

Mark 12:28-37 “What Matters Most to God”\*\*

Main Idea: According to what Jesus had to say in Mark 12:28-37, if we are to get a handle on what matters most to God, we must come to grips with two issues.

I. We must come to grips with the most important command (28-34).

A. A teacher asked Jesus a question (28).

1. Some people think God is pleased with legalism.
2. Some people think God is pleased with license.

B. Jesus answered the question (29-31).

1. Love God with all you are and have.
2. Love your neighbor with the same consideration you give yourself.

C. The teacher complimented Jesus (32-33).

1. Obeying God is important.
2. Loving God and neighbor is most important.

D. Jesus commended the teacher (34).

1. What matters in God’s kingdom is not natural for us.
2. What matters in God’s kingdom is why we need a Savior.

II. We must come to grips with the most important person (35-37).

A. Jesus asked a question about the teachers’ view of Messiah (35).

1. They believed in Messiah.
2. They believed in a deficient Messiah.

B. Jesus asked a question about David’s view of Messiah (36-37).

1. He believed what we must believe.
2. He did what we must do.

Make It Personal: Does what matters most to God matter most to you?

1. Is there evidence that you really love God?
2. Is there evidence that you really love your neighbor?
3. Is there evidence that you know the real Messiah?

What matters most to God? It’s easy to get sidetracked, to think you’re okay with God because your life is filled with religious activity. Such was the case in his early years with John Wesley.

Wesley was born in 1703, the fifteenth child of a minister Samuel and his wife Susanna Wesley. Wesley's mother faithfully taught him the Bible. He later obtained a solid formal biblical education and eventually was ordained as a priest in the Church of England in 1728. Kent Hughes shares what happened next:

“Returning to Oxford, he joined a group of undergraduates led by his brother, Charles, and the later-to-be-great evangelist George Whitefield, a group dedicated to building a holy life. It was derisively nicknamed by fellow Oxfordians the ‘Holy Club.’ Though Wesley was not yet truly converted, he met with these men for prayer, the study of the Greek New Testament, and devotional exercises.

“He set aside an hour each day for private prayer and reflections. He took the sacrament of Holy Communion each week, and set himself to conquer every sin. He fasted twice a week, visited the prisons, and assisted the poor and the sick. Doing all this helped him imagine he was a Christian.

“In 1735, still unconverted, he accepted an invitation from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to become a missionary to the American Indians in Georgia. It was a great fiasco. He utterly failed as a missionary—undergoing miserable conflicts with his colleagues, and almost dying of disease. When he returned to England, he wrote: ‘I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?’ His mission experience taught him the wickedness and waywardness of his own heart.

“However, not all was lost, because in his travels aboard ship he met some German Moravian Christians whose simple faith made a great impression on him. When he returned to London, he sought out one of their leaders. Through a series of conversations, to quote Wesley's own words, he was ‘clearly convicted of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved.’

“Then, on the morning of May 24, 1738, something happened that Wesley would never forget. He opened his Bible haphazardly, and his eyes fell on the text of Mark 12:34—‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ Wesley said that the words reassured him. And well they should, because before he went to bed that night, he crossed that invisible line into the Kingdom of God. This text was to be Wesley's life verse, a reminder of the shape of his life for the first thirty-five years of his existence.”[\[1\]](#)

Back to the question... *What matters most to God?* It so easy to turn pleasing God into a list of do's and don'ts, to think that if we DO certain things and DON'T do others, we can merit God's pleasure.

A man came to Jesus one day and asked a similar question. We're going to investigate that question and Jesus' answer this morning as we return to our study of the Gospel of Mark. According to what Jesus had to say in Mark 12:28-37, if we are to get a handle on what matters most to God, we must come to grips with two issues.

### I. We must come to grips with the most important command (28-34).

The context is Jesus' passion week. He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the applause of the crowd and the scorn of the religious leaders. Then on Monday Jesus entered the temple and started cleaning house. On Tuesday, in tag team fashion, the Jewish leaders came at Jesus and tried to trap Him in His Words.

11:27 The chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders challenged His authority.

12:13 The Pharisees and Herodians asked Him a question about taxes.

12:18 The Sadducees came with a doctrinal question.

Jesus handled each question with wisdom and perfect tact. That seemed to impress one particular man, a teacher of the law, who approached Jesus in the text before us. He, too, had a question for Jesus.

**A. A teacher asked Jesus a question (28).** “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?’” In other words, *what matters most to God?* That’s a vital question. How you answer it has eternal implications.

The parallel passage, Matthew 22:34, indicates this man was an expert in the Mosaic law and that the Pharisees had sent him after Jesus silenced their rivals the Sadducees. There’s a background to this scribe’s question. The rabbis counted the commands in the Old Testament Law. There were 613 of them, 365 which are negative and 248 positive.

Furthermore, the Jews typically divided the commands into two categories, the *heavy* and the *light* precepts. The penalty for violating the *heavy* commands was death. Two rabbinic schools, the strict school of Shammai and the more liberal school of Hillel, differed sharply over which commands qualified as *heavy* and which ones were *light*. Typically the following were considered *heavy* commands: laws regarding circumcision, the eating of unleavened bread, Sabbath observance, sacrifice and purification.<sup>[2]</sup>

*What do you say, Jesus? Which command is most important?*

One time a Gentile said to the famous rabbi Hillel, “Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole law while I stand on one foot.” Hillel responded, “What you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary; go and learn.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Even in our day there is debate about the very same subject.

1. *Some people think God is pleased with legalism.* So they promote a brand of Christianity full of rules. Do this, and this, and don’t do this...and God will be pleased. On the other hand...

2. *Some people think God is pleased with license.* *No rules!* is their motto. *Freedom!* is their cry. It’s the heart that matters to God, they insist. They gut Christianity of any sense of obligation.

Both sides need to give serious attention to what Jesus said next...

## **B. Jesus answered the question (29-31).**

Verse 29—“‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’” Jesus begins by reciting what the Jews call the Shema, a word which means “Hear” and comes from the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4. Pious Jews recite this confession of faith every morning and evening. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” It was with this sentence that the service of the synagogue always began and still begins.

The full Shema is Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41. Devout Jews put these three passages inside phylacteries, little boxes worn on the worshipper’s forehead and wrist during prayer times. The Shema is also put in a little box called the Mezuzah which was and is attached to the door of every devout Jewish house and the door of every room within it.<sup>[4]</sup>

*The Lord is one.* There are not many gods, but one. That being the case, what this one God says matters. You may take or leave others’ counsel, but not His. What He says deserves your utmost respect. What He commands demands your absolute obedience. And just what does He command? It boils down to this.

Verse 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.” Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5.

*Love*—value, cherish, give yourself to.

*Love the Lord*—He is not on the same plane with us. He is to be your master, owner, and king.

*Love the Lord your God*—this is highly personal. The One you love must be *your* Lord. It follows then that you would love Him...

*With all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*—Note the word Jesus repeats four times, **all**. What God desires is not a reserved, strings-attached, partial, leftover kind of love. No, no. We are to love Him from the core of our being, with heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words...

*1. Love God with all you are and have.* Yes, serve Him for this is His world, but first and foremost, *love* Him. Give Him your heart and affection. Put Him first in the aspirations of your soul. Think of Him constantly in your mind. Devote your strength to Him and Him alone. Love the Lord your God with all you are and have. This is the most important commandment in God's Word.

It really is. If we love God, everything else falls in place. Every time I sin it's because I failed to love God. When I hurt my wife with a harsh word it's because I failed to use my tongue in a way that expressed my appreciation for God and His good gift to me in Sherry. If I lust after pornography, it's because I am failing in that moment to demonstrate love for my God.

It's so fundamental that Augustine once said, "Love God—and do what you like."

At that point, Jesus offered His questioner a bonus. "You asked for the most important command and I gave it to you. Here's number two..."

Verse 31—"The second is this [Matt. 22:39 says, "The second is *like it*"—in other words, these two commands are inseparably related]: 'Love your neighbor as yourself [a quotation of Lev. 19:18].'"

*Love your neighbor*, He said. In other words, love the person next to you. This is not your world so don't live like it is. Look around you. See your fellow human being. And love him. That's interesting. The same word Jesus used to sum up our responsibility to God He now uses to sum up our responsibility to each other. *Love*. And what's the standard for this love?

Love your neighbor *as yourself*. We're so prone to think of self. If I'm hungry I go looking for food. If I'm tired, I make sure I get rest. If I have a need, I do my best to meet that need. I have an instinctive resolve to take care of myself. But God commands me to transfer that devotion to my neighbor. In other words...

*2. Love your neighbor with the same consideration you give yourself.*

Why was there fighting in Lebanon this week? It's the same reason for the fighting that occurs behind the closed doors of your home and mine. We fail to love the other person with the same tenacity with which we love ourselves.

And then Jesus concluded in verse 31, "There is no commandment greater than these." Love God. Love neighbor. Those two commands are fleshed out in the Ten Commandments (commands #1-4 developing what loving God looks like; commands #5-10 showing what loving neighbor looks like), and later by Jesus in the Beatitudes.

According to the rabbis, the essential things were circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and sacrifice. Not so, says Jesus. What's essential is a heart that loves God and neighbor.

My friend, it's so easy to let religious ritual take the place of love. Case in point, the story of the Good Samaritan. A priest and Levite saw a wounded and bleeding man on the side of the road but refused to help him. Their justification? They were on their way to worship in the temple. They were going to let a man bleed to death, but thought they were okay because they "had religion."

Notice what happened next in our passage...

**C. The teacher complimented Jesus (32-33).** "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> 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."

This teacher liked what he heard. He acknowledges two implications...

1. *Obeying God is important.* He mentions burnt offerings and sacrifices at the end of verse 33. Were those necessary? Absolutely. God commanded them. Were they important? Yes. A first century Jew could not be right with God apart from them. Was obeying God important? Yes, and it still is. However...

2. *Loving God and neighbor is most important.* “To love God...and to love your neighbor *is more important* than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Is going to church is important? Yes. Is having your devotions each day important? Yes. Is giving your tithe to the Lord important? Yes. Is serving in a ministry important? Yes. But these are but means to an end. They are meant to teach and help us to do what is *most* important, *to love God and to love neighbor.*

Both implications are vital. On the one hand, God is not satisfied with hollow religious activity. Neither, on the other hand, is He pleased with a pseudo-love that fails to show up in practical ways in one’s life, such as in devotions, faithful church attendance, and Christian service. Love for God and neighbor is what matters most, yes, and if we have that it will show up in “pure religion” (as James calls it).

*Right on!* the teacher told Jesus. Consequently...

**D. Jesus commended the teacher (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.”

*Not far from the kingdom,* Jesus said. As I chew on that phrase I discover two things...

1. *What matters in God’s kingdom is not natural for us.* I’ll say it again. It is NOT NATURAL. Religion is natural. Loving God and neighbor is NOT natural, not for a sinner.

Religion is a big thing in the Bible Belt. Nearly everybody has “prayed a prayer” or “walked an aisle” at some point in their lives. Ask them if they’re going to heaven when they die and they’ll respond, “Sure.” Ask them why and you’ll hear, “Because though I’m not perfect, I’ve tried to live a good life.”

It’s a works-based approach to heaven. Just like the Pharisees had in Jesus’ day. They had 613 commands and as long as you did your best at keeping the laws, you made it.

But this scribe grasped what others missed. Personal merit isn’t enough. Doing your best isn’t enough. God is concerned about something deeper. God requires something much more fundamental. *Love.* We must love Him with all we’ve got, and we must love our neighbor the same way we love ourselves. That’s what He requires. And that’s what we lack.

And the reason we lack it is because we’ve got a heart problem. We inherited it from our parents who inherited it from theirs. The first man, Adam, transgressed God’s command, and thus alienated the human race from the Creator. Consequently, we enter the world with a self-focused, sinful bent. What’s natural isn’t loving God and neighbor. What’s natural is pleasing self. What’s natural is sin.

Which brings us to our second discovery...

2. *What matters in God’s kingdom is why we need a Savior.* The reason God sent His Son into the world is precisely this. We have failed to love God and neighbor and lack the ability to do so. But Jesus Christ came to the world to be a substitute for sinners. He died in the place of sinners to make atonement for their failure. Three days later He conquered the grave. God promises to forgive the transgressor who believes in His Son. But that’s not all. God also gives the merit of His Son to whomsoever repents and trusts in Him. In other words, God gives the forgiven sinner the ability to love God and neighbor, the ability is obtained again through His Son.

*You are not far from the kingdom,* Jesus told the teacher. Not far. What does that imply? Close, but not quite there. In fact, we are nowhere told that this man actually did enter God’s kingdom.

Ponder J. D. Jones' assessment: "Not far from the Kingdom,' how aptly it describes the condition of many in our own midst. They have a wistful desire for the truth, they have an admiration for Christ, they have a keen interest in religion, they come regularly to worship and yet never take the final step and openly avow their faith in Christ. 'Not far from the Kingdom'—and yet not in it."<sup>[5]</sup>

Did you realize it's possible to be within an inch of heaven and yet go to hell? The old adage is true. *A miss is as good as a mile*. We can be a church-goer, a tithe-giver, even a church member; we may appear quite religious to the human eye...and yet come short of the Kingdom. To be in the Kingdom we must not only admire Christ, we must love and obey Christ.

Back to John Wesley again. For 35 years Wesley was extremely religious but it wasn't until he came to the end of himself that Mark 12:34 rang true for him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God ." How did he enter the kingdom? His own journal tells the story of his second birth: "In the evening I went very unwittingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, *Christ alone*, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, *even mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death."<sup>[6]</sup>

After that God used Wesley in mighty ways. He preached 42,000 sermons. He averaged 4,500 miles a year. He rode sixty to seventy miles a day and preached an average of three sermons a day. When he was eighty-three he wrote in his diary, "I am a wonder to myself, I am never tired, either with preaching, writing, or traveling!"<sup>[7]</sup>

But for Wesley, as it must for you and me, it all began the day he trusted Christ alone with simple child-like faith. It's not enough merely to be *near* the kingdom.

What matters most to God? To love God and to love your neighbor, that's what matters, that's the most important command. And that's why we need Christ.

But who exactly is the Christ that can save sinners? That question is the very issue Jesus addressed in the next scene.

## II. We must come to grips with the most important person (35-37).

In order to fulfill the most important command you must trust in the most important person. You must believe in Christ. But listen. It must be the real Christ. The fact is, many believe wrongly about Christ. Jesus exposed that very problem in verse 35—"While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, 'How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David?'"

Notice the setting. Jesus is still in the temple courts. Having silenced His critics by skillfully answering their questions, Jesus now takes the offensive by posing a question of His own.

**A. Jesus asked a question about the teachers' view of Messiah (35).** Jesus refers to the teachers of the law (we just met one in the previous account). He identifies the common view these teachers had concerning *the Christ*, that the Christ is the son of David.

Keep in mind that the word "Christ" was not a name but a title. *Christos* and *Messiah* are the Greek and Hebrew for the same word, both meaning *the Anointed One*. In ancient times a man was made king by being anointed with oil, hence, the reason for this title. The Christ is the Messiah, the Anointed One that God promised to send to be King.

Based on Jesus' question, we learn a couple of things about the teachers of the law.

1. *They believed in Messiah.* They talked about Messiah, a lot in fact. They were saying, according to Jesus, "The Christ is the Son of David." Of all the titles for Messiah in Scripture, this one is probably the most common, *Son*

of David. The teachers loved to talk about the promise God made to King David, that one day one of His descendants would come and establish God's eternal kingdom. Yes, they believed in Messiah. However...

2. *They believed in a deficient Messiah.* That's Jesus' point in asking this question. "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David?" The teachers were saying that the Messiah would be the son of David.

You say, "What's wrong with that? The Messiah was the son of David, wasn't He?" Yes, He was. But that's not all He was. He had to more than David's son in order to rescue sinners.

And that was the problem with the Jewish teachers in Jesus' day. Their Messiah was too small. He was the son of David, but only the son of David. He would rescue them, yes, but only from their peripheral economic and social problems, not their fundamental spiritual problem.

My friend, if you refuse to believe in Messiah you will not enter God's kingdom, for sure. But know this. If you believe in a deficient Messiah, you will suffer the same fate and miss God's kingdom. You say, "What must I believe about Messiah?" You must believe what David himself believed. "What's that?" you ask. Jesus tells us in the next two verses...

**B. Jesus asked a question about David's view of Messiah (36-37).** "David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."'<sup>37</sup> David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?' The large crowd listened to him with delight."

As we ponder David's example we learn two things...

1. *He believed what we must believe.* Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1. He specifically reveals two insights about the content of that verse. One, these are the words of David. And two, these are the words of God the Holy Spirit. You say, "Was the Bible written by men or God?" The answer is *yes*. God the Holy Spirit used men to write it.

Now notice specifically what David said. "The Lord said to my Lord." David is referring to two persons, both identified by the term 'Lord.' The *Lord* said—that's a reference to God, the one who possesses all authority in heaven and earth. The Lord said to *my Lord*—that's a reference to the coming Messiah, one who would enter the world as a descendant of David. Note that David refers to this coming ruler as one who is superior to him. He is *my Lord*.

Notice also that according to David the Lord said something to this Messiah who would come. He said, "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." The Messiah that David predicted would come received permission from God Almighty to sit at His right hand. Furthermore, God Himself said He would place all enemies under the feet of this descendant of David.

Let this sink in. David believed and declared that the Messiah would be two things: his descendant AND his Lord, a man AND one equal with God. David had many descendants who ruled on his throne, starting with Solomon, but only one fit this description, the One born to a virgin in David's line who conceived by God the Holy Spirit, the One the Scriptures call both "The Son of Man" AND "The Son of God." That One, of course, is the One asking the question we're pondering, Jesus the Christ.

Beloved, David believed that the Messiah was both *man* (his son) and *God* (his Lord). Do you believe that? To be saved from your sins you must believe in that Messiah. Yes, David believed what we must believe. Furthermore...

2. *He did what we must do.* What did David do? He declared the coming Messiah to be "my Lord." Hear his profession of faith:

He is *my Lord*—this is personal; though king of Israel, David willingly submits himself to this Person.

He is *my Lord*—the word Lord in the Greek text of Mark 12:36 is *kurios*. In the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, it's this word that regularly translates God's name *Yahweh*. That's who David acknowledges Messiah to

be, *Yahweh*, God Himself.

My friend, the Messiah came to reconcile sinners like us to God, but to be reconciled to God you must do what David did. You must come to grips with the Most Important Person. Jesus must be more than merely your example and friend, although He certainly is a friend of sinners. He must be your God and Master.

This morning we've asked the question, "What matters most to God?" We've also found the answer to the question, the one given by Jesus Himself. Now...

Make It Personal: Does what matters most to God matter most to you?

Be honest with yourself as you answer these three probing questions...

1. *Is there evidence that you really love God?* What kind of evidence? you ask. 1 John 5:3 says—"This is love for God: to obey His commands." If you love God you will obey His Word.

2. *Is there evidence that you really love your neighbor?* Your neighbor is whoever God puts in your life—your spouse, your kids, the fellow next door, and so on. Are you seeking to meet the needs of those people with the same tenacity with which you care for your own needs? By nature, we are self-focused. But that's why Jesus came, to transform us into people who truly love God and neighbor. Is there evidence of that transformation occurring in your life?

3. *Is there evidence that you know the real Messiah?* If you know the real Messiah you will not be content to give Him a corner of your life, nor will He be content to live in that corner. He who is Lord deserves and desires to be treated as Lord in your life and mine. Confess Him today, as did David. He is *my Lord*.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Kent Hughes, p. 114.

[2] J. D. Jones, p. 466.

[3] Taken from Wessel, p. 737.

[4] Barclay, p. 295.

[5] J. D. Jones, p. 470.

[6] Taken from Kent Hughes, p. 119.

[7] Kent Hughes, p. 119.