The will of God is firstly about love

Text: Mark 12:28-34

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Lev 19:9-18; Luke 10:25-37; Mark 12:28-34

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 164, 116, 503, 184, 532

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#42)

**Theme:** When a scribe asked Jesus to identify the most important commandment, He answered, wholehearted love for God and for one’s neighbour, to which the scribe agreed and was commended by Jesus as being not far from the Kingdom of God.

**Proposition:**  God’s will is for His love to be reflected by you in your relationship with him and with others

**Introduction**

The study of physics is not “everyone’s cup of tea”. It is not every one’s favourite subject at school. Physics is not something everyone gets really excited about. However, for me, I was fascinated by this subject as a child growing up, later studying it at Cambridge university in England. Physics is ‘*the branch of science that deals with the structure of matter and how the fundamental constituents of the universe interact*’. There are generally understood to be four fundamental forces at work in the material universe: the strong force, the weak force, the electromagnetic force, and the gravitational force. Many physicists have sought to develop a ‘theory of everything’, otherwise known as ‘the ultimate theory’ or ‘master theory’ that would explain all the physical rules by which this universe ordinarily functions in a single equation, in a single summary physical law.

Similarly, in the moral realm, over the centuries leading up to the period when Jesus lived on this earth, Jewish religious leaders had lengthy debates about the 613 different commandments which are found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Was one particularly greater than the others? Is one the foundational principle for all the others? With this question in mind, one rabbi, Hillel the Elder, who lived from around 40 BC to 10 AD said “*What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbour: this is the whole Law; the rest is commentary. Go and learn it*”.

In our text, a scribe comes up to Jesus and asks, “*Which commandment is the most important of all?*” (v28). In the realm of physics, it would have been a bit like asking Albert Einstein, or Stephen Hawking to express all the mechanics of this universe in a single equation. We do not know who the scribe who asked the question was, but in Matthew’s parallel account (22:34-40) we learn that ‘*when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him*’ (v34).

This is one of a series of tests for Jesus that Mark records in chapter twelve. Firstly, some Pharisees and Herodians tried to ‘trap him in his talk’ by asking Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman Caesar. When Jesus replied ‘*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s*’ they marvelled at Him. Secondly, some Sadducees tried to ridicule the idea of a bodily resurrection with a question about a woman who had been married seven times. Jesus replied ‘*He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong*’ (v27). Now we focus our attention on the conversation that Jesus then had with the scribe, under three headings:

1. Loving God with all that you are
2. Loving other people as you love yourself
3. Entering the Kingdom by faith in Christ
4. **Loving God with all that you are**

The ‘Hitchhikers guide to the Galaxy’ is a comedy science fiction franchise, including books, radio broadcasts, a computer game, and a feature film all created by Douglas Adams. In one famous scene, a giant super computer called ‘Deep Thought’ had been programmed to answer the ‘*ultimate question of life, the Universe and everything*’ and after eons of calculations came up with the simple answer ‘42’.

In contrast to this silliness, the answer to the serious, profound and vital question, ‘*what is the essence of God’s will for you and me*’ is simply love. Notice that the word ‘love’ is central to the answer Jesus gives to the testy question ‘*which commandment is the most important of all?*’. However, what we mean by the word ‘love’ in English can be hard to define. In one breath we might say ‘I love cheesecake’ and in another ‘I love my children’ – but we don’t mean exactly the same thing. To quote from an English dictionary, love can be ‘*a great interest and pleasure in something*’ – like a sweet tart made with cream and soft cheese on a biscuit base. Or love can be ‘*an intense feeling of deep affection*’ – like that of a loving parent has towards his or her offspring.

You may know that the Greek language, as used in the New Testament, has multiple words for love. Eros is the term for sexual love. Phileo is the term for brotherly/sisterly love (e.g. Heb 13:1). Agape is the term for the love that God is in His being (1 John 4:8; 1 John 4:16). Agape is the term for the love that God expresses towards His people. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). The agape love of God can be described as His goodwill, kindness, compassion, and grace shown in self-sacrifice and unconditional commitment to those upon whom He chooses to set His love.

This is the love that Jesus speaks of when He answers the scribe’s question about the greatest commandment. Jesus quotes from what is known in Judaism as the ‘Shema’ from Deuteronomy 6:4. (‘Shema’ is the Hebrew word for ‘Hear’). ‘*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And 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*’ (v29-30). The book of Deuteronomy is mainly about the renewal of the covenant that God had made with His people Israel, the descendants of Abraham. Moses expresses this in Deut 29:13 “*that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*”.

The first generation who had been delivered from Egypt had almost all died as a consequence of their disobedience to the Lord. The command to love the covenant God of Israel with all of your being is central to the book of Deuteronomy. Renewal of the covenant relationship required true obedience – a voluntary submission of heart, soul and strength to the revealed will of God. This love (agape) is expressed in actions that flow out from a willing choice to follow God’s good directions for life.

To put this in fewer words: willing obedience is a result of love. Jesus expressed this fundamental truth about true agape love when He said: “*If you love (agape) me, you will keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). The love of God’s people for their Lord is grounded in His prior love for them. His covenant love was demonstrated in His action when He powerfully delivered Israel from captivity in Egypt. Remember that the Law of God, as expressed in the ten commandments, both as recorded in Exodus, before the forty years in the wilderness, and afterwards in Deuteronomy, are **preceded** by a statement about God’s covenant love: “*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*” (Ex 20:2 and Deut 5:6).

The love of God **precedes**, comes before, the love of people like us for Him. His love for His people, **precedes** even the start of time: “*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world*” (Eph 1:4). His love for Israel, **preceded** their journeying to Egypt and their enslavement there. He said to Abraham “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing*” (Gen 12:2). God’s love is, in the words of Jonathan Edwards “an ocean without shores or bottom” – boundless as God Himself. The love that God commands is a human love of response to His prior gracious, boundless divine love, as John helpfully puts it “*we love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).

Loving God with all that you are is the only way to fulfil the first four of the ten commandments. Jesus responds to the scribes question firstly by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which teaches that the essence of God’s will is that we love Him with all that we are. Jesus then adds: “*The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these*” (v31). Which brings us to our second point:

1. **Loving other people as you love yourself**

In the 2014 science fiction movie Interstellar, the character Dr. Brand states that ‘*love is the one thing we are capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space*’. The movie portrays love as an emotion that overcomes the spatial and temporal realm of the material universe. For the characters in Interstellar, the powerful love of a father for his daughter somehow mysteriously enables him to communicate with her through a higher dimension.

Similarly, but really, the love for other people that Jesus speaks of is powerful. Reflecting the love of God, this agape love for others acts with goodwill, kindness, compassion and grace towards another human being. It is shown in self-sacrifice and unconditional commitment. To love your neighbour as yourself is to obey the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth of the ten commandments.

The love that Jesus speaks of in the second part of his reply to the scribe is for ‘your neighbour’ as He quotes from Leviticus 19:18. The Hebrew word translated ‘neighbour’ (rea) simply means ‘another person’ and can refer to a friend, spouse, neighbour, companion, or associate. In the Old Testament a neighbour was anyone that a person had contact with in the course of their life, either Israelite or Gentile: Of another Israelite, Leviticus 19:17 states “*You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him*”. Of a non-Israelite, Leviticus 19:34 states “*You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God*”.

Similarly the Greek word translated neighbour literally means ‘near’. In position close to another. In the ‘parable of the Good Samaritan’ where Jesus answers a lawyer’s question ‘*who is my neighbour?*’ (Luke 10:29), A Samaritan cares for a traveller going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, likely a Jew, who has been robbed and beaten. The Samaritan was a loving neighbour to a stranger, having kind compassion on him, tending to his wounds, transporting him to an inn and paying for his ongoing rehabilitation. This parable shows the lack of love of a Levite and a priest who, despite their high religious status, broke God’s law.

Notice that this parable does not extend the meaning of the term ‘neighbour’ from Leviticus. Jesus was effectively reminding all those who heard his words that the Scriptural category of neighbour is very broad. For people like us in a high-density city, a neighbour may be a person who lives a few doors away, in a rural town, within a few blocks, in the country, across multiple paddocks. In our lives, neighbours include those who live close to us, those who work or study with us at school, polytech or university, and/or those we may share recreational interests. A neighbour might be the person whose car has broken down by the side of the road as you pass by, the mother in the supermarket who is struggling with a large trolley and challenging unruly toddlers, or the family next door who have just received the news that one of them has cancer.

The command is to ‘*love your neighbour as yourself*’. It is expressed by Jesus elsewhere (Luke 6:31): “*As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them*”. Loving your neighbour could be said to begin with ‘putting yourself in their shoes’ – that is thinking about what it would be like to be in someone else’s situation. If you were ‘in their shoes’, what would you need? Compassion? Understanding? Comfort? Friendship? Hope? Food? Shelter? Transport? And so on.

We could say that Jesus ‘put himself in the shoes of people’ like us. Brothers and sisters, He suffered and died in our place. He loved us with self-sacrificial unconditional love. The Apostle Paul writes to the Romans (5:8): “*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*”.

It is true for each of us that some people are more difficult to love than others. Some of your ‘neighbours’ have very different personalities, lifestyles, backgrounds and interests compared to yours. Some of your ‘neighbours’ may be unattractive to you, even abusive towards you, seeking to do you harm. All of the ‘neighbours’ of Jesus Christ are different to Him. We are all not holy as He is. We all do not love God all our heart and with all our soul and with all our might. We all are not naturally attractive to Christ, who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3). We all were enemies of God before we were reconciled by the death of His Son (Rom 5:10). Yet, brothers and sisters, Jesus has loved us, his ‘neighbours’ who share with him a human nature. He loved us as himself.

He calls you (and me) to love your neighbours as yourself, most certainly including those who have different personalities, lifestyles, backgrounds and interests compared to yours. Including those who you find unattractive and those who are your enemies (Rom 12:20-21). Is it easy to love your neighbour as yourself? I don’t think so. Is it possible to love your neighbour as yourself perfectly and completely? Is it possible to love God perfectly and completely? We’ll answer those questions in our third point:

1. **Entering the Kingdom by faith in Christ**

The Euclid spacecraft, launched in July 2023, is a wide-angle telescope with a 600-megapixel camera designed to help scientists better understand dark energy and dark matter. This Euclid telescope looks out at the very distant objects in the universe that are far, far away from earth. These vast intergalactic distances can be measured in light-years, but these huge measurements of physical separation are beyond our ability to truly comprehend.

When Jesus heard the response of the scribe to His summary of God’s Law, Mark records that, He said to him “*You are not far from the kingdom of God*”. These words of commendation do not refer to a spatial distance, but are used figuratively. So what does Jesus mean when He says, ‘*not far from the kingdom of God*’? In his reply, the scribe had confirmed the truth of what Jesus had said about the more important commandment by saying “*You are right, Teacher*”. He also said that loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbour as yourself ‘*is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices*’ (v33).

Here the scribe makes reference to two Old Testament Scriptures – 1 Samuel 15:22 and Hosea 6:6. 1 Samuel 15 records how Saul went against the Lord’s command to devote the Amalekites to destruction, killing ‘*both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey*’ (1 Sam 15:3). Instead “*Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction*” (1 Sam 15:9). When challenged by Samuel, Saul gave two excuses: It was the people, not him who spared the valuable animals. The reason was so that these animals could be sacrificed to the Lord. When Samuel refused to accept Saul’s excuses, Saul repeated them (1 Sam 15:20-21). It is then that Samuel says the words quoted by the scribe in our text: "*Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams*” (1 Sam 15:22).

Later in covenant history, the prophet Hosea focused his ministry on Israel’s violation of her covenant relationship with the Lord – mixing pure worship with the idolatry of the surrounding peoples. In Hosea 6:6-7, the Lord declares through His prophet: “*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me*”. Adam had not responded in love towards God who had provided for him all good things. Instead Adam showed his lack of love for the Lord by disobeying the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17).

Like Adam, Old Testament Israel demonstrated their lack of love for their covenant Lord by breaking His command to have no other gods before Him (Deut 5:7). It didn’t matter how many sacrifices they made on the altar in the temple, how many burnt offerings literally went up in smoke, their hearts remained unrepentant. The Lord said to them ‘*your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away*’ (Hos 6:4).

In quoting from these two Old Testament Scriptures, the scribe revealed that he understood that **the root of disobedience to all of the Lord’s commands is a lack of love for God**. Mark records that ‘*Jesus saw that he answered wisely*’ (v34). The scribe was not far from the kingdom of God, he rightly understood the Law of God, so what exactly was he missing? What did he need in order to be not just close to the kingdom of God, but actual **in** the kingdom of God?

Firstly, this scribe needed a changed heart, as Jesus would explain to Nicodemus “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). He needed a heart that was able to love God. He needed to be made spiritually alive. Notice that this scribe responded warmly to Christ, unlike the chief priests, other scribes and elders who were seeking to arrest him (21:12). His heart seems to have been softer, more receptive to the gospel, than theirs. How could this scribe later come to know whether the Holy Spirit had regenerated his heart? If he knew that he had received the mercy of God. Then he would believe that he was saved, not by outward religious works, not in dependence on his human will or exertion (Rom 9:16) but by God’s steadfast covenant love in Christ alone.

After the conversation between this scribe and Christ, Mark records that ‘*after that no one dared to ask him any more questions*’ (v34). Jesus had completely silenced those who would seek to ‘*trap him in his talk*’. Like a brilliant physicist who explains the single equation that defines the universe, or the master teacher who identifies the transcendent quality of all good relationships, or the Light that sees into the dark matter of the human heart so Christ speaks into the heart of anyone who will listen to His Word of Life.

We do not know if the scribe in our text later entered into the kingdom of God. We do not know if he came to repentance because he had not loved God with all that he was. We do not know if he came to repentance because he had not loved his neighbours as himself. We do not know if he received the gift of life through faith in Christ as his Saviour. How about you?

Are you far from the kingdom of God or are you not far? Are you in the kingdom of God? Have you come to repentance because you have not loved God with all that you are? Have you come to repentance because you have not loved your neighbours as yourself? Have you received the gift of life through faith in Christ as your Saviour?

The answer to the ‘ultimate question of life, the Universe and everything’ is not 42, it is Jesus Christ who is ‘*the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him*’ (John 14:6). So come to Him and then seek to reflect the love of God for you in Christ as you love God with all that you are, and you love others as you love yourself.

AMEN.