

Scripture Readings for Sunday Nov 4th 2018

Mark 11:27-33

²⁷ They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. ²⁸ “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?” ²⁹ Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ³⁰ John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!” ³¹ They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ ³² But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) ³³ So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.” Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

Mark 12:28-34

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?” 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.

Sermon: Love God and Neighbour

Just for a moment, imagine your house is burning; not a nice thing to contemplate – I know! But as you hurriedly make your exit, what would you take with you? You would grab the children, of course, and a pet. Maybe - if there was time - your wallet, laptop, car keys, or some personal documents. Everything else can burn. In such times you discover where your priorities really lie. The question the Jewish scribe asked Jesus was like that. When you reduce everything to a bare minimum, what is the *most* important thing in your religious faith? It’s a good question. And it’s a discerning, revealing question for this expert in the Old Testament law to ask. It is helpful to remember that the Pharisees and scribes maintained extensive oral regulations, whereas the powerful and influential Sadducees didn’t accept that oral tradition and only held to the Torah – the law of Moses. There was tension between these two groups and such questions were routinely debated in rabbinic schools. So, how would Jesus, a popular¹ rabbi,

¹ Mark places this incident within days after Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which underscored his popularity.

reply? This is clever question, a bit of a litmus test, but the way Mark introduces this encounter, it's *not* a trick question.²

Before we continue, let us pause for a moment and remind ourselves of the wider context. After the healing of blind Bartimaeus,³ we have the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem – which we celebrate on Palm Sunday.⁴ Then, according to Mark, we have Jesus clearing the temple courtyard of its moneychangers and merchants.⁵ While *reforming* the practices within the temple was a common, messianic expectation, nevertheless, the *need* for such reform was a shameful indictment of the chief priests and the Sanhedrin - the assembly of the leading rabbis in Jerusalem. Their reaction, so Mark tells us, was to seek a way to kill Jesus.⁶ Our first gospel reading this morning, therefore, sets the tone for the inevitable clash between Jesus and the religious establishment. Now, throughout Jesus' ministry, we have come across various encounters between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. And behind all them, the underlying issue is simply this: *Who has authority to speak on behalf of God?* It is, therefore, quite predictable that all this would come to a dramatic head at the temple in Jerusalem.

The day after Jesus sought to cleanse the temple of its corrupt practices, the chief priests, scribes and other leaders came to him and asked, "By what *authority* are you doing these things?"⁷ Jesus knows their mindset and, like a shrewd politician, responds to their question with a question. He says, "Before I answer you, answer me this: 'Where did John receive his authority to baptize?'"⁸ They thought it over, and Mark relates their logic: "If we say, 'John's authority came from God,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin' then the people will get upset because they saw him as a prophet."⁹ These religious leaders didn't want to answer Jesus' question because were *afraid* of either public embarrassment or public anger, so they said, "We don't know." Jesus cleverly responds, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."¹⁰ Jesus may come from rural Nazareth, but he is no country bumpkin!¹¹ But the implication of all this is that the authority of Jesus came from God – just like John the Baptist's had.

Later, they try again, "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?"¹² Again, it is a trick question. If Jesus says "yes" the *crowds* will get angry for the Jews hated the occupying Romans. If he said "no," the *Romans* and

² See Mark 12:28.

³ Mark 10:46-52.

⁴ Mark 11:1-11. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/A-Misunderstood-Man-on-a-Mission.pdf>

⁵ Mark 11:15-18. John's gospel places this incident near the beginning of Jesus' ministry; see John 2:13-22.

⁶ Mark 11:18. Later, in Mark 12:1-12, Jesus tells a pointed parable that further antagonizes the religious elite.

⁷ Mark 11:28.

⁸ Mark 11:29.

⁹ Mark 11:31-32. Unlike their leaders, the *people* respond to the authority of those who had been sent by God!

¹⁰ Mark 11:33.

¹¹ See John 1:46.

¹² Mark 12:13-17. This group included Herodians, who collaborated with the Romans - and so there was a *political* element, and Pharisees, who were not aristocrats or priests but were lay leaders who thought that such compromise was the reason for the nation's oppression and responded by advocating a strict and burdensome personal code of living for pious Jews. Consequently, these contrasting groups/viewpoints create a bold and potentially deadly challenge to Jesus' authority.

civic leaders would react in fear in case Jesus was about to incite a revolt. Either way, the religious establishment wins! Jesus famously asks them to show him a coin. “Whose image is this? “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then Jesus says to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”¹³ Again, a clever response revealing Jesus as a wise sage, worthy of respect.¹⁴

It was, then, in overhearing this discussion, and perceiving Christ’s wisdom, that this particular scribe¹⁵ came to Jesus asking, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus responds by reciting the *Shema*: “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 mind¹⁶ and with all your strength.”¹⁷ Since the 2nd century BC, pious Jews have repeated the *Shema* every morning and evening.¹⁸ This response therefore reflects the *Jewishness* of Jesus, something many Christians simply overlook or, worse, downplay these days. There is, therefore, in Jesus’ mind a *continuity* between his message and Jewish tradition of the “Law and the prophets.” The point is clear – we are to love God with our *whole being*, with *everything* we have got! Jewish law, then, begins with worship, with whole-hearted love of God, because if it is true that we were made in God’s image, we will find our fullest meaning, our true selves, the more we learn to love and worship the One we were designed to reflect.¹⁹ Jesus, however, does not stop there, and adds, “And love your neighbor *as yourself*.”²⁰ The second command follows from the first, for if humans are made in the image of God, of course we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

I remember being taught in Sunday School that the word “*joy*” means *J*esus first, *O*thers second and *Y*ourself last. In our self-centered culture, we tend to reverse that order. We place ourselves first - and we would also include our nuclear family members, then we extend charity toward others, and finally – if at all – there may be some room left for God. Now that may be an exaggerated caricature, but I think there is some truth to it! The command to *first* love God with your whole being is therefore countercultural; but Jews, Christians and Muslims would all agree on this matter.²¹ Certainly, this is a reminder for each of us to reevaluate *our* personal priorities in life. We are all called to have a *God-centered* view of history and the world, not a self-oriented, individualistic view of reality.

¹³ Mark 12:17.

¹⁴ As the early church later reflected on Christ’s words and actions, especially those during Easter week, they came to realise Jesus did *not* come to provoke a violent overthrow of religious *or* civic leaders. Nevertheless, his popularity with the crowds meant that, if he had chosen to, Jesus could have acted like other populist leaders who rebelled against Rome.

¹⁵ This shows that Mark does not present a blanket condemnation of Jews or Jewish leaders.

¹⁶ Jesus adds “with all your mind” to this list of heart, soul, and strength. (This might also be put down to subtle difference in meanings of words in Hebrew and Greek – see also LXX.) While not wanting to elevate “the mind” over these other dimensions of love, there are many Christians today who don’t worship God with their minds. Some are even anti-intellectual and suspicious of the use of reason. Others see “worship” only in terms of an emotional experience.

¹⁷ Mark 12: 29-30. This is a direct quote from Deut 6:4-5.

¹⁸ It is only to be expected that Jesus would have memorized this saying as a child.

¹⁹ But we must also remember that our love is in *response* to God’s love for us; see also 1 John 4:7-21; John 3:16-17. God is wholeheartedly committed to us. This was first made evident through God’s steadfast love with Israel, enshrined in the covenant, and later through the incarnation of Jesus Christ – God’s sending of his Son into the world to rescue it.

²⁰ Mark 12:31, which is a direct quote from Lev 19:18. Note that the verbs used for both commands is based on *agape*.

²¹ The three monotheistic religions would also agree on the second command to “love your neighbour as yourself.”

Now while I am sure my Sunday School teachers meant well, the notion of always placing “yourself last” can place an unrealistic burden on sensitive children and can damage their sense of personal worth - even in relation to God. As an adult, I was able to make better sense of this second command: I must love myself *rightly* to be able to love my neighbour *rightly*. “Love your neighbour *as yourself*” needs to be interpreted as “Love your neighbor *in the same way that you love yourself*.”²² The assumption is that you have *healthy* self-love, which is obviously *not* narcissism or conceit. The egotist cannot love others, because they are self-obsessed. But if we have a poor self-image, then neither can we love others effectively. For those with this tendency, it might be helpful to see this as a *double* command – to love yourself *and* to love your neighbor. And the beginning of a healthy self-image is recognition that you are, right now – regardless of all the baggage that weighs you down – a *beloved child* of a faithful and loving God who always seeks your best interest. If our identity is firmly grounded in God, our Creator, then as we respect and care for ourselves, we can begin to love others better too. And as we love others authentically, we also receive affirmation and our sense of wellbeing improves. I am not saying this process is easy,²³ but “Love your neighbor *as yourself*” is wise psychological advice as well as a summary of all the social commandments of the Old Testament law. This all may seem ridiculously idealistic to some, but if people *did* live like this *just for one day*, what a difference we would see in the world! God’s kingdom would have come on earth as it is in heaven. But let me quickly add, the kingdom of God is *not* a location - not a theocracy, nor a so-called “Christian” nation.²⁴ Rather it is where God’s values are internalized and actively lived out in the world. Being part of the kingdom of God, then, is a commitment to live the way Jesus did; that is what discipleship means – following the master in what we think, say, and do. There is an *ethical* response to the worship of God. To make that possible, we have the Holy Spirit to enable and strengthen us to live the Jesus way.²⁵ We *are* not - and *will* not - be perfect in that endeavor, but we must not be burdened by that fact, because while we are fallible, we are also forgiven. Nevertheless, collectively, we will incrementally make a noticeable, positive difference in God’s world.

What happened next? The scribe repeats the two commands back to Jesus, which is a rabbinical way of saying “I *totally* agree with you.”²⁶ But the expert in the law then adds, “These two laws are more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”²⁷ What does *that* mean? Remember, this conversation was taking place in the temple courts – the central place for sacrifice for Jews. So, this certainly sounds provocative, even dangerous.²⁸ It is, however, important to note that various Old

²² Neither does this command mean love your neighbour *instead of* yourself.

²³ We are, after all, commanded to love our *enemies* (Matt 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). Furthermore, the Jews understood that “loving others” as meaning *only* their fellow Jews! Unlike any previous rabbi, Jesus quotes this law of love without qualification and without limiting its boundaries; that is made explicit in Luke 10:25-37 in response to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” This is the radical nature of Christ’s teaching and call.

²⁴ Jesus would have acted differently if he intended to be a *political* saviour.

²⁵ See Gal 5:22; 1 Corinthians 13:13 shows the priority in the 3 Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

²⁶ Mark 12:32-33.

²⁷ See Mark 12:33b. One of the areas of contention between Sadducees and Pharisees was in the precise details of administering certain sacrifices. This scribe sweeps aside all such issues and says these two commandments are more important than the whole sacrificial system.

²⁸ Mark takes us to that place with Jesus’ cryptic predictions of the destruction of the temple in chapter 13, something which occurred in AD 70. (Had the temple already been destroyed in Mark’s day, you might think he would have mentioned it!)

Testament writers, when distilling down the essence of the law, had also come to the same conclusion, namely, that in the final analysis sacrifices are *not* essential.²⁹ For example, hear the (perhaps, familiar) words of King David: “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”³⁰ And hear the prophet Hosea: “For the Lord desires mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”³¹ In other words, when you are escaping from a burning house, or when a crisis is upon you, loving God and one’s neighbors still matters, but religious rituals - like sacrifices – don’t. It is, instead, a matter of the heart.³²

The scribe’s response shows that he understands the heart of the Old Testament. Jesus recognises the man’s wisdom and says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”³³ The scribe is very close to becoming a disciple because he comprehends that these two commands to love God and others are the true fundamentals. Even so, being “not far” from the kingdom of God is still being *outside* of it. We don’t know how the scribe responded, but we do know that Jesus calls *us* to follow him, just as Bartimaeus and the disciples did.³⁴

As we further consider what these two commands mean for us today, we must reflect on what it means to have wholehearted devotion to God, and to *one* God. Two possibilities come quickly to mind: the first could be termed *casual pluralism*, by which I mean that we can be too ready to accept that whatever anyone believes is actually OK.³⁵ The second is *modern idolatry*. While we don’t live in a polytheistic culture like Jesus did,³⁶ we still have many modern idols that can take place of the One who is ultimate, such as the love of money, sex, and power.³⁷ But there are other, perhaps more subtle, allegiances that take precedence over love of God, such as loyalty to nation, family, career, political party, or some other organisation. Both casual pluralism and modern idolatry reject the command to *first* love the Lord your God enthusiastically with your whole being.

Second, “loving others” can sound very 1960s, the era of vague and sentimentalised “love and peace.” But loving others is never easy or trivial. Mark places this conversation with the scribe in the context of

²⁹ See 1 Sam 15:22; Isa 1:10–17; Micah 6:6-8; Amos 5:21–24.

³⁰ Ps 51:15-17. These words are attributed to David following his adultery with Bathsheba and his confrontation with Nathan.

³¹ Hos 6:6. See also Mark 7:1–16 where Jesus says what comes out of a person’s *heart* is what is important, not external ritual. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Evil-Comes-From-The-Inside.pdf>

³² The priority is not, then, to be focused on the process by which we have peace with God (i.e., the sacrificial system), rather on behavior that arises from a heart transformed by God.

³³ Mark 12:34. (See also Mark 1:15.) In keeping with the OT Wisdom Tradition, there is, perhaps, a sense that both acknowledge wisdom when they see it. Mark then says, “And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.” Jesus is therefore the publicly undisputed champion of Jerusalem; his authority to speak on behalf of God has been established!

³⁴ Mark 10:52; 1:10, 10:28. Note too that Jesus *enacts* that call and hence is a role model for his followers.

³⁵ As José Miranda puts it: “Christ died so that we might know *not* everything is permitted.” (Migliore, p190)

³⁶ It may well be that one of the criticisms of the early Church from Jewish communities was that Christian claims about Jesus sounded to them like polytheism. Mark’s statement from the mouth of Jesus: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” may, therefore, serves to silence those hecklers.

³⁷ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>

Christ's passion week, where Jesus knows he will be killed by the powers that be and yet Jesus *still* speaks of love of God and neighbour.³⁸ Moreover, throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated his self-giving love by embracing the "outsiders," those at the periphery of society. That meant having compassion for widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor and slaves – those who had few, even no, rights. A question we must therefore ask is, "Who are such people today?" This will include migrants and immigrants, the homeless and poor,³⁹ victims of ecological and economic injustice, and those who are ravaged by disease, violence, and natural disasters. In a global village, we must think both locally and internationally. It's not an option to privately worshiping God and ignore our neighbour – both are essential. St. Augustine put it this way, "Whoever thinks that he or she understands the divine Scriptures, or any part of them, but interprets them in a way that does not build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not understand it at all."⁴⁰

My final question is this: How does this passage speak to those who, like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, claim to be "preserving" Christian values in a hostile culture? We need to ask ourselves are we missing the basic point as summarised by these two commandments and, instead, are more interested in preserving our authority with our own religious power games. Have we, like Herod and his courtiers,⁴¹ been seduced and compromised by our culture? Or, like the Pharisees, have we (inadvertently) reduced a dynamic relationship with the living God to a set of guilt-laden rules? Or have we, like the Sadducees,⁴² misunderstood the hope of the resurrection and live only for the here and now? Or, are we so interested in ethical and theological details that we miss the essential point? May Jesus look at our lives and say of us "the Kingdom of God is here." Amen.

³⁸ See also Luke 23:34.

³⁹ Especially those who fall in the 'cracks' of our social security systems.

⁴⁰ John also writes it forcefully: "For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen . . . Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister." 1 John 4:20-21.

⁴¹ Mark 12:13; Herod Antipas, the one responsible for the death of John the Baptist. See Mark 6:14-29 (and Luke 23:7-12).

⁴² See Mark 12:18-27.