

## Not Far from the Kingdom

### Read Mark 12:28-34

When it's wartime, it's quite important for soldiers to know who is on their side and who is with the enemy. The short question "Friend or Foe?" sums up all a soldier would need to know about any person encountered. Is this person with us or with them? It's very simple. There is no nuance. The one asking the question behaves as the authority.

Some of us may recall that the leader Joshua asked a question much like this as the Israelites got ready to take the Promised Land. Seeing a warrior with a drawn sword, Joshua asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" (Joshua 5:13).

This warrior answered, "Neither."

It was the wrong question. The commander of the Lord's army, an angel, was the actual authority, and it's Joshua who needed to make sure he was on the Lord's side.

The way people interact online and in person lately feels a bit warlike. Subtly and not so subtly, people are feeling out those they encounter and even those they've known for a long time as friend or foe. Is he "one of them" or "one of us"? There are only two camps in polarized spaces—for or against—no matter which social or political issue is up for discussion.

When Jesus walked the earth and engaged in public ministry, people were also trying to figure out where he stood. It was understandable. The Law and Prophets were the foundation of Judaism. And there were traditions and groupings within this faith long before Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth arrived on the scene.

In the first century BC, two rabbis represented different approaches to the law—Shammai who interpreted it more strictly and Hillel who was considered more lenient. Their successors carried their ideas forward in what were called “Houses.” There was the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel. Experts in the law and Pharisees wanted to know, “Which one did this man Jesus side with in the standard debates?”<sup>1</sup>

The passage we are looking at this morning comes towards the end of Jesus’ ministry. At least the first part of this extended dialogue took place in the temple, and the tension is building. Pharisees and Herodians think they’ve crafted the perfect question about paying taxes, sure that however Jesus answers—yes or no— he will find himself in hot water. Yet, Jesus is not pulled into their trap; he calls out their hypocrisy, to the amazement of those around.

Next, another Jewish faction, the priestly Sadducees bring forward a preposterous scenario that tries to undermine belief in the resurrection. Jesus exposes the false assumptions in their question by quoting from the story of Moses at the burning bush.

Finally, an expert in the law ventures a question. It seems that he’s coming with sincerity, recognizing the wisdom of Jesus’ previous statements. He really wants to know, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” The Torah, or law books, of the Old Testament contain 613 specific commandments, 365 you shall nots and 248 you shalls.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3190-bet-hillel-and-bet-shammai> (1906)

<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary New Testament* (1983), p. 163.

The Rabbi Hillel, who I mentioned earlier, had once been asked by a Gentile to summarize Torah while standing on one foot. The Rabbi told him, “Do not do to your neighbour what is hateful to you. This is the whole of Torah. The rest is commentary.”<sup>3</sup>

So, what will Jesus say is the Greatest Commandment? Jesus begins with what is called the Great Shema in Judaism: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.”

All the men listening had been taught the first line of this creed from Deuteronomy 6 as soon as they could talk. All the faithful Jews listening recited these words every day, morning and evening.<sup>4</sup> And many of them took the command to bind these words on their foreheads and hands so literally that they attached boxes containing these words to their heads or arms with leather straps.<sup>5</sup>

There was really no controversy among the people of Israel on this point. The reality that Yahweh is the One worthy of all honour and love was the foundation of their faith and their lives. It set them apart from the nations around them that worshipped many gods. The devotion owed to this one God was complete, which is stressed by the repetition of “with all your” heart, soul, mind and strength<sup>6</sup>.

From the opening words “Hear O Israel /Shema Israel”, the questioner and the crowd anticipated what was coming next.

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Huatta, *Mark*, (2015), p. 168

<sup>4</sup> Huatta, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Mark: Teach the Text Commentary Series* (2014), p. 219.

<sup>6</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *Gospel According to St. Mark* (1959), p. 378.

They had their answer. From this, the crowd thought they were going to hear what they'd always been taught.

But then Jesus continues. "And the second is this." Pardon? may have been an unspoken initial response. I didn't ask for the second greatest. I just want to know the greatest. That is enough for me.

But apparently, it's not enough for Jesus. He adds, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Why does Jesus add on a second commandment? Matthew Henry suggested that love for neighbour naturally flows from love of God.<sup>7</sup> Another commentator calls these two commands "inseparable."<sup>8</sup> And St. Augustine, back in the 4th century wrote "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and our neighbour does not understand it at all."<sup>9</sup>

So, where does this command, "Love your neighbour as yourself" even come from? It is not found in Exodus or Deuteronomy, but it's in the middle of Leviticus chapter 19 among what the NIV heading says is "Various Laws". The full verse says, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD." Within this chapter of Leviticus, care for neighbours is mentioned five times, care for strangers three times, care for the poor two times, and then one time each for the hired worker, the blind, the deaf, one's brother and the elderly. And lest we think that this chapter is all about the horizontal

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1721), p. 1806.

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, p. 378.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine *On Christian Doctrine*, translated 1958 and quoted in Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark: Proclaiming the Power of God* (2008), p. 214.

dimension of life, the refrain “I am the Lord” or “I am the LORD your God” is repeated thirteen times.

Returning to the Gospel of Mark, all the chapters that come before this dialogue show Jesus’ actual obedience to this inseparable pair of commandments. Imagine you were living in Rome and first received the scroll of Mark. Here you had on parchment details about Jesus’ ministry that were truly “Good News.” Here was news of a new king and a new kingdom. This Jesus was in tune with his Father in heaven, knowing the Scriptures at a deep level whenever he uttered them at the synagogue or in everyday conversations. He prayed and followed the guidance he received in every step and phase of ministry.

Indeed, Jesus’ relationship with his Father in heaven was the source of his love for children and for someone else’s mother-in-law, for those who couldn’t see or hear or walk, for those tormented by demons, for the hungry, and for the desperate crowds whether they came from Judea, Samaria or Gentile territories. Rabbi Jesus is the proper interpreter of the law of Moses because he also fulfilled this law in every way, as no other human had ever been able to do.

In their later letters, James and the Apostle John highlight the deep connection between the love of God and neighbour. James puts it this way: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism...If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. (James 2:1; 8-9 NIV).

And John brings it even closer to home in 1 John 4: “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4:19-21 NIV).

Okay, okay, you may be thinking. It’s all about love. It just seems a bit idealistic.

It’s true as Heidelberg Catechism Q and A 114 says that those converted to God cannot obey these commandments perfectly. It goes on to say, “Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments.”<sup>10</sup>

And if all this talk of love sounds a bit too much like popular culture and all the love songs they play at the mall, let’s examine just what kind of love Jesus is talking about here.

As many preachers have pointed out, the Greek language had different words for different types of love: love within a family, love for a friend, love in a romantic relationship, and finally self-giving love that has its source in God.

Agape love is this self-giving love. It’s active, not simply “nice.” Again we read in John’s letter, “Let us not love with word or tongue but with action and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Love is impossible if we hold a person at a distance or if we completely ignore them.

And love is more than a warm feeling. It is visible and felt by those who receive it—through a tangible gift, through acts of

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<sup>10</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), Q and A 114

service, through spending time together, through words of encouragement, and through physical touch<sup>11</sup> - a hug, a handshake, a pat on the back. In Mark's gospel, we see Jesus loving in all these ways. He gives food to the hungry crowds. We see Jesus serving and spending time with those suffering the stigma of disability. We see Jesus blessing little children and reaching out his hand to touch those considered unclean.

Self-giving love knows that something is required of me. It does not calculate what the bare minimum might be in loving someone. No, as J.C. Ryle wrote, "Nothing will be intentionally lacking where there is love."<sup>12</sup>

Love is a single word. Still, genuine love is lived out in a thousand different contexts and specific ways. It is not one-size-fits-all. Love is something we can get better at by listening to and understanding who it is we are called to love. Love can be hard work.

When the very first refugee family from Poland was sponsored by this church five decades ago as an expression of love for God our Maker, those on the refugee committee endeavoured to love these new neighbours as they loved themselves. One senior member recalls picking them up from the airport and visiting their apartment! No doubt they learned a few words in the newcomers' language and were responsive to the specific things they needed to settle well in a new community. Of course, they invited them to worship times but also respected if they chose to worship elsewhere or not at all. And this beginning set the stage for our welcome of many other international newcomers who were born in Cambodia and Cameroon, in Sudan and Somalia, in Iraq and India.

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<sup>11</sup> The five ways one can show love paraphrased here are based on the book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman (1992).

<sup>12</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Mark* (1857), p. 262.

Another way our desire to care for neighbours has been expressed is the way we serve communion at this church. The decision years ago to serve grape juice instead of wine at the Lord's Supper was an act of love for those among us who would be tempted by any amount of alcohol in their journey of sobriety. Larger glasses are now available when the tiny communion cups are too hard to grip. Love for those with dietary restrictions is reflected in having gluten-free bread. Having an elder brings the bread and juice to pews when we walk forward to receive the elements shows love for those of us with mobility concerns. Finally, those not yet ready to partake are offered a blessing.

Agape-love that gives of itself sees the good in another, seeks their wellbeing and gives the other person the benefit of the doubt. Matthew Henry said that love of neighbour recognizes another person as being "of the same nature with ourselves; our hearts are fashioned alike, and my neighbour and myself are of one body, of one society, that of the world of mankind."<sup>13</sup>

We see this in the way Jesus interacts with those he meets in the gospel accounts, including the man who asked about the greatest commandment. This law expert rephrases Jesus' answer and shares an insight that burnt offerings and the sacrificial system are less important than the double command to love. And Jesus continues to engage with him—truly seeing him and the longings of his heart. He declares, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

And how about us? How close are we to the Kingdom of God? Are we continuing to serve the Lord through active, self-giving love for each other and for our neighbours?

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<sup>13</sup> Henry, p. 1806.



When my father passed away in 2019, I received many expressions of love. I'd like to highlight just one. A member of this church asked what they could do to support my family. After considering, we asked if they knew someone who might be able to lend me a car for a few days so that I could go be with my mother and sisters out of town ahead of the funeral. My husband and children would drive in our one vehicle, later.

As it turned out, this person offered their own car to me—without asking about my driving record, without warning me not to speed, without adding conditions like returning it with a full tank of gas, and without advising me to just rent a car like anyone else would. This person gave me the benefit of the doubt and could see that this tangible act of sharing was something that met my need. I realize now the inconvenience it likely caused for them during those four days, and I will never forget this act of kindness.

You probably have examples of the small and big ways that you have received love from others in the church over the years. We tend to fixate on the times when someone in the church has slighted us, but I encourage you to think about at least one occasion today when you received genuine love from a fellow believer. Write it down in your sermon notes. I encourage you to tell this story to someone else. Let's build on those acts of genuine care as we go forward together as a church.

People of God, when Jesus looked at broken people, he did not size them up as "Friend or Foe?" It is the wrong question. Instead, he saw only neighbours in need of self-giving love and compassion. That's how he lived and how he died, because that was what love required. Even the Roman soldiers who presided over his death received words of blessing, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

The tendency to size up others as friends or foes, as “us” and “them,” is not the way of Jesus. In this space and all the spaces we enter this week, may we increasingly love the Lord by interacting with each other as neighbours, people vulnerable like ourselves. Then we will not feel so isolated and lonely. Then our youth will no longer ask, “Why does the church fight so much?” Then we will live out the inseparable loves for which God created us. And then we will not be far from the Kingdom of Jesus our Lord.