



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

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in the Season after Pentecost

Faith Leads Us to Love

How do we respond to the wonderful gifts the Lord has given to us? God supplies us with what we need for our bodies and lives. He protects us from trouble and comforts us when sadness comes our way. He provides healing and he hears our prayers. Above all, he saved us from the ravages of sin and the reality of hell by sending Jesus to live and die in our place. How do we respond? Jesus answers that question in the Gospel for today: Love God and love your neighbor.

Sermon
Mark 12:28-34

Learn to Live in Love

One of the teachers of the law came and heard [the Jewish leaders and Jesus] debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: '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 mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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." 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.

Introduction: So was Aaron Rodgers OK when he didn't get vaccinated or not OK? Should people get vaccinated for Covid or not? Should you have to wear a mask or do you have freedom not to wear a mask. You want to start an argument? Just ask one of those questions.

Here's another question you could ask: **Of all the commandments, which is the most important?** Now if I asked you that question this morning, you'd probably shrug your shoulders. What's the point? But that question really mattered to people who lived at Jesus' time. Over the years the religious leaders of Israel had put together a list of 613 laws and the experts were forever arguing about which laws were the most important. If you could keep the most important laws, you would get closer to God. If you could handle only the less important laws, well, not so good. Trouble was, nobody could decide what the most important laws were. So one day a legal expert put the question to Jesus: **Of all the commandments, which is the most important?** No matter how Jesus answered, there was going to be an argument.

Jesus' answer was simple: **Love God and love your neighbor. There is no commandment greater than these.** But there weren't any arguments. At the end of today's Gospel Mark tells: **From then on no one dared ask him any more questions.** I'm pretty sure there won't be any arguments here, either, but there will be a question. If the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor, how do we do that?

All summer long and into the fall we've been hearing St. Mark tell us words and works of Jesus which brought us practical guidance about living our lives as Christians. Jesus talked about money and missions and marriage and much more. So before we turn our attention to the end of time—starting next Sunday—we want to talk about love which

really covers all the things we do as Christians. The point Jesus made to the legal expert in Mark 12 is pretty much the same as the point he makes to us this morning:

Learn to Live in Love

It was Tuesday of Holy Week, and the Jewish religious leaders had been debating with Jesus all day. And they were all rotten to the core and planned to get rid of Jesus by week's end. But this teacher of the law doesn't come off too badly. Mark tells us that **he had been listening to the debates and noticed that Jesus was giving good answers**. So he asked Jesus a question people had been debating for centuries: **Of all the commandments, which is the most important?** Jesus knew this guy was an expert and so he took him back to Moses, the great law-giver of Israel. The specific passage was Deuteronomy chapter 6—you heard Moses' words in the First Reading: **These are the commands, decrees, and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children, and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you**. And then Jesus quoted Moses: **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 mind and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself**. Jesus didn't quote any more of Moses, but the expert knew what Moses wrote by heart. **These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates**. You want to know the greatest commandment? Love God and love your neighbor. **There is no commandment greater than these**. And this commandment is so great that it has to dominate everything you do in life: heart, children, home, road, hands, foreheads, doorframes, gates. Moses said it first. Jesus said it next: **Learn to live in love**.

Guess what? The expert agreed completely: **Well said, teacher, you are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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**. The expert got it 100% right. When Jesus heard the right answer, he said to him, **You are not far from the kingdom of God**.

Not far, Jesus said. **Not far**. So how close was he? The expert agreed that the true God, the Lord of Israel, deserved obedience. He agreed that the essence of obedience was to love God with one's entire being. He agreed that love for neighbor flowed from love for God. He agreed that the inner emotion of love was more important than outward acts of service. **Not far**, Jesus. **Not far**. So how far was he? Jesus knew that this expert in the law was convinced he could keep the greatest commandment. He wasn't ready to admit he had failed to love God and neighbor; he hadn't come clean about his sin. He was still clinging to the idea—as all the legal experts did—that he could please God with his obedience. And something else. The expert had not discovered that the rabbi in front of him was the Son of God and his Savior. It never crossed his mind that that Jesus of Nazareth had come to take his sins away. He understands the greatness of the law perfectly, but he did not grasp the sweetness of the gospel. And without repenting of his sin and believing in Jesus, he could never enter the kingdom of God. So close and yet so far away!

You and I are in a very different place from the legal expert in the Gospel. Once upon a time we were far away; we were stuck in sin and unbelief. But our baptisms unstuck us and covered us with the righteous robes of Christ. We don't fool ourselves about sin. We know what sin is and we know what sin does. We have no illusions about our thoughts and words and actions. We confess our sins every Sunday. We admit to sin in the Lord's Prayer when we say: **Forgive us our trespasses**. **And** we know who saves us from sin. We know and believe that **the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin**. We know the gospel in a nutshell by heart: **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**. We read the gospel, we hear the gospel, we sing the gospel. We are all ready to say with Paul: **The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**. We repent of our sins, we believe the gospel, and we are all members of the kingdom of God.

But I'll say this: We could all stand a good, thorough review of what Jesus and that legal expert agreed on in today's Gospel, that loving God and loving our neighbor is the greatest of all the commandments. Moses knew and the expert knew and Jesus knew that love begins with God: God commands it, God demonstrates it, and God empowers it in us. God's kind of love isn't passion or friendship; God's idea of love is thoughtful and thorough. It's love we think about. God's love doesn't require pay back; it doesn't need incentives. God's love for us was grace; we didn't deserve it. God's love for us was profound; it relied on the blood sacrifice of his own Son. God's love for us is powerful; it leads us to destroy our egotism and then creates in us the desire to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength. And with the same heart and soul and mind and strength that we love God, we also love our neighbor, not just the people who live next door or the people we know, but all the people who need our love. Martin Luther said one time, "Love God and do anything you like." And so Paul wrote to the Romans: **Love is the fulfilling of the law.** So we love God. John wrote to believers: **We love him because he first loved us.** And we love our neighbor. Jesus said to his followers: **Love one another as I have loved you.**

So true—and so difficult. And that's why, for us Christians, love has to be more than a word on a pretty plaque that hangs on your bedroom wall. Moses' words in Deuteronomy 6 are implicit in Jesus' words in Mark 12. Love has to live inside of us, it has to be the emotion that comes to mind when we think about God. We need to share love with our children and grandchildren, not just in nice presents at birthdays and Christmas, but in the words we speak about Jesus and his love. Talk about love when you're relaxing at home with your spouse or your family, how love works among people who are close to one another. Talk about love when you're out on a walk with a friend, how love molds your relationships with others. Think about love for God and neighbor in your bedtime prayers and with your first cup of coffee. Use your hands to open your Bibles because you love to hear God's voice and then use your hands again to help people with kindness. Let your face show love with a smile and a laugh. Let your brow wrinkle with intense praise to God and again with deep concern for others. Put love on your front door and everyone who passes by or comes inside will see that your home is a place where Christians love God and love their neighbors. **This is how we live in love.**

Love God and love your neighbor. Jesus called it the greatest of all the commandments. He lived and died and rose again to forgive the times we've failed to love. He honored his Father and served his people to give us a model of love. And today he guides us and inspires us to remember our need to love, to love God and to love others. **And this is how we learn to live in love.** Amen.