

## “The Big Two”

*Mark 12:28-34*

Pastor Jeff Fox-Kline | Sermon for Sunday, October 31, 2021

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“<sup>28</sup>One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup>and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” <sup>34</sup>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 question”.

This story occurs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And while each of the three versions vary slightly, the essence is the same. When it comes time to decide what is the most important thing for us to do, Jesus affirmed that we are to love our God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In Matthew and Luke, the question was asked as a way of testing Jesus. But in Mark, the scribe came near Jesus because he heard him disputing with others. This man overheard Jesus and felt that Jesus seemed pretty special. So he asked Jesus the big question. What’s the most important?

One thing that surprises me is the way that people react to him dropping this big truth. It would be wrong to say it was greeted with a

shrug, but they certainly reacted as if this was common sense. In Matthew, no one says much of anything and the story moves on. But if you'll notice in Mark, the scribe responds by saying "You are right, teacher". It really seems like he already knew the answer to the question before even asking it. And in Luke? Jesus doesn't even answer the question. Instead, he turns the question around "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" and the lawyer answered the question with the answer that we all know now. I'm not sure why, in Matthew and Luke, they would ask this question to test Jesus if they already knew the answer. It's like saying, "If you're so smart, prove it. What did you eat for breakfast this morning?"

So then, why do we share this story? We often think of the laws as specific, concrete, directions. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. These are tangible, concrete laws that have a sort of binary outcome. You either kill or you do not kill. You either steal or do not steal. Of course, we know there are nuances to these laws, debated for centuries, but at their core they are about how we behave and the actions that result from our behavior. But these two laws, love God and love neighbor, don't have a binary outcome. These two laws are matters of inward sense, not outward behavior. Around 500 years ago, John Calvin reflected that "It now appears from this summary that, in the commandments of the Law, God does not look at what men can do, but at what they ought to do". The laws that Jesus outlined are aspirational, with no set end, no on or off switch, nothing but the way in which we love. We are not able to keep these laws perfectly, but that's the point. If Jesus said "the most important law is 'don't eat shellfish'" then we would have a pretty easy time obeying the most important law of all. But because the boundaries of what it means to love are so fuzzy, we are never sure if we're doing it to the fullest.

These two laws give us focus for how to live our lives. Love God, love neighbor. I love the way that Jesus says it in Matthew, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets". In light of Jesus' declaration of the two greatest commandments, on which all the laws hang, we have a new lens with which to look at the law. In one of his sermons, Martin Luther picks up on this thread, saying "We are also to

notice here that all the works of the law are not commanded merely for the purpose that we simply just perform them... Yea, if these commandments oppose the love of our neighbor, he wants us to renounce and annul them". When Jesus says that the whole of the law and prophets hang on these two things, then we start to view the law and the prophets refracted through those lenses. What Luther is saying is that God doesn't just give us a bunch of laws solely so we can blindly follow them, but rather to teach us and lead us to greater love. If a law does not accomplish that, then we can do without it. Even more so if it causes us to approach others with a less loving heart. I'll talk about shellfish for a moment here. In his sermon, Martin Luther uses circumcision as an example, but I figure shellfish works just as well for our purposes. Leviticus 11 says "But anything in the seas or the streams that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and among all the other living creatures that are in the waters—they are detestable to you and detestable they shall remain". What is it about this commandment brings us closer to loving God? What about this commandment brings us closer to loving neighbor? The fact that the law hangs on those two commandments means that maybe we don't have to worry so much about this. Jesus spent much of his ministry interpreting laws through this lens. Jesus honored the sabbath, kept it holy. But sometimes people were hungry. Or people were sick. Or people needed help. And so Jesus would work on the sabbath. If we look at the law, Jesus committed a sin. But if we listen to Jesus' teaching, we see that in violating this law Jesus showed greater love for his neighbor, and honored God through his work.

We can go through a checklist of laws, too, and see where they fall. Do not kill? Obviously. Do not bear false witness? Same. Have no idols? Yep. Don't wear blended fabrics? I'm going to say probably not on this one. These are obvious ones that we can keep or discard, but sometimes things can be trickier. A law from Leviticus 13 states that people with leprosy are pronounced unclean. That made sense back when leprosy could spread with ease and cause harm to a whole community. But now, we know more about leprosy. We know how to keep ourselves safe without declaring people unclean. This law initially showed love to neighbor but it became something different as time

passed. One of my favorite phrases from the Reformation is “*reformata, semper reformanda*”. *Reformed, and always being reformed*. It’s a way of declaring that the Spirit is not done speaking to us, and that we need to remain open to being changed by that same Spirit. The law about leprosy became less loving as we learned more. And so, as is fitting, we adapt our understanding of this law through our lens of loving God and loving neighbor.

“*Reformata semper reformanda*”. Always being reformed. We cannot stay blind to the movement of the Spirit out of blind obedience to archaic laws. Leviticus 25:44: “ ‘Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves’. This law was used to maintain slavery. But we know that God’s slavery kills neighbor and offends God. Leviticus 18:22: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”. This law has been used to abuse our beloved LGBTQ siblings. It does not show love to God, or to our neighbor. Leviticus 19:34: “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God”. We disregard this law, though in keeping it we would show greater love. Leviticus 25:36: “Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit”. What if we took that seriously? Martin Luther said that from these commandments we “are to conclude, all works are nothing, that do not originate in love, or are against love. No commandments should be in force, except those in which the law of love can be exercised”.

Friends, siblings, beloved... Let us glory in the law of love. Let us be open to learning to love in new ways. Let us welcome the Spirit, give ourselves up to love of God, and bring this love to all our neighbors.