

LOVING GOD – THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT (Mk. 12:28-34)

There is an old country and western song, by Warner Mack, “Love is where the heart is” ... Isn’t that true? It’s *true* for the Christian. The heart is the seat of our emotions ... It’s not our mouth for we can say words, but not mean them ... It is the heart with which you love. When your heart is committed, your whole being is committed. That also applies to your relationship with the Lord. ... If you love the Lord, He owns your heart which means your whole being is devoted to Him, as Paul put it, **Phil. 1:21** *For to me to live is Christ.* ... That is the definition of a Christian ... to love God **Mk. 12:30** ... *with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength*

As the Lord Jesus stood in the temple, He was confronted by the Pharisees and the Herodians, - the religious and civil authorities (v.13). When they had finished, the Sadducees (v.18), - the temple authorities, - attempted to discredit Him, as the psalmist had prophesied one thousand years earlier, **Ps. 2:2** *the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed,* but to no avail.

These were calculated and planned attacks against the Saviour, for Matthew tells us (Mt. 22:34) they retreated, held a special meeting, and returned ... **Mt. 22:35** *Then one of them, which was a lawyer [νομικός ... a lawyer exclusively devoted to studying and defending the Law of Moses], asked [accosted, demanded] him a question [interrogated Him], tempting him, and saying, **36** Master [διδάσκαλος], which is the great commandment in the law? **37** Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. **38** This is the first and great commandment. **39** And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.* ... Jesus was speaking directly to this lawyer, who was also a scribe and a Pharisee ... a legal expert who knew the Law of Moses inside-out, outside-in, downside-up, and upside-down! He came along, - Matthew says, - ‘tempting’/testing Jesus ... This was the third wave of attack.

At the same time, though, this man seems to have had a sincerity the others didn’t. While he came as their representative, he also clearly had an agenda of his own, and a mind of his own to discover the *true* Jesus. ... He seems to have genuinely wanted to arrive at his own conclusion. He was willing to forego what the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees had expressed for he himself wanted to find out the *real* Jesus.

This scribe had heard the arguing, and from an objective viewpoint, he saw a case for what Jesus was saying for he was *stunned* by what he heard and saw.

The scribe was there, - with his expert knowledge of the Law of Moses, - in an official capacity to entrap Jesus ... that is what he was sent to do. And if he could detect the least antipathy from Jesus against the Law, based upon his uncompromising expertise, *they would have Him!* ... The Pharisees and the Sadducees didn't agree on much, but they *did* agree the Law of Moses was sacred, and if Jesus was caught saying anything to the contrary He most certainly would be condemned. So, the scribe asked a 'loaded' question, Do you accept what Moses taught, or are you setting yourself above the Law, for if you are you are a rebel ... and we'll report you to the Romans for insurrection!

Jesus answered from the Scriptures ... and neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees nor the scribe could disagree, **Mk. 12:29** And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: **30** And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. ... Jesus quoted from what the Jews call the 'Shema', - one of their most sacred passages - , **Dt. 6:4** Hear [*shema*], O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: **5** And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. ... And you will notice two things, firstly Jesus included the phrase with all thy mind, - that's from the Septuagint ... And secondly, how Moses emphasises the people's duty to be obedient to Jehovah, **Dt. 6:1** Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, *which the LORD your God commanded* to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it: **2** *That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee*, thou, and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged. **3** Hear therefore, O Israel, and *observe to do it*; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. ... They were responsible to love the Lord their God with absolute commitment.

Love for God was to be their priority and it is also the priority of the Christian ... By what I'm doing, saying, thinking ... am I doing it, saying it, thinking as a Christian ought? ... He knows what I am doing, He knows what I am saying, He knows what I am thinking ... God is worthy, and we show how much we love Him by the reverence, respect, and honour we give to Him ... as we serve Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength ... And that is what Jesus was reminding these Jewish leaders loving God means.

But how did the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes understand it? ... Their love for God lacked the emotion of the heart for they coldly and rigidly lived according to the *law* of man-made regulations. They had taken the Law of

Moses and supplemented them with their own perceptions and opinions ... they had hijacked the Law of God for their own purposes. For them, being obedient to God was being obedient to their laws, to a set of pretentious regulations and rites formulated by rabbis and teachers. Their Sanhedrin had arrogantly taken God's place and undermined true religion in the land of Israel. ... These religious hypocrites did not know Him, and they themselves were in breach of the Law of Moses they claimed to uphold.

In the Bible there are only two types of people, - those who love God, and those who don't, and if you don't love Him, you hate Him. That sounds harsh, but that's how God sees it. As far as He is concerned, you either love Him, or you hate Him ... that is how Dt. 7:9 explains it, *Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; 10 And repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them.* ... It is either one or the other ... If you say you love Him, you are obedient to His word and His will ... If you don't love Him, His word and His will are of no importance to you.

This is where we now look to ourselves and ask ... Do I love God the way His Word describes, or do I not? If I say I love Him, do I love Him with all my heart, and mind, and soul, and strength? Is it true ... "He is my everything, He is my all, He is my everything, Both great and small"? ... On another occasion Jesus *impressed* this upon His disciples, *Jn. 14:15 If ye love me, keep my commandments ... 21 He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me ... 15:10 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love.* ... That is what defines the follower of the Lord Jesus, - he/she has a love which maintains their obedience to His Word. *Conversely*, if you don't keep His word/commandments, you don't love Him as He requires.

And then Jesus follows this up with another quotation from the first five books of Moses, *Lev. 19:18 ... thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD. ... Mk. 12:31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. Treat other people with the same care you treat yourself.* ... That wasn't a quality immediately associated with the Pharisees and Sadducees because they reckoned they were better than everyone else. They spent their days 'looking down' on others. The words of Jesus were like an arrow to the heart for He was saying our relationship to God also relates to how we treat others. It is a lesson He taught from the beginning, *Mt. 5:43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. 44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do*

good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; ⁴⁵ That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.

All this was so alien to the Pharisees, who wouldn't sit and take a meal with you unless you were a Pharisee ... who wouldn't discuss with you if you weren't a Pharisee ... who looked down on you because you weren't a Pharisee! ... And the scribe, who asked Jesus the question, replied, **Mk. 12:32** Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ... The trap to catch Jesus had failed, and instead, the words of Jesus touched this scribe's heart and he acknowledged it in front of the Saviour, in front of his fellow-Pharisees, and in front of the crowd. Jesus got it right! ... Look at how intently the scribe was *receiving* the words of the Saviour, ³³ And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding ... He was listening to Jesus for notice how he also added in the aspect of the mind, which was not in the *Torah* ... it wasn't in the Hebrew (Dt. 6:5), but the scribe was so enthralled with the Lord that he included it too.

The place was so quiet, you could have 'heard a pin drop', as we say. Jesus was proclaiming the truth and He had no charge to answer. ... What Jesus said was touching this man's heart for the scribe finished off with saying loving God with all your heart, and mind, and soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself **Mk. 12:33** ... is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. ... I wonder if Samuel's words to Saul were in his mind, **I Sam. 15:22** Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams.

And Jesus graciously addressed this man, now seeking for the truth, - for **Mk. 12:34** Jesus saw that he answered discreetly [*wisely, prudently*], and He told him, *Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.* ... You are not yet *there*, but you are not far away. ... That's good, but it is still not sufficient. The man's mind was being captured, it seems, but not yet his heart. Perhaps he *did* truly come to confess with his mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in his heart, and was saved ... maybe after the judgment hall where he watched the Saviour being interrogated ... or maybe at the cross ... or maybe when he heard Peter preaching on the Day of Pentecost.

After that, no one else questioned the Saviour in the temple for none could match Him. His truth withstood all His opponents. He didn't speak a harsh word but presented them with the truth of God from which they had strayed.

As Christians, we are not saying anything new. What we are saying about loving God is repeated over and over from the very commencement of the Church. We are not here to promote ourselves, but we are here to preach Christ ... Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ glorified, Christ coming again.

We are here to talk about Him, and to enjoy learning about Him, and coming to know Him more. We are here to love His company and the company of His people ... and, I trust, it's helping us to look forward to seeing Him, and being with Him forever ... One of the men standing beside Jesus that day in the temple was the apostle Peter and he was later to write in his epistle, **1 Peter 2:7** *Unto you therefore which believe he is precious* ... Is that how it is? *Is He precious to you?* I trust He is, and that you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and body ... and your neighbour as yourself. Amen.