

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2021

(Mark 12:28-34)

The scribe who approaches Jesus in today's passage from Mark asks a very difficult question. What he is essentially saying is this: *Rabbi, if you were to pare down the 613 commandments found in the Law and governing our lives – the 365 that prohibit us from many things and the 248 that are more positive – which would you say is the most important?*

Summarizing such an incredible number of commandments – far more than just the 10 we typically recall being given to Moses on the mountaintop – would be a tremendous task for nearly anyone else. But the person to whom the question is posed is *not* just anyone else. Look at what Jesus does: he begins his answer by going to the very beginning ... far back beyond any of the guidelines that have been put in place ... to the very root of their faith.

He begins by going to God.

*Sh'ma Yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai ehad. Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*¹

This is the *Shema*, recited by devout Jews several times each day, the words of which are “widely regarded as the heart of the faith”² found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. This prayer is used by Jesus as an introduction reminding us first of all of who God is ... our God, the one God ... the God who is unified, unique and above all other gods. *Sh'ma Yisrael*. Listen, Israel; listen to what is about to be said.

Then Jesus continues. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your being and with all your might.”³ Often when these words are spoken the emphasis is invariably placed on *heart*, and *being* (or the more familiar soul), and *might*: “love with all your *heart* and with all your *being* and with all your *might*.” Rather than those three words, however, perhaps we should emphasize just a single word: *all*. Jesus is recalling the words of Deuteronomy and using them to remind us that we are to love with *every fiber of our being*. “Love with *all* your heart and with *all* your being and with *all* your might.”

I think that here we should remember that God is a God of abundance ... the one, as we remember in words taken from the end of Rite I Morning Prayer, “whose power,

¹ Translation of Deuteronomy 6:4 by Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary – The Five Books of Moses*, pp. 641.

² Stephen L. Cook. *Reading Deuteronomy: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, p. 73.

³ Translation of Deuteronomy 6:5 by Alter, p. 641.

working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”⁴ With this in mind we next see Jesus demonstrate a type of abundance by answering a question for which *one* answer is requested and instead giving *two*. Again he returns to the words of the Law, this time found in Leviticus (and here I’ll share them in the context of the entire original verse): “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”⁵

Six hundred thirteen commandments summarized in two, and that when only one was requested. What Jesus has done is remarkable, and to those such as the scholar James Brooks is one of his “great teaching contributions ... to bring together and virtually merge the commands to love God and to love fellow human beings... Jesus showed that it was impossible to really love God without loving neighbors. Love for God is expressed by loving others.”⁶

Loving our neighbors as ourselves; it’s something that we hear often, isn’t it? In the parallel version of this scene in Luke’s Gospel, there are some differences. The scribe, for instance, is put in the position of answering his own question when Jesus responds by asking him what the law says. But that exchange also is the lead-in for the parable of the Good Samaritan, when the definition of neighbor is expanded by Jesus to include *everyone*.

So this is where we are at this moment: we are to love God with *every bit of our being*, and we are to love everyone with *every bit of the love* that we show for ourselves. In the words of the late Chef Tell on the old *PM Magazine* program (yes, I actually do remember that!), “Very simple, very easy, no big deal” – right?

In my personal experience, it’s been anything but easy. There were times in my early adulthood when I was more focused on living life than loving God. There were times when certain people did things that made it almost impossible for me to like them, let alone love them. But God knows that I’m flawed, and if there’s one thing God has it’s infinite patience. As many times as I ... as many times as *we* ... stumble and fall, God is there for the hand up. We can never stumble and fall enough that God won’t still be there, reaching out for us.

There’s I think where we can find good news from this passage: grace I see present in the commandments. Jesus recalls the words of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in what he pulls as the two greatest commandments *knowing* that we won’t always succeed. There’s grace in the fact that we’re not explicitly told that we *will* succeed or in fact that we *must* succeed. There’s grace in the fact that we’re flawed and still

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 60.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18 (NRSV).

⁶ James A. Brooks. *Mark*, p. 198.

God wants us to try. Perhaps most beautifully of all, there's grace in the fact that no matter how much we try and how many times we fail, God still loves us.

Perhaps there's wisdom in recognizing our frailties and yet still working to overcome them ... still striving to take the next step on the journey toward love. Recognize what needs to be done and always try to do it. Always strive for love. The more we try ... the more we rise from our falls ... the more we recognize the necessity for love ... I think we'll continue to hear anew those words of Jesus spoken first to this scribe: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."⁷

Amen.

⁷ Mark 12:34 (NRSV).