



The Gospel of Mark

A Living Word Independent Bible Study



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Part 32
Mark 12:28-34

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(NIV)

INTRODUCTION

Jesus' confrontations with authorities in Jerusalem will reach a crescendo in this passage.

So far, Jesus has handled confrontation easily:

With the chief priests and scribes, about the source of Jesus' authority.

With the Pharisees and Herodians, about the paying of taxes to Caesar.

With the Sadducees, about the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

Now, Jesus faces a final question with yet another scribe, who asks Jesus which, of all the commandments of God, is the most important.

Once again, Jesus will respond definitively and authoritatively.

The passage ends with Mark's narrative comment: "From then on, no one dared ask him any more questions"!

Mark 12:28 (NIV)

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?”

“heard them debating”

That is, the resurrection question from the previous passage.

“noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer”

This time, apparently, the statement is not a trap or a trick – the scribe has a serious question for Jesus.

He seems to be impressed with Jesus’ answer concerning resurrection, and seeks opportunity to get an expert opinion on another debated issue.

Mark 12:28 (NIV)

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?”

“which is the most important”

All the commands and prohibitions in the Torah were being noted and collected in Jesus’ day.

The total was 613 – 365 negative and 248 positive.

These numbers equaled the days of the year and their understanding of the organs and bones of the human body.

The numbers were understood to represent the TOTALITY of a person’s time and person, suggesting a TOTALITY of devotion to God.

But the sheer number of them led to the question: Is there a centering focus to all these commands, or is God’s will just this avalanche of unconnected particulars?

The scribe’s question reveals that he believes there must be some sort of ranking or core unity to it all.

Mark 12:29 (NIV)

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

“Hear, O Israel ...”

Jesus agrees with the scribe’s belief, and readily identifies the greatest commandment.

Thus, Jesus rejects the idea that all commandments have equal weight – one is greater than all the others!

He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the passage known as the “Shema”, from the Hebrew for “Hear”.

The Shema was recited every morning and evening by devout Jews.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

Mark 12:30 (NIV)

“Love the Lord your
God with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind
and with all your
strength.”

“heart ... soul ... mind ... strength”

Mark adds a fourth to the original Hebrew quotation, which was “heart, soul, and strength” – “mind”.

For Jews, in Hebrew, the word “heart” carried connotations of “mind” that the Greek of the New Testament did not carry.

Mark likely added “mind” when writing in Greek to ensure that the same totality was conveyed.

In Greek thought:

Heart = the seat of the inner being, the spiritual life.

Soul = feelings, emotions, and desires

Mind = understanding and intelligence

Strength = the ability or capacity to act

Mark 12:31 (NIV)

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

“the second is this”

Jesus goes beyond what was asked and gives a commandment that is SECOND in importance.

“Love your neighbor as yourself”

This time, the quote is from Leviticus 19:18:

Leviticus 19:18 – “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

Love for human beings is the natural complement of love of God.

“no commandment greater”

Note that NEITHER of these is included in the Ten Commandments!

However, the first five can be summed up in “love God”. And the second five can be summed up in “love neighbor”.

LOVE is at the center of it all – it is the common feature of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, and therefore the heart of Jesus’ summary of God’s will.

LOVE ranks higher, and is more important than, all other commands of God!

Mark 12:31 (NIV)

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

“no commandment greater” (continued)

Note the additional comment of Jesus in the parallel in Matthew 22:40:

Matthew 22:40 – “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

In other words, not only are these two commands **GREATER** than all others, but all others actually **DEPEND ON**, or **FLOW OUT OF**, them.

They summarize the entire call of God throughout Scripture.

This is a **PRIMARY** Christian teaching, in numerous New Testament texts:

Romans 13:8-11 – “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does not harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

John 15:10-12 – “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Galatians 5:13-14 – “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

1 John 4:7-8 – “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Mark 12:31 (NIV)

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

We ACTUALLY and TRULY accomplish the whole law by living a life of love. By receiving God's love, we are enabled to love others ... and UNLESS we receive God's love, we will have great difficulty loving others.

But HOW do we do this?

1) Some people assume this means “JUST DO IT!” – through will power, CHOOSE to love! But the difficulty of loving difficult people wears us out!

2) Some people, then, just “lower the bar” – redefining “love” to “be a good neighbor”, “be a good citizen”, “be a helpful person”, “just be really nice and friendly.” But Jesus says “love as I have loved you” – by dying for us. Jesus sets the bar HIGH, beyond human capability.

3) A better understanding, based on 1 John 4:19.

1 John 4:19 – “We love because he first loved us.”

We can love because God first loved us – a miraculous inflow of love, and knowledge of BEING loved, that saturates us to the depth of our being – an infusion of love that changes us at the core of who we are, enabling us to love. In Paul's words:

Ephesians 3:15-19 – “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

Mark 12:32 (NIV)

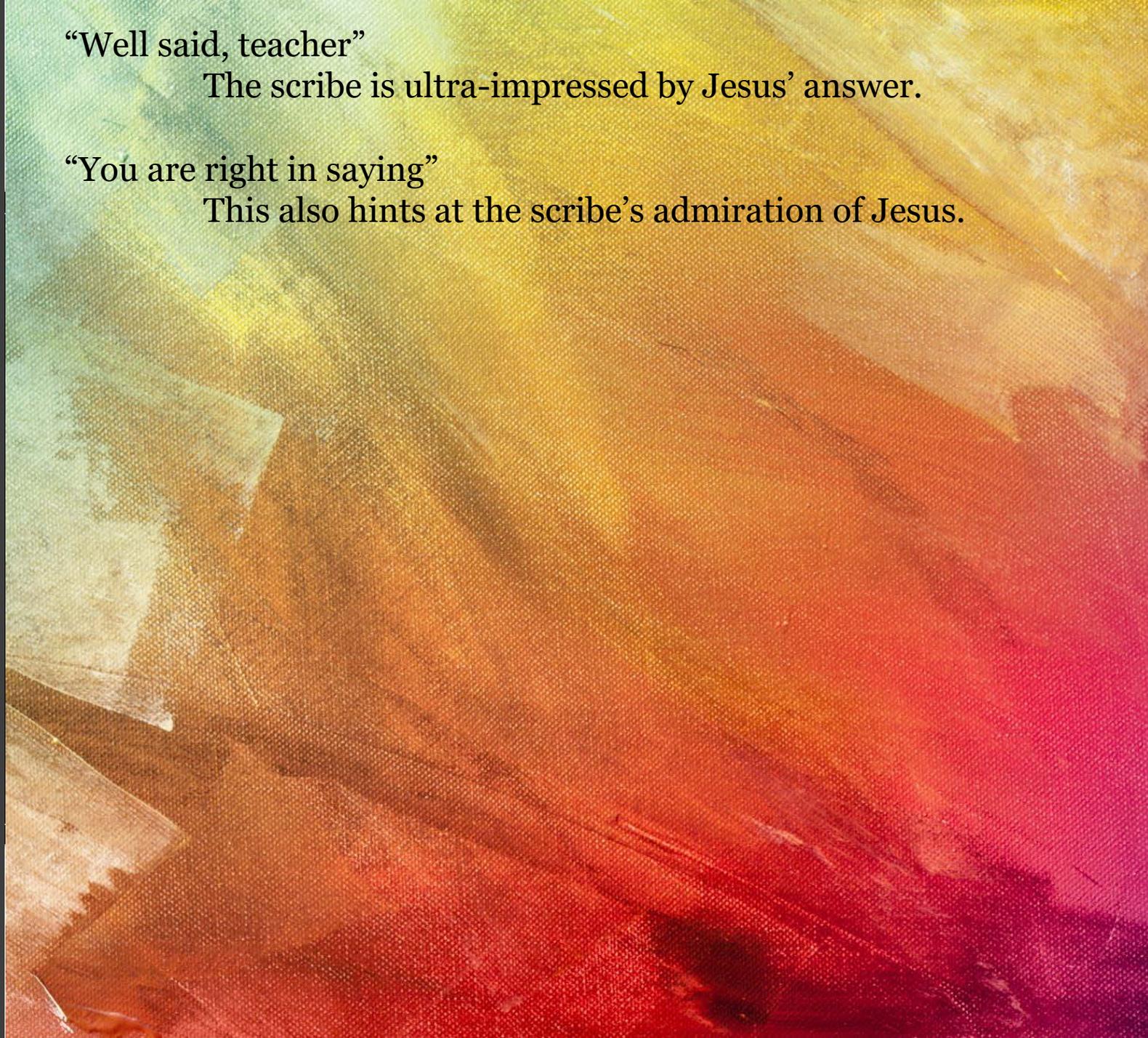
“Well said, teacher,”
the man replied. “You
are right in saying that
God is one and there is
no other but him.”

“Well said, teacher”

The scribe is ultra-impressed by Jesus’ answer.

“You are right in saying”

This also hints at the scribe’s admiration of Jesus.



Mark 12:33 (NIV)

“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.”

“more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices”

This echoes the Old Testament prophets:

1 Samuel 15:22 – “But Samuel replied: ‘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.’”

Hosea 6:6 – “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Micah 6:7-8 – “Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

This scribe endorses Jesus’ theology!

He underscores the “rightness” of Jesus’ message in the face of all the prior opposition from chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees!

Take note, also, that the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran contain indications that their Messianic expectations pointed to the power of love:

“He will atone for guilt and sinful unfaithfulness and as good will for the earth, better than the flesh of burnt offerings and the fat of sacrifices.”

Mark 12:34 (NIV)

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.

“he had answered wisely”

Jesus is likewise impressed by this scribe!

“You are not far”

The scribe seems close to entering the ranks of those who have responded to Jesus’ message of the Kingdom – which has been the essence of Jesus’ proclamation.

It’s not entirely clear why Jesus says “not far from”, and not “in” the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps, it was a need for repentance on the part of the scribe, but we are not actually told.

Jesus, of course, has the authority to make these kinds of pronouncements regarding one’s nearness or remoteness from the Kingdom!

“No one dared ask him”

From now on, we will see JESUS take the initiative, rather than him responding to critics’ questions.

Mark 12:28-34

(NIV)

SUMMARY

The final scribe to confront Jesus with a question actually ends up affirming Jesus' interpretation of Scripture.

His positive assessment of Jesus puts an end to any further questioning by Jerusalem authorities.

Love of God and love of neighbor are the most important commandments, outranking all others – even the commandments concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Jesus has again demonstrated his continuity with the Old Testament prophets.

From now on, Jesus will take the initiative in his teaching.



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