

God, and as such exposes the attitude of heart which is needed in order to fulfil God's Laws; in particular, the attitude of heart towards God.

Jesus could see that the right attitude to God was essential, but only part of a person's obligations before God, and He added to this the one text in the Old Testament Law which spoke about having a right attitude of love towards other people, which is found in Leviticus 19:18. Together, Jesus said, these constituted one 'commandment'. The whole of Leviticus 19 is regarded as a 'moral code' which sets out the duties of God's people towards each other, and it is fascinating reading, especially alongside the more famous Ten Commandments. Unfortunately, Leviticus is not a book that is well read by Christians, and they often miss out on the treasures that are in it, in particular this chapter. From Jesus' point of view, it was essential to the New Covenant of God's people, as well as the Old.

Application

It is remarkable that at this late stage in Jesus' ministry, He came across a scholar (scribe) who had an open mind about Him and was prepared to listen to what He had to say and recognise it as the truth. Most of the intelligentsia of Israel rejected Jesus out of hand, yet here was one man who did not reject Him, and he received the warm praise of Jesus as a result. It is vital that despite the rejection today of the classical disciplines of theology in many Universities in favour of secular religious studies, some scholars retain good quality Christian scholarship as disciples of Jesus Christ. Out of the brief encounter recorded in our passage today between Jesus and a scholar came a crucial command of Jesus Christ which remains a guide for all Christians today. In the same way, out of today's good quality scholarship it is possible that Godly knowledge about Scripture and the purposes of God can come. This is essential for the life of God's people, the Church, and its future.

The other application we must surely take from this text is the message that Jesus has given a clear commandment to us. This is a combination of two Old Testament passages which tell us to love God and love others with complete and utter selflessness. When the devil strikes and we are under the influence of trouble and distress, it may appear to us that self interest is the best policy. It is not; love of God and love of others will always yield the dividends of mutual care and affection in this world which are ultimately craved by all people. Jesus' command is not an imposition on humanity, it is the path to a liberated life!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Apart from this text, discuss what you consider to be the most important thing Jesus said? How does it help you as a Christian?
2. How can we put into practice our love of God? Is it possible to show love of God without showing love of others?
3. Is it sufficient to be 'not far from the Kingdom of God' (12:34)? What do you think Jesus meant by this?

Discipleship

Despite the positive feel to this passage of Mark's Gospel, Jesus was still on His way to Calvary, and His death was drawing closer. If you have followed recent studies, you will know that after our studies of Mark's Gospel, I suggest that you write down your own reflections on what Jesus may have thought about what was happening to Him. Everything Jesus experienced was coloured by what would happen to Him in a few day's time.

Final Prayer

The majesty and the power of Your glory O Lord is beyond our comprehension. Yet You continually make Yourself available to us in surprising and helpful ways, showing us Your love and compassion. May we always be alert to Your presence and responsive to Your touch O Lord; AMEN.

Prayer

We worship You, Lord God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace:

.....
Create in us a strong desire to do what is right, and please You in all we do;
Build us up in truth and love so that we are unafraid to be known us Yours;
Make us worthy to be Your people, because others see that we live by love;
We worship You, Lord God, bless us forever more, in peace. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Forgiveness

Pray for those who find it hard to forgive others because of difficult things that have happened in the past. If this describes you, then ask the Lord to help you submit what has happened to Him, so that He can help you and guide you in your response to what has happened. All of us, however, can pray for those who have yet to find how to forgive others and find true liberation.

Meditation

Lead me today, Lord Jesus, in everything I do;

Give me a spirit of joy at all times and in all places;
Give me a body which is trained and ready for action;
Give me a will which is always submissive to Yours;
Give me a heart that is willing to hear what You say;
Give me a mind ready to be both gentle and wise;
Give me a life which displays the truth of Your Word;
Give me an ear to listen carefully to all that I hear;
Give me a desire to be primed and ready for your call;

And lead me onwards each day, strengthened and renewed.

Bible Study - Mark 12:28-34

²⁸ One of the scribes came up and heard them debating amongst themselves. Noticing that Jesus answered well, he asked Him, 'Which is the most important commandment of all?' ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is this, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength." ³¹ The second is this: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' ³² The scribe said to him, 'Well spoken, Teacher. You are right in saying that He is one, and besides Him there is no other; ³³ and to love him with the whole heart, the whole understanding and the whole strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more important than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices.' ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Review

Previously, Jesus had been confronted by priests, Pharisees, Herodians and Sadducees (11:27f, 12:13f, 12:18f.), and all of them sought to test Jesus with trick questions. In this passage, a scribe came to Jesus without any such devious intent, to ask Jesus a question frequently debated by the scholars of the day; 'which is the most important commandment of

all?' (12:28). The Jewish people lived according to the laws of Moses, and it was natural that scribes and scholars should seek to learn more about the things of God by discussing such questions, and the scribe simply invited Jesus to make His own contribution to this debate. He would have expected that Jesus' answer would be based on the Ten Commandments, and he would have listened for any new teaching within Jesus' reply.

Up to this point Jesus' teaching in the Temple was dominated by tension and aggravation. However, Jesus' reply to the scribe was concise, original and powerful, and the answer He gave completely changed the tone of the conversations in the Temple. His answer to the question about God's commandments was to point the character of God Himself, and using a famous passage from Deuteronomy (6:4f.), Jesus said that what God required of His people was love; love of God and love of other people (12:30,31).

We are used to hearing about 'love' in church today, but we need to be careful to listen to what the Gospel actually say to us about love. In fact, love is not mentioned much in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, though it is an important theological theme of John's Gospel (see, for example, John 13:34f.). For this reason, Mark's reference to love has a powerful impact. It is not just Jesus' answer to a scribe's question, but a commandment to all who would seek to live as one of Jesus' disciples. It also describes Jesus' own motives for what He was doing. We should remember that the people around Jesus did not understand the significance of His teaching and the disciples did not understand Him when He said He would die and rise again; but here in this passage they had their answer to all their questions. Jesus did what He did out of love for God His Father, and love for all people. Furthermore, all this would mean little unless those who heard Jesus say this felt that He loved them. As John said later in his Gospel; He 'loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end' (John 13:1). Jesus' summary of the commandments (12:29-31) was not merely a law imposed on others, it was true to Himself.

All this is extremely important. Jesus answered the scribe's question in two distinct ways. He did not pick any of the Ten Commandments or discuss other details of the laws of Moses. He quoted words from the 'Shema', the great prayer of the Israelite people found in Deuteronomy 6:4,5 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one ...' (12:29,30). This prayer was given to the people of Israel as a continual remembrance of God's love and protection, and the prayer was said daily by devout Jews (and is to this day). Yet Jesus went further and in a unique and entirely original step combined this personal command to love God with another text from 'the Law' from Leviticus 19; 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:18 – see Mark 12:31).

In this entirely original manner, Jesus gave an authoritative and memorable command combining our duties towards God and all other people, based on love. To this day, these words of Jesus and similar statements found in the other Gospels (including John) stand as Jesus' only specific comment on the laws of Moses. They are not just a command to us by which we should live, but they summarise Jesus' own life; He told us the truth about God and he lived the truth about God, and the truth is that God is love.

Going Deeper

Over the centuries before Christ, rabbis had plenty to say about 'the greatest commandment', some of it close to what Jesus said. There is therefore great debate about whether what Jesus said is truly original; but the power of these commands of Jesus is not a matter of the fact that He said it, but that He lived it, and gave us all an example of how these great laws of Moses can and should work. As we look at this more closely, we will see how and why this is so.

Differences between the Gospels

It is clear that this incident in Mark is parallel to one in Matthew's Gospel; Matthew 22:34-39. Matthew's version of this story is shorter than Mark's and does not contain the reply of the scribe (from verse 32 onwards) and Jesus' warm response 'You are not far from the Kingdom of God' (Mark 12:34). Most scholars feel that Matthew took enough of the story from Mark to make his own point, which is about a wider matter to do with the relationship of the Old Testament

Scriptures to the life and ministry of Jesus (Matt 22:34-46). In Luke's Gospel (Luke 10:25f.) however, although we read something which is very similar to Mark's story, it is very different. A 'teacher' came to Jesus with a question and Jesus replied by asking the man to tell Him what the Law said. After this, it was the teacher who quoted Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18 to Jesus; the words did not come from Jesus' lips as in Mark and Matthew!

If you read on in Luke's Gospel, you will find that this passage is part of Jesus' general teaching ministry and it introduces the famous story of the Good Samaritan. It is generally reckoned that because this story is simply not present in Matthew or Mark, where our passage is part of Jesus' teaching in the Temple before His death, Luke's story is a quite different event. It is quite possible that Jesus used the unique combination of Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18 in His teaching on a number of occasions, and He said it in answer to the scribe (in Matthew and Mark) as an answer which was consistent with His teaching. In Luke's Gospel, however, He asked the 'teacher' about this as a test of His commitment to the Kingdom ; such an explanation fits well with the parable of the Good Samaritan which follows in Luke's Gospel.

The discussions of rabbis

There are a number of recorded examples of rabbis teaching their students about the commandments, and attempting to reduce the Laws of Moses into one concise 'principle' which encapsulated all the Law. One of the most famous of these is a quote from the famous rabbi Hillel, speaking about 25 years before the birth of Christ: 'what you yourself hate (to be done to you), do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole law, and all the rest is commentary; go and learn it'. This saying is a judicious reworking of the general principle mentioned in Leviticus (see above) and used by Jesus in today's passage (12:31). Knowing that sin was always a human problem, Hillel cunningly changed the positive commandment of Leviticus 19:18 to 'love the neighbour' into a prohibition of anything contrary to personal self interest. Some feel that Jesus was influenced by Hillel and others, and that Jesus' words were therefore not unique. There is also some evidence of the use of both Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18 in Jewish manuals for guiding converts to Judaism dating from near the time of Christ; but it is impossible to say whether this predates Jesus' great pronouncement (12:29-31) or not. It is far more straightforward to accept that what Jesus said was indeed a unique and clear commandment which revealed a great deal both about Himself and also the truth upon which the Kingdom of God was built; its impact upon subsequent history has been unique.

The rabbis and scholars also made a distinction between two possible ways of summarising the law. The first was to find a way of reducing the Law to one or two commandments which, if kept, led a person towards the ideal of keeping the whole Law of Moses. Secondly, they sought a summary of the Law which was so intrinsically powerful and all-embracing that all other laws were merely secondary. Clearly, Jesus gave the scribe an answer of the second kind. Jesus was not concerned to make people obey the Laws of Moses in a rigorous manner, but to find within these laws the heart of the God who gave them. When Jesus said 'there is no other commandment greater than these' (12:31) He demonstrably regarded the other laws of Moses as secondary. This is entirely in keeping with what Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospels; for example; 'do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil' (Matt 5:17)

Jesus' reworking of the Old Testament Law

The genius of Jesus' reworking of the laws of the Old Testament is of a different order from what we have looked at so far. Firstly, the quote from Deuteronomy 6:4 (12:29,30) is important because it was given by Moses precisely as a summary of all the requirements God placed on His people in the Law. If you read Deuteronomy 5, you will find that after God had given the people the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:6-21), the people asked Moses for help because they felt vulnerable in the face of such a demanding set of laws, and the presence of God who had given them (Deut. 5:22-33). Moses was therefore asked by God to give the famous prayer of the 'Shema' (Deut 6:4,5) as a brief reminder of the people's duties towards God which they had to keep about their person at all times. The 'Shema' is a prayer which speaks about loving