

## **Sermon Theme: Live in Love**

### **Sermon Reading: Mark 12:28-34**

Growing up my mom would like to remind my brothers and me, “Close only counts in horse shoes and hand grenades.” It was her way of easing the tension and reminding us that most of the time being close doesn’t cut it. It can be a hard lesson to learn and one that is not always enjoyable that even when you try your hardest and put forth your best effort, sometimes it’s not good enough. There are many different examples where we have learned that being close doesn’t mean a thing. Various different sports are referred to as a “game of inches.” A ball going one way or another, a player diving just a few inches further or higher, could make or break the season. Go to an amusement park and the sign says, “You must be this tall,” even if you are close, in case of safety, lawsuits, and other trouble they probably aren’t going to bend the rules. As much as we might like it the other way at times—especially when we do put in a lot of time and effort—we can understand that most of the time close isn’t enough. But what about when it comes to God’s Law and what he tells us to do? We know God expects perfection. But by the way we live and act we can give the impression that someone being close, doing your best is enough.

Some of the religious leaders from the group of Sadducees had come to trap Jesus with a question. But again Jesus avoided their trap and put them in their place. The other group of religious leaders—the Pharisees—had witnessed this beat down and appreciated that aspect, but they didn’t want Jesus to get too comfortable and any more popular with the people. And so it seems like they sent this man from the reading in Mark—one of teachers of the law—to pose a question to Jesus.

This man would have been very well-versed in all the laws and regulations of the Old Testament and Moses. He was a professional who studied, knew them, and was able to discuss them at a high level. So at first glance, the question sounds rather simple: “**Of all the commandments, which is the most important?**” But this question is anything but easy. The rabbis, religious leaders, and teachers of the law had wrestled with this question quite a bit. They had gone through the Law of Moses and counted 613 commandments that God’s people were to follow. These commandments were then put into two different categories where 248 were positive—actions that were supposed to be done and 365 were negative—actions to not do. And so the discussion would then turn to deciding which commandments were heavy or great—things you absolutely had to be sure to do—and which ones were small or light—which ones weren’t as serious. It was only natural that the discussion would then follow to try and figure out, “Which is the greatest?”

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

These words would have been very familiar both to the teacher of the law asking the question and the Jewish people. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” was spoken by devout Jews three different times a day. What follows with loving God and your neighbor would have also been familiar being quoted from the Old Testament Laws of Moses.

It makes sense to us that these would be the most important. Of course we should love God above all things. As we confess, after all the things God has done and continues to do for us, how everything comes from him, God deserves all of our love. It also makes sense that we ought to love our neighbors as ourselves. Sometimes referred to as “The Golden Rule” you maybe have also heard it said, “Treat others as you want to be treated.” Even secular and non-religious or non-Christian America will acknowledge this is something that people should be doing.

The teacher of Law agrees with Jesus as well, “**Well said, teacher, you are right,**” he tells Jesus. He even goes on to add that these commandments were even more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. This guy gets it. Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, Mark writes. This man recognizes that it’s not only about the actions that someone does; it’s about the attitude and what’s in the heart. He sees that it’s not about hair-splitting between which is a greater or lighter law, but love for God which then shows itself in love for your neighbor.

From the man’s response we can see that he was probably genuinely curious of which commandment is the most important, and we can understand why he would ask that question. It goes back to the religious teaching of the Pharisees in Jesus’ time that if you follow and live according to God’s Law, you will have a place in heaven. The underlying thought seems to be then that if he can have a good summary to follow, well then, “I can keep that. I have an attainable goal to shoot for with life.” We can be fairly confident in this assessment because of the religious teachings of that day and also with how Jesus commends the man. “**You are not far from the kingdom of God,**” Jesus told him. The man made a very good summary and application of God’s Law, so he was close. But he was still stuck in that belief that he could, in some way, keep this law and, therefore, go to heaven.

This thinking of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law speaks to us. A freshly folded pile of laundry, the neat lines of a mowed and raked lawn, a clean kitchen, recognizing a job well-done we look back at it and almost want to give ourselves a pat on the back. Or, think of how it’s nice to be able to cross things off the to-do list because then we see how we are accomplishing something. This is all fine and good. But then like the leaders in Jesus’ day, we can treat God’s Law in a similar way: a list that we can cross off what we have done and recognize what we have accomplished.

But in order for that type of mindset to work means only focusing on the things that we can do and have accomplished. And so one might bring up how, “I go to church when I am able; I was confirmed; my name is on the membership list, I helped out in these various ways.”

Or, even when we have done something wrong, we want the attention to be on what we did correctly. For instance, one might think some harsh things about the stranger at the store and how they were acting with their kids, but at least I didn’t say it out loud. Or, one might be sick and tired of helping this person, but at least I do it with a smile and keep doing it.

Or, we focus on those things that we might not be tempted by and point out how others are. There’s that individual caught up in pornography. That individual found themselves in drugs and it’s wrecking their family life and their kids. This person won’t respect those in authority and is always getting into trouble. That other person cheated on their spouse. That little Pharisee in us that may not be tempted by those sins is quick to be shocked, dismayed, and wonder how someone could do something like *that* while at the same time eager to find pride in the sins they are able to conquer, relishing in what they have accomplished, while simultaneously ignoring where they have done wrong.

Instead of letting the sharp teeth of the Law bite us, we much prefer to dull them. But really listen and hear what Jesus says: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.** ‘**Love your neighbor as yourself.**’ With your whole being, starting from your heart and mind, love God entirely. This means that it’s not about crossing laws off a list, but it’s how you are to live always. It’s not about how close you have come, it’s whether you have actually done it. God’s Law does not say, “Try,” it says, “Do.” And when we do not love God with our whole being, then we cannot love our neighbors as ourselves because love for neighbor flows from love for God. And so selfishness stains the good things that are done. Ulterior motives are hidden underneath the selfless action. Expectation of reward and recognition is tied to a job voluntarily done.

But then we try to avoid the knock-out punch of the Law that would put us down evading it using the ready-to-go excuses, pulling out the victim card where “everything and everyone doesn’t understand what I’m going through and they are out to make my life miserable” from the pocket, and finger-pointing at everyone else who is to blame except me.

But these are the facts and this is what God expects. He is one Lord and one God; he is the only one to answer to. And because he is the one, he makes the rules that every individual must live by and are accountable to from the cute little baby to the senior in the nursing home. Standing in the face of the Law our sinful nature and little Pharisee cries out,

“Unfair,” but God doesn’t dull his Law. He doesn’t soften the blow. His Law is just! And when we miss the mark of his expectations and cross the line of what he tells not to do there are always consequences. Therefore, punishment is deserved for sin committed and suffering is demanded for sinful lives. It doesn’t matter how close you might have come; not far from the kingdom of God means you are not in. Close does not count. In fact, only being close means eternal suffering in hell.

Jesus doesn’t listen to the excuses or even allow them. Jesus shows that when telling the man he’s not far from the kingdom of God. The man needed to see that there was still something he was missing, but the teacher of law wouldn’t find it in himself. Jesus doesn’t listen to our excuses or have the time of day for them. Instead, he went to work to do what we couldn’t do and gives what you could not earn. Jesus did it all proclaiming, “It is finished,” from the cross so we know there is nothing left for us to do. He loved God with his whole being so that even when facing his own death his desire first and foremost continued to be his Father’s will and not his own. He loved his neighbor as himself as we see time and again with how took care of those around him, taking time out of his schedule to stop and heal a sick woman, to go to a centurion’s house, to raise someone from the dead. But he didn’t do it for personal gain or praise, but to serve God, give him the glory, and to do good for his neighbor. He did this all for you, not to be demoted to a model for how to live your life, but so that your sins would be paid for in full. With his death in your place and his rising from the dead, Jesus wraps you in the clothes of his perfection and holiness. So now God sees you as Jesus has made you: holy and without sin. Because Jesus was punished in your place and suffered for you that means you are not punished as your sins deserve. Instead, because God is just and for Jesus’ sake, you are welcomed into God’s kingdom.

And so, we love God with our whole being and love our neighbors as ourselves. Not for our own personal benefit, but for the benefit of our neighbor. Jesus already gives all the benefits to you with his perfect life and innocent. We love God and our neighbor by trying to be better and trying harder, but Jesus works in you to will and to act according to his purpose. Don’t dull the Law, we need its sharp bite as it directs our lives and daily shows us our need for our Savior. Only after being knocked down and killed by the Law are we ready for the uplifting, life-giving voice of the Gospel. See what Jesus has done for you so that you are not just close but by faith you are in the kingdom of God. Because of his love for you, you have life with him. With that love our desire and want is to serve God with our whole being because Jesus gave his whole being for us. Empowered with Jesus’ unselfish love, we want to show that unselfish love to our neighbors as we live lives as God’s children. Amen.