

## **The King in the City: The King's kind of Love**

Mark 12:28-34

October 31, 2021

Dan Hoffman

We really live in a unique time in the sense that there is more diversity of opinion about what is right and wrong in mainstream culture than ever before.

So there has always been different opinions about what is right and wrong. But those differences have usually been worked out within the consensus of a culture. So there have been Protestant cultures and Catholic cultures and Atheistic communist cultures. And these cultures have dealt with their diversity within their own norms.

But today we don't live in that kind of culture. There are dominant stories here, but there are lots of underlying stories as well. And like never before we have placed value on hearing the smaller stories. And lots of this is great. But it also means there is very little agreement on what is right and what is wrong.

Well Jesus did not live in a culture like ours in this respect. But He did interact with diversity. And the way He responded was brilliantly beyond what any of His contemporaries were expecting. He spoke truth to power without anger. He saw through the positions people held to their souls. And in doing this He was able to preach His message about the Kingdom of God in a way that still brings revolutionary challenge and transformation 2000 years later.

So if you've got a Bible handy go ahead and open it to Mark 12. We will be picking it up in verse 28 today. And as you find your spot would you stand with me in hunger to hear what Jesus would speak into our lives. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Mark 12:28-34]

This is the word of the Lord, you may be seated.

So it's Tuesday of Holy week, and Jesus has been under attack from cultural leaders of all sides. The chief priests and elders questioned the source of His authority. The Pharisees and Herodians tried to expose His political bias. The Sadducees sought to trap Him in a theological conundrum. But He answered all their questions. And this scribe has been listening the whole time and he's impressed.

And something is going on in his heart. He really wants to know how to please God. He wants to know what God expects. And so he asks a question. And it's not a perfect question. But Jesus sees his heart and gives him a soft but truthful answer.

...

So here's the breakdown: First there's a question. Then Jesus responds by painting a picture of the life we all want but don't believe exists. And finally Jesus shows us the path to get there.<sup>1</sup> A question, a picture and a path. So first, the scribe's question:

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (Mark 12:28)

Now this was a real question that the scribes and Pharisees were wrestling with. The Pharisees loved God's law and they wanted to please God, but they had a problem. In their study of the Old Testament they identified 613 laws.

And they wanted to please God so they gave themselves to keeping these laws. But they realized they weren't able to do it. None of them kept all 613 laws all the time. So the question arose: what did God actually require as far as the law was concerned?

And there was difference of opinion. Some Pharisees thought God would accept them as long as they kept the big laws – so they focused on Sabbath and the 10 Commandments. But others thought God gave all 613 laws, so they had better keep them all. And when they failed, they could offer a sacrifice to make up the difference.

And this is the context of the scribe's question. He wants to please God and so He wants help from Jesus. "Jesus, will you show me what to do with God's law?"

...

Now let me jump forward 2000 years. We don't have Pharisees and Sadducees anymore, but we do live in a world full of different ideas about what God wants from us. The world has these ideas, and the church has them as well.

So some Jesus-followers believe God doesn't really care about the rules. What He wants from us is good action. So take care of the poor and feed the hungry and that's how you please God. And those are the things we focus on.

Other Jesus followers on the other hand believe God does care about the rules. What He wants from us is moral behaviour. So don't have sex outside of marriage, go to church and read your Bible. And that's how you please God. And those are the things we focus on.

So where do you fit? We all have a cultural bias. The place we've grown up and the things we've experienced shapes us. But no matter where we are at with this Jesus' words here are going to speak truth into every one of those places.

So the question is how do I please God? Do I follow all His rules or maybe just some of them, or maybe the rules aren't that important at all? What does God actually require?

...

And look at how Jesus answers the question. He tells the man that there is no greater commandment than love. Love God and love your neighbour as yourself. And this sounds totally 21<sup>st</sup> century. Everyone loves what Jesus says about love.

---

<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/arguing-about-morality-5237/> (Accessed October 29, 2021)

...

But ironically because this is so comfortable there is actually a danger that we are missing the gravity of what Jesus is saying. I mean whenever Jesus sounds like sugar and spice and everything nice there is probably something that isn't adding up. And if you were concerned about that you would be right because what Jesus says here scared His first listeners to death. And we know this because the story ends saying:

After that, no one dared to ask Him any more questions. (Mark 12:34b)

They didn't dare. Jesus spoke about love and He silenced everyone who was out to get Him. Love scared them to death. Just let that sit with you for a second. Why?

Well, what Jesus says here isn't soft and fluffy at all. It's weighty. Jesus' words about love pull back the covers on a picture of abundant life that the Old Testament law paints. And amazingly it's a picture we all want but never believed existed. And when Jesus' first hearers saw it they were silenced. And we need to see it too.

So in verse 29 Jesus answers the scribe's question saying:

"The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." (Mark 12:29-30)

Now notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say: "Do all the Old Testament laws because God says so." If Jesus had said that then He would have been the conservative of conservatives. But Jesus doesn't say that.

Nor does Jesus say: "Don't worry about the Old Testament laws. There is a whole bunch of stuff there that is mean and nasty, and God isn't like that at all." If Jesus had said this then He would have been the liberal of liberals. But Jesus doesn't say that.

Nor does Jesus say: "Just do the big ones." And then He would have picked a few of the 10 Commandments. But if He had chosen any of them He would have pegged Himself as either a moderate conservative or a moderate liberal.

So for example if Jesus said just make sure you honour your parents and don't commit adultery. Then He would have been saying "What God wants from you is to be a good and moral person." Jesus would have been a moderate conservative.

On the other hand if Jesus said just make sure you don't steal and don't bear false witness", in other words don't distort the justice system. Then what He would have been saying was "God wants you to do good actions." And Jesus would have been a moderate liberal.

But Jesus doesn't answer this question in any of the ways the scribe expects. Instead Jesus does something different, He paints a picture of what the Old Testament law actually describes.

So Jesus chooses two verses that initially seem to be His favorites, but they are more than that. So first Jesus chooses Deuteronomy 6:4 which is part of the Shema – “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God...” And second, He chooses Leviticus 19:18 – “Love your neighbour.” And Jesus says there is nothing greater than these.

But while at first it looks like Jesus’ point is to say “Just love and don’t worry about the rest.” He isn’t actually saying that. Instead, He presents love as the summation of the Old Testament. And the parallel story in Matthew makes this clear. So Jesus says:

The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40)

In other words Jesus takes the 613 OT laws and says: “You can boil them down to two things – love God and love your neighbour. And if you give yourself to these things you are doing what the law set out to accomplish. Or it’s like Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose.” (Matthew 5:17)

And the purpose of the Law and the Prophets – that’s the whole Old Testament – is to love God and love our neighbours. That’s what Jesus thinks the law is about.

...

Now sometimes this is easy to understand. Like “honour your father and mother” could also read “love your father and mother.” All the positive commands are like this. But it’s a bit more complicated with the negative commands – and there are lots of them. Don’t murder. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t steal.

But if you want to please God – and the scribe does – then it’s the same there too. But this is hard. Jesus says “God’s not that impressed when we manage not to kill people. Most of us do that. What He wants is that we love the guy who hates us so much we want to kill him. That’s what God expects.

Or what about don’t commit adultery. So maybe you’ve got a poor relationship with your spouse. They aren’t giving you what you need. And so you start looking around. And there’s your neighbour. And wow she pays attention to you like your wife should. And then all of a sudden there is this temptation.

Now here’s what Jesus says: God’s not going to be pleased if you manage not to commit adultery against your wife. Whoop-dee-do! What God wants is for you to love your wife even though she isn’t giving you what you need. Serve her. Build her up. Lay your life and your desires down for her. That’s what God wants. Love is not just avoiding adultery it’s giving yourself to the very opposite for your wife.

And Jesus says the whole Old Testament is like this. This is the heart behind every rule God has given – every one! And that’s because the Old Testament paints a picture of life the way it was designed to be. It’s a picture of the life we all long for.

So nobody wants to be robbed. Nobody wants to be lied to. Nobody wants to be cheated on. But the world God created us for is bigger than simply not having these bad things happen to us. God wants love for us.

But we can’t imagine that so here’s what we’ve done with God’s rules. We’ve looked at them as though they were a light switch or a line in the sand. As long as you avoid stepping over then you are good. But Jesus says that was never the world God created us for. And that has never been the intention of God’s law. God’s heart has always been to lead us into the life we were created to enjoy.

And it’s a life of justice and holiness and faithfulness and honesty. It’s a world bubbling over with truth and mercy and acceptance and honour. It’s a world where people don’t simply manage not to kill each other or cheat, but one in which everyone is falling in love with the holy God of the universe who loves us and wants abundant life for us. And when we love God, it bubbles over into our relationships with each other. That’s what Jesus thinks the Old Testament says. The point of the Law and the Prophets is love.

...

Now this all sounds good – I think – to a bunch of 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadians – we love the love stuff. And Jesus is saying this, but He is also saying something more. He is saying the whole point of the law is love, but He is also saying you can’t understand what love is without the law. And this is actually the part that leaves Jesus’ listeners too afraid to ask Him anything else. And it has the same affect on us.

...

So right now in Canada there is a huge movement away from the cultural Christendom of our past. Throw it all away. Throw away the Bible and its rules. Throw away the morals and the family structures. Throw them all away because they are antiquated ideas full of forced chastity and oppression. It’s all just patriarchy and power.

And there are Christians who agree: Let’s just focus on Jesus and love and get away from all the rules and the wrath bits. But here’s the interesting thing in, in this text Jesus isn’t interested in moving away from the God of the Old Testament. Instead He thinks the rules of the Old Testament define what love is.

So He does say the point of the law is love, but He doesn’t say “My Father was a bad communicator. He meant to say it’s all about love, but instead He wrote the rules that you get.” No. Jesus says the rules we get show us what love actually is.

...

So I’m 41 now. And 20 years ago Nikki and I got married. And I had all sorts of ideas about love that I inflicted on her and the result was that she spent the first couple years of our married life crying. Ask her about it, it was great.

Now I wasn't trying to be insufferable. I really did love her. But the fact is both of us had ideas about love that were incredibly immature. And so she had a list of things a loving husband was supposed to do and be – that was her problem – and on my part, I hardly did any of them. But the good news is we didn't get stuck there, we've grown.

And I'll tell you with confidence that our ideas about love are way better now than they were back then. But I hope it doesn't stay here. And that's because our relationship is still far from perfect. There is still selfishness and pride and insecurity wrapped up in our ideas about love – at least Nikki's ideas. And I hope that when we've been married 40 years our ideas about what love is will blow away what we think today.

Here's my point. Without a standard to define love it just shifts with our understanding. And that's fine if you've got an amazing idea about what love is, but guess what, we all think we do! And yet I made my wife cry for two years. You see love without an external standard is not love at all. And this is what we see in culture.

So right now there are a hundred standards about what should and shouldn't be done. One group says the loving thing is to erase the stain of history – cancel it. And another group says the loving thing is to learn from history. One group says the loving thing is to affirm everyone's sexuality and another group says the loving thing is to affirm the traditional family. And there are hundreds of these wars going on right now because North American culture has no foundation to stand on. There is no standard for what love means.

But Jesus says there is a standard – God's standard. But people object – “No, God's standard beats us down and steals our fun.” But here's the crazy thing, Jesus didn't think the God of the Old Testament and His laws were oppressive. Jesus thought God's laws were the very definition of love. So was He wrong?

...

You see it's not actually love unless it's both holy and accepting. It's not love unless there is both grace and truth. It's not love unless there is both honesty and generosity. And each of the Old Testament laws and stories unpack a different aspect of this. And together what we get is a picture of love that is bigger than any culture has ever imagined. And this is the kingdom of God that Jesus invites us into.

...

So a scribe asked a question – what laws do I have to follow in order to please God? And Jesus answered by showing him that pleasing God isn't about following the rules or not; or following some of the rules but not others. What God has always wanted from us and for us is love. But not our broken ideas about love, His kind of love.

And the chief priests and elders and Herodians and Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes all heard what Jesus said here and they got quiet. Jesus' picture of God's kingdom was both more beautiful and more weighty than they had ever imagined. You see Jesus hadn't made the 613 laws easier, He had actually raised the standard to perfection – to love. And now everyone realized they were hopelessly falling short.

You see everyone likes the idea of being loved unconditionally. But the idea of having to love other people – your unjust boss, your unfaithful spouse, your unreasonable child or parent; your unimpressive self. If the requirement is love in these situations then none of us measure up or even want to. So where is the path forward?

...

There is one more statement in this passage that points the way. After Jesus gives His answer the scribe says: “Well said.” And then he repeats what Jesus says except he adds one more thing. After saying “Love of God and love of neighbour is what it’s all about he adds:

This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.” (Mark 12:33)

And Jesus never said this, but He likes it. It shows that the scribe gets it. And so Jesus responds “You aren’t far from the Kingdom of God.”

Now here’s the point. The sacrifices were there to make up for when people failed the law. But that only works if there are 613 laws and you can do most but just miss a couple. Then you can make it up. You can be good enough. But this guy realizes that God’s law of love is so huge – it’s infinite. And there is no way he is going to be able to do it. Nobody can live up to the picture Jesus paints.

And the scribe gets it. “I can’t get to God myself. I can’t get to God by doing enough good things. And I can’t get to God by being moral enough. Love is bigger than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices I could offer.” He gets it. But he’s not there yet.

And so Jesus says “You aren’t far from the Kingdom of God.” You understand there is nothing you can do to be good enough – you’re right – but you don’t see the answer yet because the answer hasn’t been giving.

...

But in three days Jesus would be arrested and tortured and crucified and killed and buried. And as Jesus would hang on the cross He would cry out “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Jesus, God’s Son, the One person who followed God’s law perfectly – who loved both God and His neighbour flawlessly – would be forsaken so that us unloving law breakers could be made sons and daughters. God bore the requirements of the law so we could be embraced. That’s grace.

And in Jesus God became the sacrifice you and I could never give so we could see how much God loves us. And He did this because it’s when you are loved that you can fall in love. And this is what God wants from us and for us. He wants to win us with His love – a huge and multi-faceted, rich love – so we will fall in love with Him and pour His kind of love out to the people around us. The whole law is about this. Do you see how much God loves you?