easy to become completely immersed within a "Christian Bubble" and alienate yourself from the rest of sinful humanity—self-righteously judging, shaming and fearfully avoiding the world around us.

In the wake of the recent synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, money has been raised to help families of the victims. Much of that came from the local Islamic community. Two religions that do not believe in the resurrection of Christ. Two religions I could not be part of. And yet?

Jesus says we are to love our enemies and pray for them, meaning love not in an emotional sense but in the sense of willing their good, which is the sense in which we love ourselves.

God's love is one of relationships and we are relational creatures. With love in your life, everything you do is eternal and worth doing.

Moments that stand out are moments done in the spirit of love.

It's not what we have done nor what we have believed or achieved, but how we have discharged the common charities of life.

We are to be judged by the *withholding* of love. This is the negation of the spirit of Christ. It is as though he had never lived or died.

One huge mistake we make is that we try to define God's love in human terms, that is, according to what we know about human love. We cannot discover what God is like by remembering our own experiences in love. Sorry, Tina Turner!

How would our church look if we loved each other as well as those outside our congregation in the way that God loves us? God's love is universal; it is meant for everyone, not just a few.

His love is unconditional. There are no 'ifs' in God's love. As Paul said, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Salvation is ours not because of Jesus' death, but in spite of it.

God makes the first move. He does not wait for us to come asking.

God is faithful. Count on it; His love is always there.

In loving us, God gives of Himself. He didn't send us a care package; He came to us in human form.

God's love accepts and forgives us just as we are. God's love is absolutely pure. God's love is not the same as human love. That's the good news.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.