

Three orders for pleasing God
(Mark 12:28-34)

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November 4, 2012

Mark 12:28-34

An expert in the Jewish Scriptures heard Jesus disputing with the Sadducees and came to Jesus. Seeing that Jesus had answered the Sadducees well, the expert asked Jesus: “Which one of the commandments is the most important?” Jesus answered him: “The most important is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. The second one is this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no commandment greater than these.” The expert said to Jesus: “Well said, teacher. You have said truly that God is one and that there is no other God; and that to love him with all one’s heart, one’s whole mind and one’s whole strength and to love one’s neighbour as one’s self is much greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And Jesus, seeing that the expert answered thoughtfully, answered him saying: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that, no one dared ask Jesus anything.¹

Before the Fall, humanity, male and female, was in an assured, divinely protected relationship with God, with each other, and with the world around them.

After the Fall, all that changed, between God and humanity, between humans, and even between humans and the earth:

cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen 3:17-19 RSV)

After the Fall, men and women developed means of trying to please God, to placate God, to appease God, and to live with the curse. Those means always took the form of sacrifice. For example, the first fruits of Eve’s womb, two sons whom she must have born with pain, according to the curse, were Cain, her first-born, and Abel. And the first thing we hear about Cain and Abel were not only that they laboured, presumably with difficulty according to the curse, but also that of their labours, they offered sacrifice:

³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴ and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions. (Gen 4:3-4 RSV)

¹ I have left the older English “thou” in order to indicate that in the OT text God speaks in the second person singular to Israel, not in the second person plural. This is a matter either for Israel understood as a whole (Israel = “thou”) or for individual Israelites to carry out.

Nowhere in the text does it say that God asked for this sacrifice. They simply brought it. And this was true of peoples of every race and culture that developed. Sacrifice became the common way that humans approached God, whatever they called God. Whether it was among the descendants of Adam and Eve who became the inhabitants of the Middle East, or northern Europe, or the Far East, or the lands of North and South America, sacrifice was everywhere the common means of approaching God.

Now, according to the rest of God's revealed Word, we know that God accepted sacrifice, at least some sacrifice. God accepted Abel's sacrifice of meat and blood, but not Cain's of grain. God accepted the sacrifice of Noah after the flood. God accepted Abraham's sacrifice. Yet nowhere does it say that God instructed any of the patriarchs that they should sacrifice or how to do so.

Eventually, however, God gave instruction to His people Israel regarding what was to be sacrificed and how it was to be sacrificed. This happened only after the people of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt. There, while wandering in the desert for 40 years, God gave them instructions as to how to sacrifice and actually established a group of men, the Levites, who would be responsible as priests for doing sacrifice correctly.

Over time that sacrificial system developed until it no longer took place in a moveable tent but now in a Temple, that grew bigger and bigger until finally it occupied the space of four football stadiums. That was the place of sacrifice that we find in the days of Jesus.

Obviously, sacrifice was acceptable to God, at least in some cases. The sacrifices of Abel, of Noah, of Abraham, of the Passover were all acceptable. And, as long as sacrifice was done correctly, it appears that God accepted it when offered in the Tabernacle and Temple.

But, sacrifice was not the whole story, was it? In other words, while sacrifice marked various moments of God's engagement with the people of Israel, and who knows, possibly marked the engagement of other peoples around the world who also offered sacrifice, it was not the whole story.

The people of Israel were asked to consider this: does God want only sacrifice, that is, physical expressions of contrition and repentance expressed through the ritual slaughter of an animal? Or does God want and intend something more?

The answer came in a variety of ways, but the rabbis for the most part agreed: yes, God wants more than just external acts of contrition before God expressed in the taking of the life of an animal. God wants absolute obedience from His people expressed in their daily lives and activity.

This was perhaps expressed most clearly in the Law that God gave to His people. That Law contained instructions regarding how properly to sacrifice. But those laws regarding sacrifice are a minimal portion of the whole Law. The main thrust of the Law concerns how to act towards God and towards fellow Israelites, with a few laws thrown in about how to act in regard to people who are not Israelites.

You know these instructions well, especially in the summary of them given to Moses in the form of a series of commandments. These commandments are divided into two sets of commandments. The first commandments concern the relationship of Israel to God:

³ *"You shall have no other gods before me.*

⁴ *"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; ...*

⁷ *"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*

The second set of commandments concerns the relationships of Israelites to each other:

¹² *"Honor your father and your mother*

¹³ *"You shall not kill.*

¹⁴ *"You shall not commit adultery.*

¹⁵ *"You shall not steal.*

¹⁶ *"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

¹⁷ *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."*

And because of this division into two, there is another way that we can summarize the whole Law, and it is in the form of just 2 commandments. These are the two commandments that Jesus draws attention to in his response to the scribe in today's Gospel:

²⁹ ... *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ 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.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

Jesus concludes: *"There is no other commandment greater than these."* (Mar 12:28-31 RSV)

Now, these two commandments do not leap out at a reader as obvious statements. The first about loving God is found only in Deuteronomy and the second about loving neighbour is an obscure text from Leviticus. But, they are perfect summaries of the Law. They say everything that one is supposed to glean from the 10 Commandments, and the 10 commandments say everything that one is supposed to glean from the whole Law, from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. So, these two commandments, Love the Lord thy God... and Love thy neighbour as thyself, say it all!

That's why the scribe who encountered Jesus adds: You are right, teacher. You have summarized the Law better than even the legal experts could do but using the law to summarize the law. And in doing so you have not mentioned "sacrifice", because sacrifice is only meant to be a visible and outward expression of both of these actions in life. Sacrifice cannot substitute for love of God and love of neighbour. You cannot hate God or hate your neighbour and then make it all better simply by offering an animal sacrifice. You must love God, which means devoting your whole life and every aspect of your life to God. And you must love your neighbour, which means devoting your active life to caring for the fellow Israelite that you see every day.

And Jesus looked at him, saw that he spoke wisely, and said to him: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

What did Jesus mean?

He meant: ‘You get it, that’s good. Sacrifice is good and total obedience is better. But, you’re still only close. You’re not there yet. You realize what’s good and what’s better but not yet what’s best. You realize the two orders for pleasing God, sacrifice and daily obedience, but not the third.’

And what is that? Jesus doesn’t tell him. But, what Jesus meant is clear from the rest of the gospel proclamation of Jesus in the Gospels and in the rest of the gospel proclamation of the church, starting with the apostolic witness and the letters of Paul.

First, it is clear that God honoured at least some sacrifices. However, the sacrifice of an animal for human error or uncleanness, while good, has only a limited and temporary efficacy.

According to the letter to the Hebrews,

... every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² ... he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. (Heb 5:1-3 RSV)

Such sacrifices – all sacrifices – could only point to something else, a sacrifice that would one day deal with the Fall once and for all.

But, what about the second order, the two, great commandments, the commandments that summarize the entire Law of Moses? Surely these are not limited and temporary? Surely, the commandments of God are good for all time, especially as summed up “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul, all thy mind, and with all thy strength” and “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”. If we do these, aren’t we assured that we are living members of thy faithful people? That’s right. And that’s why they’re better, a second order of pleasing God.

But, as yourself again the question: Can you love God in that way? Can you love your neighbour in that way? Do you? If we could do them, we would indeed be perfect. If the scribe had said to Jesus: Master, you are right. These are the two commandments that summarize Moses’ teaching to us, and that’s exactly what I do, he would have been perfect. Could he have honestly said he did? I doubt it, anymore than the rich young ruler could who came to Jesus and, when asked whether he followed all the commandments indicated that he did, but that he was unwilling to sell everything he had and give it to his poorer neighbours that they might be as rich as he.

Ask yourself the question: You’re probably a pretty good person, but do you love God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength? Do you love your neighbour exactly as you love yourself so that you would part with everything that you have that they might have what you have or more?

The answer should be: no. And you're not alone. The worst sinner or the greatest saint does not perfectly love. This scribe could not do so. Why, even Jesus' followers who were with him, listening to the exchange, even Peter did not do so. Because, if you could, if the scribe could, if anyone could, then that person would be perfect before God, perfect in his own ability to love God and his neighbour. And that person would not need the sacrifice of Christ to cleanse him, a sacrifice that the Lord made for the sins not just of the imperfect but for the whole world, the worst sinners, the scribes of Jerusalem, and you and me. As Paul said: The Law reveals what we must do to please God and yet every time we try to do the Law, we fail. That is the grace of the Law: to show us that we cannot please God on our own, either by sacrifice or by even our best daily obedience.

And so we come to the third order for pleasing God, the best way to do so.

Sacrifice was permitted by God as a means of preparing the whole of humanity to grasp what was necessary to reconcile fallen humanity to a loving God. Sacrifice prepared people to see that the multitude of sacrifices could cleanse nothing permanently but that a single sacrifice, the sacrifice of the only Son of God, would be able not only to restore fallen humanity but to set all of creation on the path to full restoration.

Loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving one's neighbour as one's self, were the goals that God required of us but they were impossible goals. Every time one hears the Law and what it requires, we are reminded: Oh Lord, I failed yet again. And so it is with every human, faithful Jew or sinning Gentile: there, but for the grace of God expressed in the sacrifice of Christ, go I. I, too, have failed, again and again; and again and again the blood of Christ, sacrificed for me, cleanses me from all my sins. And that is the best way to please God, and it is the only way to please God.

Because of the sacrifice of Jesus we may even be enabled to love God and our neighbour in a way that was never possible before. But, beware lest you think that it is in your loving of God and of your neighbour that you are saved. This is to fall away from the best, even though it is a very good thing to strive to love God and neighbour. But in this world, we will never have sinless perfection to live our lives. We will always struggle as fallen men and women who have been redeemed by the blood of the lamb and who need daily to be cleansed by that same blood once offered for us. Only one day in the future, when the Lord shall come with power and might, will all things be made perfect. Today we live in hope, through faith, because of the love of Christ that has been poured into our hearts.

When we leave here, we will not go out perfect. But, we will go forth with a message for those around us. Would you be reconciled to God, to your wife or husband, to your children or parents, to your neighbours, to the whole creation around you? Then look to the sacrifice once offered for you. Look to Jesus: He will take from you your sin and sickness. He will never fail you, this Beautiful Saviour.

Let us pray.