

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Matthew, Chapter 7

Insight on the Word: The Greatest Commandments: Blueprints for Successful Living

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This series of comments is based on the International Sunday School Lesson, used by churches in many denominations. We are presently surveying incidents in the life of Christ from the Gospel of Mark. For April 5, our text is Mark 12:28-37.

As we join the Lord Jesus this week on his way to the cross of Calvary, the scene has changed dramatically. No longer is he teaching his disciples and attempting to avoid the great crowds who thronged to hear him and see his miracles. Now he is in Jerusalem, in the final week before his death. He began teaching in the Temple courts on Tuesday following his triumphal entry into the Holy City (Mark 11:1-11), and immediately faced the questions and insinuations of the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the Pharisees. Mark records five incidents of confrontation between Jesus and these religious leaders, including the two in our text today.

Sometimes we paint too negative a picture of these Pharisees and scribes. As a group, they had become so legalistic that they were more interested in justifying their behavior than pleasing their God. Jesus said of them, "Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition." (7:9). And this is a problem we need to face in our churches today—traditions we have created which make it unnecessarily difficult for earnest,

seeking people to enter the kingdom of God and receive eternal life. But not all scribes were that bad.

Let's read today's text. A new scribe had come by and observed the arguments between Jesus and the various religious sects of his day. A "scribe" could write, and studied the law in depth. Some scribes were Pharisees, others Sadducees, others were not particularly involved in religious arguments. This scribe was impressed with Jesus' answers and evident wisdom.

His question: "Which is the first commandment of all?" This question was sort of a test for Jesus. But unlike the previous questions, this scribe wasn't trying to trick Jesus or embarrass him. The man wanted to see which things Jesus thought were most important in living a godly life. Did Jesus really understand the most important matters of the Law, or was he simply a smart aleck upstart who was showing up the weaknesses of the "establishment"?

The ensuing conversation gives us a blueprint for a life that will please God and will bring peace and joy to our lives today. Let me show you what I mean.

1) Know the Lord your God (Mark 12:29). Jesus is quoting the *Shema* from Deut 6:4, a prayer and confession of faith which was used by pious Jews every morning and evening. In the midst of the pagan cultures of their day, the godly remnant held on to the truth about who God is, and that gave their lives stability in spite of persecution and social decay.

They confessed the ancient words of Moses: the LORD (Yahweh) our God is one LORD (Yahweh). By this they expressed their faith, (1) that there is only one God, the Creator of all things; (2) that God has made himself known to Israel; and (3) that Yahweh God has made a wonderful covenant of blessing with Israel, so they can say he is their God.

Because of Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection, everyone has the opportunity to enjoy the blessings God promised through Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) and the nation Israel. But too many people today don't know God, or their ideas about God are all confused with other religions or popular secular ideas. I'm amazed to hear so-called Christians embracing reincarnation, mother-earth worship, secular humanism and chance evolution. They just don't know their Bibles, and so they don't know their God! (At other times I hope to deal with these issues individually.) For stability in your life, you need to know who God is, and the only reliable source is in the Word which God has given us. Be aware of the religious trends in the world, but measure them against the sure word in the Bible. It will bring wisdom and understanding to your life. (

2) Love the Lord your God (Mark 12:30). Some people think it's impossible to command love from someone else—and yet the Lord God commanded Israel to love him totally. How could he expect his people to obey such a

command, a command based on the attitudes of the heart? Certainly this is not a civil law which the elders of Israel could enforce with threat of punishment. No one can measure the love in another's heart. But God has so loved the people of the world, that he demonstrated his love by giving Jesus to pay the price for our salvation. Doesn't he have the right to demand our love in return—especially if we desire the benefits of eternal life with him?

We are commanded to love God with everything we are and have. This means to seek God for his own sake, to desire to please him, to long to know him better and more personally. We need to throw all our "heart" into this love, for the heart in Jewish thinking was the center of the will, the decision-maker. When we have a made-up mind to love God, the "soul" and all its emotions, attitudes and affections will follow along and enrich the relationship we have with God. Then we can enlist all our "mind" to learn about God's ways, and grow in wisdom and understanding of him. And finally, but very importantly, we can employ all our "strength" in physical strength and abilities, in leadership and other natural talents, to demonstrate our love for God by encouraging others to know him, too. Such a love will naturally lead to a holy life, freed from the stresses of sin and regret.

(3) Love your neighbor (12:31). This command is "like" the first, but it is still the second command. It's no

secret that life is much better when people act unselfishly to help others in need, and put others' needs before their own. We ought to be thankful that atheists, mystics, New Agers and other religious movements all practice a degree of love and compassion for others. Even drunks and open sinners can do that.

But only when our hearts are filled with love for God can we really love our neighbor "as ourself", the way we would like others to treat us. All too often people won't love us back! They'll use us, mistreat us, gossip about us, and just won't be grateful. That's the test of true God-given love (read Matt 5:44-48). Recently a government report addressed a problem they called "compassion fatigue." So many people have so many physical, emotional and personal needs that workers in social agencies, both public and private, are overwhelmed and giving up hope. How can you keep on loving the unlovely, let alone your enemies?

You can with the love of Christ in your heart. He will give you an ability to help others, keep your priorities straight, and not experience burn out.

(4) Worship the Lord in spirit and truth (Mark 12:32-33; John 4:24). The scribe was actually excited by Jesus' response to his question. He saw the emptiness of the religious systems around him, and he longed for reality. Jesus went to the heart of the Law, and revealed the Lord's real purpose in it.

As the scribe commended Jesus, he

compared the love Jesus spoke of, with the sacrificial system which occupied so much of the Jews' attention. He did not say that the sacrifices were useless, just that the sacrifices were not as important as love for God. Indeed, without love for God and for one's neighbor, the sacrifices become an immoral sham. In his answer, the scribe was following the trail of understanding blazed by the Old Testament prophets (1 Sam 15:22; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

We, too, must look at our worship and church activity. Is it motivated by a love of show? By desire for status? By longing to fit in with a certain group? In time, the emptiness of all these motives will become clear, and you'll be tempted to abandon your faith altogether. But if you take the time to recover your "love affair" with the Lord Jesus, you'll find plenty of real motivation for praise, for private devotions, and for service for God and his church.

In the final analysis, Jesus was testing the scribe as much as the scribe was testing Jesus. Jesus' evaluation was positive: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). I hope he took Jesus' hint, recognized Jesus as his Lord and King, and entered into the kingdom.

But for us, this episode teaches us a pattern for successful kingdom living, whatever circumstances of life come our way.

The Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church's Second Annual Youth Revival



Reverend Johnny Pack IV

The Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church located at 4009 North Missouri Avenue, where the Reverend Johnny Pack IV is Pastor, would like to extend an invitation to the Youth of our City as they make ready for their Second Annual Youth Revival.

This year's Youth Revival will run the week of April 20th through April 24th, starting at 7:30 p.m. nightly. This year's theme is "Let Your Light Shine" and the Evangelist for this year's Revival is none other than their very own Pastor, The Reverend Johnny Pack IV, B.Th. For more information you may contact the Chairman of the Evangelism Ministry, Minister Roderick Cain at (503) 281-6684 or you may contact the Church Office at (503) 249-0377.



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Theme: Whatever you're going to do
for the Lord, do it now

1 Peter iv.11

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