

## Thirty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?”<sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!’<sup>30</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’<sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>32</sup> The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’<sup>33</sup> And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”<sup>34</sup> And when Jesus saw that (he) answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28–34)



*The Pharisees and the Sadducees Come to Tempt Jesus  
| James Tissot | Brooklyn Museum, PD-US*

This coming Sunday is the [31st Sunday](#) in Year B. Our gospel is taken from the Gospel of Mark and is one of the most well known passages. Jesus is asked about the commandments: <sup>28</sup> *One of the scribes...asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?”* The response is very familiar to Christians: <sup>29</sup> *Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!’* <sup>30</sup> *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 other commandment greater than these.”*

This is not the first question asked of Jesus by Jewish leaders. Jesus has been under “observation” throughout Mark’s Gospel as Pharisees, Sadducees and the scribes were always evaluating Jesus’ activities. They judged charged Jesus him with “blasphemy” after hearing him forgive someone’s sins (2:7); they evaluated the people with whom Jesus ate (2:16); some Jerusalem scribes claim he was in

league with “Beelzebul” because of his exorcism activity (3:22); they questioned his disciples’ hand-washing practices and adherence to the tradition of the elders (7:1,5); along with priests and elders, the scribes probed into the origins of Jesus’ authority (11:27-28), which the general populace perceived to be distinctive from the scribes (cf. 1:22); along with Jerusalem priests, they wanted to kill Jesus because they were afraid of his popularity (11:18, 32; 14:1). These are not hallmarks of a warm and cordial relationship.

The setting for this gospel pericope is in the midst of Holy Week. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Our story falls within a series of conversations between Jesus and various leaders which began in Mark 11:27:

- Question about authority from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders (11:27-33)
- Parable about abusive treatment of authorities (12:1-12)
- Question about taxes from Pharisees and Herodians (12:13-17)
- Question about the resurrection from Sadducees (12:18-27)
- Question about the greatest law from a scribe (12:28-34) ~ *our gospel*
- Question about the Davidic ancestry of the Messiah raised by Jesus (12:35-37)

Our gospel reading is the final discussion initiated by one of these leaders, since “*no one dared to ask him any question*” after this encounter (cf. Mark 12:34)

The scribe's question in our text is not posed “to test” Jesus as in Matthew 22:34-40 and Luke 10:25-28. The question is, in fact, a familiar one from Jewish tradition: “Is there a way of summarizing the commandments?” The question seems to have been asked by a scribe who was well impressed with Jesus' answers in the preceding discussions. A common feature of the preceding questions was the traditional rabbinic distinction between lighter and weightier, smaller and greater commandments. In this context it is not the “10 Commandments” but the 613 individual statutes of the Law/Torah.

In Jesus’ day, a well-known summary of the whole Law/Torah was given by Hillel the Elder. When challenged by a Gentile, Hillel replied: “What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” (Shabbath 31a; cf. Tobit 4:15) Likewise, Jesus’ response goes much deeper than the distinction between small and great commandments and shows that he understood the question to concern the principle of Law/Torah. But Jesus’ answer will summarize the whole Law/Torah in the will of God which calls for the love which is a whole-hearted response to God and to the neighbor.

### **Jesus’ Reply**

*Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!’<sup>30</sup> 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 other commandment greater than these.”*

Mark alone among the evangelists reports that Jesus introduced his answer with the opening words of the Shema’: *Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!* (Deut. 6:4), a prayer and confession of faith said every morning and evening by pious Jews. The words of the Shema’ indicate that the command to love God is an obligation which stems from his uniqueness as God and his gracious favor in extending his covenant love to Israel.

Monotheism was a belief, in its time, peculiar to the Jewish people. All the nations around them had a plethora of gods and demigods. But Israel's encounters with the Lord recounted that the Lord was One and there were no other gods besides him

*"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!" (Dt 6:4 - Shema')*

*"This was shown to you so that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him." (Dt 4:35)*

*"Thus says the LORD, Israel's king and redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but me." (Is 44:6)*

*"I am the LORD, there is no other, there is no God besides me." (Is 45:5)*

*"Remember the former things, those long ago; I am God, there is no other; I am God, there is none like me." (Is 46:9)*

*"For you are great and do wondrous deeds; and you alone are God." (Ps 86:10)*

The Shema prayer begins with the imperative command: *"Hear."* It is a present tense imperative, which implies continuous or repeated action: *"Keep on listening!" "Continue to hear!"* This command to listen is heard frequently in Mark, e.g., in the parable of the sower (4:3) and at the Transfiguration: *"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him"* (9:7). Perhaps the *"first command of all"* is: *"Listen!"* What follows this initial command are the consequences of truly listening and hearing as indicated by the shift to a future tense: *"You shall love..."*. The shift moves from a singular eternal truth (the uniqueness of God) to a continuous love response.

Stoffergen offers an insight on love and its command. He writes: *"Could you imagine a young couple on their first date? The woman thinks to herself, 'I really like this guy. He's so handsome. He's so charming. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life with him. What can I do to get him to love me?' Then you hear the woman say in a stern voice: 'I command you to love me. You will marry me. We will live happily ever after.' Would a marriage like that work? Can love be commanded?"*

The underlying word for the verb *"to love"* is *agano*. It implies action rather than emotion. No command can change one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Rules might make us act more lovingly towards other people but not *"with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."* But then again there is one other time *agano* is used in Mark's gospel.

In the story of the rich young man who comes to Jesus asking him what he must do to inherit the kingdom of God (10:17-22), we read: *"Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, 'You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'" Jesus' love for the man was evident in the action recommended. Jesus' response was not a Hallmark card moment, but a response for the good of the other. Jesus commands us to love our enemies (in Matthew 5:44). Our response might well be all action accompanied by feelings not commonly described as "love." So, there is a sense in which love can be commanded.*

Along with the other evangelists Mark records Jesus' response which is a combination of

Deut. 6:5 - *"Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength."* and

Lev. 19:18 - *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself"*

“It is the Lord our God who is to be loved with a completeness of devotion which is defined by the repeated ‘all.’ Because the whole man is the object of God’s covenant love, the whole man is claimed by God for himself. To love God in the way defined by the great commandment is to seek God for his own sake, to have pleasure in him and to strive impulsively after him. Jesus demands a decision and readiness for God, and for God alone, in an unconditional manner. Clearly this cannot be the subject of legal enactment. It is a matter of will and action. The love which determines the whole disposition of one’s life and places one’s whole personality in the service of God reflects a commitment to God which springs from divine sonship.” (Lane, 432-3)

### **The Scribe’s reaction**

<sup>32</sup> *The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’* <sup>33</sup> *And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* <sup>34</sup> *And when Jesus saw that [he] answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

Shock of shocks - this individual scribe agreed with Jesus. But as mentioned earlier, the ideas were already there in the Hebrew Scriptures. But what would have been in question was the context of Lev 19:18. In the narrow sense of to whom it applied as the command is defined by the prior reference to “*the sons of your own people*” in the beginning of the verse in Leviticus. Although not from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus lifted the commandment from this restriction in reference, with his startling teaching concerning the breadth of neighbor in the passage of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37). The Lukan statement concerning the will of God and its fulfillment as the combined and inseparable love for God and love for men is evident in subsequent apostolic teaching (cf. Rom. 13:8–9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8). I would suggest that given Mark is writing for a Roman audience, the wider understanding of being neighbor might be a given.

What might be surprising in the scribe’s response is that these two commands are “*worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.*” Lane [433-4] offers: “The common scribal position is well summarized in the maxim of Simon the Just (ca. 200 B.C.): ‘The world rests on three things: the Law, the sacrificial worship, and expressions of love’ (M. Aboth I. 2). In addition, there are also statements in rabbinic literature which are attached explicitly or implicitly to OT texts like

1 Sam. 15:22 - “*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the LORD’s command? Obedience is better than sacrifice, to listen, better than the fat of rams.*”

Hos. 6:6 - “*For it is loyalty that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*”

Prov. 21:3 - “*To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice*”

These texts affirm the superiority of the moral life, and especially of love, to cult and sacrifice. A careful reading of the texts indicates that “love” is understood as benevolence expressed in works of love which are set above sacrifice because of their atoning significance (cf. Aboth de Rabbi Nathan IV. 2). This concept falls short of expressing that inner commitment to God for his own sake which Jesus had affirmed” and to which the scribe agreed. (Lane, 434)

### **It is personal**

When Jesus answers the scribe, He uses the second person singular form of the verbs: “*You shall love..*” Jesus is telling this individual what he should do. In this way it is not a dissimilar encounter with the

earlier episode of the rich young man who asks what he must do to inherit the Kingdom (Mark 10:17-22). Although the man goes away sad, he clearly understood that this was an answer to what he, personally, must do. When the scribe responds and virtually repeats what Jesus had said he makes it impersonal. He doesn't say, "You're right! I should love ...." It is as though the initial question was somewhat "academic" as opposed to personal; an intellectual exercise for the scribe as opposed to seeking a guide to this life and the Kingdom to come. Even Jesus notes that the scribe has answered "*with understanding*" perhaps acknowledging the goodness of the answer.

But then Jesus adds: "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*" This is a bit ambiguous and was likely intended to provoke reflection on the part of the scribe. The scribe's searching and humility before God are a start. His enthusiastic approval of Jesus' teaching revealed an attraction toward the one through whom God had brought the Kingdom near. But the encounter is not a rabbinic discussion about the heart of the Mosaic Law, but a proclamation of the demands of the messianic Kingdom. I wonder if this is Jesus' encouragement to the scribe to move from "academic" to action.

Jesus' response acknowledges that the scribe has grasped a profound truth about the essence of God's commandments. By recognizing that love for God and neighbor is more important than external religious rituals, the scribe shows an understanding of the deeper moral and spiritual requirements of God's kingdom. This insight brings him close to entering the kingdom. Yet he has not yet fully committed to Jesus or embraced Him as the Messiah. Jesus' remark may imply that the final step into the kingdom involves recognizing Jesus' role as the fulfillment of the Law.

Jesus' statement might also suggest that while the scribe is close in terms of understanding, he still needs the transformation of heart and faith in Jesus that is necessary to enter the kingdom. These words might be as simple as an invitation for the man to take the final steps toward the kingdom. It is a gentle encouragement, indicating that the scribe is on the right path but still needs to make a decision of faith to fully enter into God's reign.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

For a final thought, Pheme Perkins [679] offers:

What does it mean for Christians today to say "the Lord our God, the Lord is one"? Most of us do not live surrounded by temples and images of polytheism. Yet we might ask whether we have not given in to another kind of polytheism, a casual pluralism that accepts whatever anyone believes as "okay." Or again, we allow good things that are not ultimate to become the ultimate and defining forces in our lives -- nation, occupation, family, race, political cause, or theological system. [p. 679]

In the face of Perkins' comment, one wonders how often such "polytheism" hinders us from the second commandment in which love demands a word from us, perhaps a gentle "push" or reminder to our neighbor that the Kingdom is at hand.

It is fashionable nowadays to place the 'great commandment' beside the 'great commission' (Matt. 28:19) as denoting the social responsibility of the church (love your neighbor as yourself) alongside its evangelistic responsibility. No-one would deny the social implication of the gospel, but, in fairness to biblical exegesis, it should be remembered that the 'first and great commandment' as recorded here is total love for God: the 'second great commandment' of love for neighbors stems from it, and is set within this theological context. If we lose this balance, we are left with a shallow humanitarianism without any deep theological roots.

Soren Kierkegaard well says ‘If we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then this commandment opens, as with a masterkey, the lock to our self-love, and snatches it away from us.’

In this summary, the heart of true religion is seen to lie, not in negative commands, but in a positive loving attitude to God and others. This is the “liberty” about which St. Paul wrote in Gal. 5:1 - “*For freedom Christ set us free*”. This is what St Augustine means by saying ‘Love and do as you like’, for such love towards God and others will in itself keep us from license. If we love others, we will do nothing to hurt them and, if we love God, what we like and choose will be to do God’s will and pleasure (Ps. 40:8). That is why Paul can say “*Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.*’ (Rom. 13:10).

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