

Discussion Guide

WEEK OF 09.15.24

Series: Gospel of Mark

Text: Mark 12:28-34

How to use this guide: This discussion guide is designed to help you facilitate a conversation around the Bible text. Begin your discussion with prayer. Then, read this week's passage. Next, work through some of the questions together. The goal is not to ask every question, but to have a good, free-flowing discussion. Do your best to ask at least one question from each section (introduction, understanding, and application), but beyond that, let the Holy Spirit guide your conversation. Also, if you heard some point from the sermon that you'd like to discuss, feel free to add that to your group's discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR INTRODUCTION

1. What is the world teaching us about love? How is this different from the Bible's view of love? Have these two descriptions of love caused conflict in your life?
2. How do you generally relate to controversial issues (i.e. I like a good argument, I create arguments, I avoid arguments, etc.)? How does your view of controversy affect your ability to meet the challenges to your faith?

Read Mark 12:28-31.

3. What challenges have you encountered that make it difficult to love God the way Jesus tells you in vv. 29-30?
4. What does it mean to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength" (v. 30)? What does each of those terms add to your understanding of what it means to love God?
5. The final component of Jesus' great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. Why does it matter so much that we love others?
6. Discuss some specific ways Jesus demonstrated His love for God and others throughout His earthly ministry?

Read Mark 12:32-34.

7. Why do you think the scribe asked this particular question? What could have been his motive?
8. How did Jesus summarize all of the commandments? Is it easier to follow just two general commandments, such as these, or to follow a longer list of more specific commandments?
9. Who is it more difficult for you to love—God or your neighbor? How are you doing in both areas?
10. What did Jesus mean that the scribe was not far from the kingdom of God? What else was needed?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

11. How does this passage encourage you to change how you live and how you worship God?
12. How can you specifically fulfill the great commandment in this coming week? Who in your life needs to know the of Christ? What can you do to demonstrate God's love to them today? What support do you need from this group in order to do this?

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COMMENTARY

Mark 12:28-34

This pronouncement story contains two authoritative sayings, one in vv. 29–31 and one in v. 34. The former is by far the more important. This story differs somewhat from the preceding one in that it does not involve controversy. Indeed, the friendly attitude of the scribe, which is different from all other exchanges between Jesus and these teachers of the law, supports the authenticity of Mark's account.

12:28. Remember that people often raised questions and objections to publicly challenge or even shame a teacher; the best speakers could silence and shame their opponents, because such teachers could make hostile questions look foolish. This was the case with last week's lesson.

Of all the commandments, which is the most important one? This question was one of the issues commonly debated among Pharisaic teachers in the first century. Many felt that the greatest was honoring one's parents. Rabbi Akiba, a later rabbi, came closer to Jesus' view here when he asserted that "Love your neighbor" is the greatest commandment. This question reflects the fact that the scribes had identified 613 separate commandments, 365 of which were negative and 248 of which were positive. They divided them further into "heavy" and "light," i.e., more important and less important. An example of a similar question but a different answer is found in the reply of Hillel (ca. 40 b.c.–a.d. 10) to a Gentile who asked him to summarize the law while he stood on one leg: "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof."

12:29–30. The quotation is from Deut. 6:4–5, the first part of the famous *Shema*. In the second century the confession of faith that consisted of Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Num 15:37–41 was recited twice daily by pious Jews. Matthew and Luke do not have the prefatory sentence, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"; but it is crucial because the obligation to love God is based on His oneness. Because He is one, love for Him must be undivided. The inclusion was important for Mark's church in their debates with Jews in order to affirm that they also were monotheists, not polytheists as the Jews sometimes accused them of being. "With all your mind" is added to the statement in Deuteronomy. The piling up of the terms "heart," "soul," and "mind" is just a way of saying "with your whole being" and is not intended to designate the component parts of human nature.

The New Testament contains comparatively few references to loving God. In addition to the present passage and its parallels in Matt 22:37 and Luke 10:27, there are: Luke 11:42; John 5:42; 14:31; Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9; 8:3; Jas 1:12; 2:5; 1 John 2:5, 15; 4:20; 5:2–3; Jude 21; Rev 2:4. John 14:15, 24; 21:15–17; 1 Cor 16:22; Eph 6:24; 1 Pet 1:8 refer to loving Christ. If any significance can be attributed to this phenomenon, it is that the New Testament writers were preoccupied with the amazing love of God for sinful human beings.

12:31. The second quotation is from Lev 19:18. In the first part of that verse the neighbor is defined as "one of your people," i.e., a fellow Israelite. Leviticus 19:33–34 extends the love command to resident aliens. It is not likely that many first-century Jews extended it any further. Therefore, one of the most significant elements in the teaching of Jesus was to redefine the neighbor as everybody, including the hated Samaritans and Gentiles (cf. Luke 10:30–37, which follows immediately his account of the discussion about the greatest commandment).

One of Jesus' other great teaching contributions was to bring together and virtually merge the commands to love God and to love fellow human beings. Some deny that Jesus was the first to relate the two. The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (second cent. b.c.) seem to do so. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus who probably died about a.d. 50, seems to have also. Even if a few others before or during the time of Jesus saw the interrelationship of the commands to love God and love others, no one else put such great emphasis on the combination and made it essential. Jesus showed that it was impossible to really love God without loving neighbors. Love for God is expressed by loving others. Jesus declared here that the basic religious demand is that we recognize the uniqueness of God as the one true God. Such a recognition of the uniqueness of God carries with it a far-reaching demand upon us.

The statement "as yourself" does not justify the self-love advocated by modern psychology as necessary for a healthy self-image. It merely acknowledges that human beings do love themselves—far too much in fact—and that God deserves as much—actually far more.

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Recognizing God for who He is means that we should love Him with the totality of our being. Knowing and loving God in this unrestricted way means that we should also love our fellow humans with a love that arises from the very depths of our hearts. *These are really not two separate commandments growing out of the recognition of God's sovereign authority; they are two phases of one responsibility to love.* According to 1 Jn. 4:20 we cannot love God without loving our fellow human beings. This two-sided commandment, which Mt. 22:40 says is the foundation of all of the law and the prophets, is taken from Dt. 6:4 and Lev. 19:18. These are *not new* commandments that Jesus is teaching. *What is new* is Jesus' joining them as a single demand made by the true recognition of the uniqueness of God's holy authority. The unique sovereignty of God is not a neutral piece of information but *demand total commitment from us.*

12:32. The material in vv. 32–34 is peculiar to Mark. Verse 32 is the only place in the Gospels where a scribe is described as being favorably disposed toward Jesus, and v. 34 is the only place where Jesus commends a scribe. Not all scribes and Pharisees were bad. Indeed, at their best they represented the finest element in Judaism.

12:33. The elevation of an ethical quality over sacrificial worship stands in the tradition of 1 Sam 15:22; Hos 6:6; and perhaps also Isa 1:11–17. The word translated “burnt offerings” refers to those offerings totally consumed on the altar. The word translated “sacrifices” refers to offerings in general, only a small portion of which was burned, and the remainder was given to the priest or returned to the worshiper to eat as a sacred meal. The two terms summarize and represent the entire sacrificial system.

12:34. There is not much difference in loving God and trusting him. In addition to acknowledging the necessity of loving God and humanity, the scribe evidently committed himself to do just that. He was receptive to Jesus as a person as well as to his teaching. No wonder Jesus indicated that the man was not far from entering the kingdom, from letting God reign in his life. By saying that he was not far, Jesus encouraged him to go the remainder of the way by wholeheartedly following Jesus. Whether he did so cannot be known, but every reader of Mark hopes so.

This teacher of the law rightly recognizes Jesus' words as consistent with Scripture; they were also compatible with Jewish tradition. Entrance into the kingdom comes through Jesus. The scribe came near when he accepted Jesus' teaching that love is central and recognized that attitude is more important than ritual acts of worship. He still needed to commit his life to that love by following Christ. The kingdom involves more than accepting Jesus' teachings. It means answering Jesus' call to discipleship.