

“New Responsibilities” Mark 12:28-34 NIV

Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem. Next week we will celebrate what his arrival looked like, but from the moment he rode into the city he was bombarded by opposition. Jesus enters the temple and cleans up the mess he sees there – that is a story for another day – and immediately the chief priests and teachers of the law confront him and question his authority (11:27-33). Jesus will not argue with them, but instead tells a parable.

The parable is about a man who planted a vineyard, but when harvest time came, the ones entrusted to care for the vineyard mistreated the servants sent to collect the fruit of the harvest. Others were sent and they were killed. Finally, the owner of the vineyard sends his own son, but he too is killed. Jesus asks, “What should the owner of the vineyard do to the tenants? They should be punished and the vineyard given to someone else.” (12:1-9)

Jesus then quotes from Psalm 118:22-23: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, the Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

The chief priests and teachers of the law get the message. They are the bad tenants in the parable and Jesus is the chief cornerstone. Already these religious leaders are looking for a way to arrest Jesus.

Next the Pharisees and the Herodians challenge Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. They think they have Jesus cornered, but he simply replies, “Render to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God’s.” (12:13-17)

The Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead, challenge Jesus with a story of a woman who outlives seven husbands. Their question is, “Whose wife will she be in heaven?” They think they have Jesus trapped, but once he again turns the trap on them. First, he says they do not know what heaven is like. There will be no marriage there. Second, referring to the Old Testament, Jesus points out that God is the God of the living, not the dead as he says he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They are still alive! (12:18-27)

So we have all the religious groups of Jesus day lining up to oppose him. The chief priests, the teachers of the law, the Pharisees and the Sadducees all take a run at Jesus and fail. They are supposed to be the ones who teach the people about God and help the nation draw close to Him. But they are far from the mark. In fact, Jesus would say they are not even in the right game.

This becomes very clear when a teacher of the law comes to Jesus, impressed by his skill in silencing the arguments of the other religious leaders. So the teacher of the law invites Jesus into a dialogue about the law. It was a common thing for the religious leaders to debate which laws, or commandments, were most important.

We might think that is a simple task as there were only Ten Commandments. But in Jesus’ day the rabbis decided there were 613 commandments in the Torah (the Jewish scripture that

became our Old Testament), 248 of which were positive and 365 were negative (a “no” for every day of the year!) So you can see the teachers of the law could spend hours, even days, debating which were most important commandments!

Let’s read what Jesus’ response was to this man. **Mark 12:28-34**

Of all the commandments in the scriptures Jesus was able to narrow it down to just two, two which cannot be separated from each other. They are like two sides to one coin.

Love God and love your neighbour.

The first commandment comes right out of the Ten Commandments found in Deuteronomy 6. Jesus included the call to the people, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

We start here with a simple truth: you can only have one God in your life. God is defined as the highest power, the supreme authority in your life, the object of adoration. There can only be one being like that. That is your god.

Sadly, many people choose something other than the one true God who created us, who revealed Himself to us in Christ Jesus and who ransomed us through the sacrificial death of Jesus. People choose science as their god, though few admit it. Some choose success. Some choose popularity. Some choose pleasure. Some choose a false god within a false religion.

God’s word to us is still the same: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

Isaiah 42:8 says: “I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images” (NASB)

You can have only one God in your life. As Christians we know that the one true God is the God revealed through Jesus Christ. We are Christ followers – Christians.

What ever led us to put our faith and trust in Jesus as our God? Why would we worship the Father in heaven who sent to us His Son, Jesus? Why would we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Why would we worship this one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

The Apostle John wrote these words:

“We love him, because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) Read that whole chapter and you will be taken to the greatest mystery in the universe: that God loves us! God showed us what love looks like by sending his Son, Jesus, to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus would die to pay the penalty of our sins so we could be forgiven.

The hymn writer wrote: Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe.

Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow.

He did that out of love. Why should we love the God revealed to us in Jesus? Because he first loved us. If ever you doubt that, look to the cross of Calvary where Jesus died in your place and you will know, without a shadow of a doubt, that God loves you!

But Jesus goes on in his quote of Deuteronomy 6:4. If we are going to love God, we must do so with our whole being. He says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

Put that all together and you have the whole person – heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is the commandment, that we are fully committed to this relationship of love.

It shapes all that we desire, all that we live for, all that we think about, all that we do.

With God we are either completely in, or not in at all.

It is like a marriage relationship. You are wholly in or you are not in at all. If you think you can have relationships with other people on the side and your spouse will believe you when you say “I love you” – you are wrong! To truly love our spouse is to say “No” to all other temptations.

So it is with our relationship with God. We are all in – heart, soul, mind and strength.

Now let’s take a pause.

The religious leaders who have been harassing Jesus throughout the last two chapters would say that is what they were doing. They, of course, did not see Jesus as God, but they did believe that they were “all in” because they meticulously kept the laws, the commandments. They believed they were a shoe-in for God’s best in heaven or his kingdom.

But Jesus holds up his hand and says, “Not so fast. You have missed a very important part of what it means to be a true God-follower. You may know the words of the commandments, but you fail to understand the heart of the commandments. Until you have truly learned to love the people around you, you do not fulfill God’s laws, nor do you know His heart.

So Jesus gives the other side of the coin: “And love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)

For Jesus you cannot say you love God if you do not love the people around you – your neighbours. As we read in 1 John 4:20:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Jesus watched the way the religious people of his day treated those around them, and it was painfully evident that they did not love the people they were called to serve. They loved their positions, they loved the attention they received, they loved the honour that was theirs but they did not love the people. They believed law trumped human need.

Jesus believed human need trumped the law.

In Luke 10 we read of a religious leader who came to Jesus and he tried to wiggle his way out of this commandment by asking “Who is my neighbour?” In the minds of the Jew the neighbour included only other Jews – never a foreigner, and in particular , never a Roman or a Samaritan.

So Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan who rescues the Jewish man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead. The religious folk walked around him and did nothing, but the foreigner reached out and helped the poor man. Then Jesus concludes with a question: “Who was a neighbour to the man in need?”

The religious man said, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus concludes with, “Go and do likewise.”

And Jesus followers have been learning to show love to their neighbour ever since. Jesus said that His followers would value all human life, and give respect and dignity to every person.

Jesus demonstrated that love throughout his ministry. He touched the untouchable leper and brought healing to his body and his soul.

He healed the man with a crippled hand on the Sabbath so that he need not suffer any longer.

He cast demons out of men and women so they could live as neighbours once again.

He held the children and blessed them.

He took time for the Samaritan women at the well, for the Canaanite woman who came on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter, even the Roman tribune, Pilate.

And Jesus followers have walked with Jesus down that same path of compassion and love to their neighbours. Have you ever heard of the Red Cross? Or the Salvation Army? Or the Samaritan’s Purse? Or World Vision? The Elizabeth Fry Society? Each of these was started by Jesus followers who took his call to love their neighbours as themselves seriously.

This passage ends with the teacher of the law understanding what Jesus was saying. Jesus responds by saying this man was not far from the kingdom of God. What did he lack? Faith in Jesus.

Jesus has a new responsibility for his followers, and that is to learn to love as he has loved us. He calls us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This is not something you can do in your own strength and power. You need the Holy Spirit to cleanse you of all false gods and affections so you may truly love God above all else, and you need the Holy Spirit to fill your heart with love – even for the unlovable.

As you walk with Jesus, are you ready for this new responsibility? It can only happen if you surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit in you. Surrender to God and let Him fill you with His love. And if you have not said “yes” to Jesus when he invites you to walk with him, do so today.