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Sermon Series: *The Greatest of These*, No. 4

Kingdom Love

February 23, 2020 (AM)

Mark 12: 28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

³² "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

I presume everyone had a big party...a big get-together with family and friends yesterday because of the special day that it was, right? February 22...it only comes around once a year, so you have to really celebrate it. February 22..."National Cook a Sweet Potato Day."

I saw that and wondered, "how is it that some of these become "national days?" I mean, they're not spiritual...they're not patriotic..."

Like, today...February 23 is actually three things. Today is "National Banana Bread Day, National Dog Biscuit Day, and National Ceramic Tile Day."

Tomorrow is "National Tortilla Chip Day."

And then Tuesday, Tuesday, of course, is Fat Tuesday...the day before Ash Wednesday, but somehow it is also "National Chocolate Covered Nut Day," which, I guess, could be appropriate for Fat Tuesday.

But c'mon...how do some of these things get their own national day?

There are monthly observances too. The month of February, for example, is three things: National Heart-Health Month and Black History Month, which I get, but it's also National Bird-Feeding Month. A whole month to celebrate bird feeding?

A few weeks ago, I mentioned that we were going to invest this month talking about love, because of the emphasis on love that happens in our society in February.

It seems to be February ought to be considered "National Love Month."

Or maybe "National Bible Month," because of the extent the Bible speaks about love. We've mentioned how pervasive the word...the concept of love...is in the Bible.

And it's not just any sort of love either, right?

There are several different Greek words for love...but the Bible emphasizes a certain kind of love: *agape* love.

Agape is love that is self-sacrificing, others-oriented, unconditional...love that is expressed regardless of response...regardless of whether or not it's reciprocated.

Agape is love that comes from God and that God designed to characterize His people and His Kingdom.

So...*agape* is a "God's Kingdom" kind of love. Wherever God is, there *agape* is found.

Now, this can get confusing to us as we read our Bibles, since our English word "love" takes on several different meanings...different sorts of love. So it's important to remember that over 100 of the 125 or so times you see the word "love" in the New Testament, the Greek word represented there is *agape*, and so the love being talked about is this unconditional, God-given, Kingdom-oriented sort of love...which can dramatically change the way we read the passages where we find it.

So, it's important to remember: *Agape* means unconditional, self-sacrificial love.

Can we remember that? Maybe this will help.

[Video: *Sloppy Agape*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrX36JrOmZc&feature=youtu.be>

I love it...not in the *agape* sense, but...you know what I mean. Thank you, Gaffneys, for forwarding that to me.

Now, going from the ridiculous to the sublime, as you might guess, it is *agape* love that Jesus speaks of here in Mark 12 as He answers this question that was asked of Him by the "teacher of the law." Some of your Bibles' call this fellow a "scribe," which is what we're going to call him since, frankly, it's just easier to say than "teacher of the law."

To understand the interaction here, you need to know that the job of the scribes was to know and to teach the oral law. And this scribe brings this question to Jesus because he'd heard Jesus debating with, and giving what were, to him, very good answers to, a group of Sadducees. We see this interaction beginning back in verse 18.

The Sadducees were a sect of Jews who rejected the oral law. So, scribes and Sadducees did not see eye to eye on many of the finer points of theology. They were on the same page, generally, but the deeper you dug, the more they disagreed.

So this scribe had just seen Jesus tell the Sadducees, "*You are in error because you know neither the Scriptures nor God's power...*" and so, of course, this scribe was liking Jesus at this point, which probably emboldened him to jump in and ask something that was often debated in his day.

You see, in that time, scholars of the law had two tendencies...as Barclay describes it. One was to expand the Law limitlessly into hundreds and maybe even thousands of little rules and regulations. If the law said, simply, "Don't do this," some, (especially the Pharisees, according to Jesus) would add to that simple, "Don't do" lists and lists and lists of ways not to do this. They'd build walls around

the law, and walls around the walls of the law, and moats around the walls around the walls of the law.

And their thinking was that if they kept all these barrier rules, then people would never get close enough to the law to actually break it.

So that was one tendency...to expand on what God said.

The other tendency was to minimize the law, and by that I mean, to try to gather up the law into just one saying or one sentence...to express the core of its message.

It's said that the great Jewish scholar Hillel was once asked if he could state the whole message of the Law while standing on one leg. And so, he stood like a flamingo and answered, "Whatever you hate, do not do to your neighbor...that is the whole law...the rest is commentary."

This was a well-intentioned "boiling down," if you will, of the law...to which Scripture actually gives witness.

Consider:

- Moses, supposedly, received 613 points of law on Mount Sinai. God said to Him, "Tell the people, Moses...this is what it takes to get on well with me."
- But then, David came along, and in answering the question, "Who will dwell on God's holy hill?" poetically reduced those 613 down to 11 points. You can find that in Psalm 15.¹
- Then Isaiah, in his chapter 33 verse 15, reduced those 11 to 6.
- The prophet Micah, in his chapter 6, verse 8, reduced Isaiah's 6 to 3: "*What does the Lord require of you?*" Micah replies, "*To do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.*"
- Then, Isaiah, in chapter 66 cuts that to 2: "*Be humble and follow God's word.*"²
- And finally Habbakuk presents just one point, "*The just,*" he says, "*will live by faith.*"³

So, this was the thinking behind this fellow's question, "Is there a predominant, core principle of the law, or is every principle and detail of the law equally important and equally binding?"

It was very much a living issue in Jesus day among the scholars, and so this scribe wanted to know Jesus' take on it. And of course, Jesus didn't disappoint.

Jesus said, verse 29 in today's reading, "*The most important one is this:*" and he quotes Deuteronomy 6:4, the beginning of what's called the Shema.

This was a passage that Jews recited twice a day to remind themselves that, in a world like theirs, where there were supposedly many "gods," their God...*Yahweh*, the God of the *Jews*, was *unique*.

This is, really, the essential creed of Judaism, "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*"

This, then, was Jesus' answer:

"*God is unique... love Him with all you are.*"

And at this point, the head of every devout Jew there was nodding in agreement.

But then Jesus went on. He said more...verse 31 in the text, "*And the second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.*"

Now, this statement Jesus took from Leviticus 19...and in doing this...in taking these two commands and essentially making them one, Jesus did something new...something no rabbi had ever before done so definitively. And, of course, the result of Jesus' words here was so profound...this really became the place where the rest of the New Testament writers, and especially John, got their ideas about life, faith and love.

The greatest thing a person can achieve is to be in right relationship with God. And in order to do that...to be that...according to Jesus, means loving God with all we are, and loving others as much as we love ourselves."

And all of this love that Jesus is speaking of here...is *agape*...*agape* love...love that comes from the will...love that chooses to love, regardless of emotion, regardless of how either God or other people respond to us or treat us.

Love that presses on when we disagree, when we don't understand, when we don't feel it, or feel like doing it.

Agape marks us as God's people.

Agape reveals our sharing in God's nature.

Agape is what shows the world who God is...this stubborn, insistent love that just doesn't quit, no matter what.

According to Jesus, our possessing and practicing *agape* love toward God and people is the core of what it means to be His follower...to follow God, for that matter.

Agape love is the natural outgrowth of repenting and believing in Jesus; it's what's meant for every person who chooses allegiance with Christ.

It's the core of the faith.

And the scribe here affirms that, when he says there in verse 33, "*To love God with all your heart and understanding and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.*"

You see, he's saying, "Right relationship with God is not about our attendance at church or synagogue."

It's not about receiving the Eucharist.

It's not about doing *this* or *this* or *this*, or about *not* doing *that* or *that* or *that*...all of those "thises" and "thats" of the Pharisees of His day.

Right relationship with God is not really about those things.

Now, that's not to say none of that matters, because it does.

Worship has its place...both individual and corporate.

Making life choices consistent with God's character is important.

Discipleship - engaging with others, reaching out, showing compassion, giving, learning, caring, serving - all that stuff is important.

But none of it is, itself, the essence of right relationship with God.

It all feeds right relationship and helps grow it and bring it to maturity.

¹Psalm 15:1-5; ²Isaiah 66:2; ³Habbakuk 2:4

But the *relationship itself*, according to Jesus, is all about this *agape*...unconditional love of God and others. Everything else flows out of that.

All the offerings we make, burnt or otherwise, count for nothing if they're not rooted in *agape* love for God and others.

That's what Paul was trying to tell the believers at Corinth, you see, where he wrote:

"If I speak in the tongues..., but have not love, I am only a... clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

He's not saying those things aren't important. He's saying even these incredibly important things are *worthless* if they're not motivated by *agape*...unconditional love.

Those Pharisees that were so concerned with their doing, and making sure everyone else did, every little detail of the law and far beyond the law...their hypocrisy that Jesus pointed out...it was all about the fact that their efforts were being made *apart* from love of God and love of others.

They had missed the *essence*, and no matter how determined they were with all that other stuff...no matter how careful and complete they were in fulfilling it, Jesus says, "if you miss the essence, you miss it all."

You can cross every "T" and dot every "I" with perfection, but if you do it without love, you miss it all.

I think Jesus' response to this scribe here is one of the most interesting things that He says:

"Buddy... you're not far from the Kingdom."

"You get it. You understand it. You know it...up here [mind]. But will you embrace it in here [heart]? Are you willing to jump in with all you are...to convert knowledge to faith, and throw yourself completely into this Kingdom reality?"

Because it's not just about knowing or understanding. Love is engagement...and so it's the engagement in Christ's Kingdom...the abandoning of ourselves to Him...to His Spirit...the jumping in by faith that enables us to really live in this sort of love.

What Jesus is telling this guy, He's saying to us as well:

"You can't just observe God from a distance and be OK with Him.

You can't simply agree with Him and be OK with Him.

You can't just go through the motions and be OK with Him."

To be in right relationship with God means choosing to love Him, and to love Him means to jump in by faith...by trust...with all we are...heart, soul, mind and strength."

God supplies the love we need to live out that love for Him and for others.

But it does start with a choice...our choice.

We're not told what this fellow chose, personally. Jesus said he wasn't far, but being "not far from" is still being too far away to do any eternal good.

It's the distance between knowledge and faith...between *understanding* and *love*...the distance between a person's *head* and *heart*.

So here's the question: does that distance exist in us?

Have we made our engagement with God about the following of rules and the checking of boxes?

Or is it about a relationship of love?

Is it a matter of only the head...or of both head and heart?

You know, anatomically speaking, it's not too great of a distance from here [head] to here [heart].

But the difference between being "with Him" and "not far from Him" is a difference of life and death.

God wants a love relationship with us all, and He'll even supply the love we need; that's why God sent His Spirit to His Church. We need His help even to love Him. And He will help us love. He'll pour His love into our hearts...if we'll supply the will...if we'll step in...jump in...with heart, soul, mind and strength.

If you haven't already, would you do that this morning? Would you choose to make a relationship of *agape* love with God and others the centerpiece of your life?

Jesus says it's the one essential element of living in harmony with God...and He says it's possible for any who'll seek it...who'll seek Him.

Closing Song: 363 - *More Love to Thee*

Benediction: May the love of Jesus fill us, as the water fills the sea, Him-exalting, self abasing: this is victory.