

“So Easy...so Doggoned Easy...”(or is it?) Mark 12:28-34 ZCC 9/1/13

*28 One of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together. Knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The greatest is, ‘Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one: 30 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.’ This is the first commandment. 31 The second is like this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32 The scribe said to him, “Truly, teacher, you have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he, 33 and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from God’s Kingdom.” (World English Bible)*

You've seen the little signs at Home Depot or Wal Mart or Lowes. On a grill or a bicycle or whatever—assembly \$25.00 or some similar number. I ignore those don't you? I'm a man—a REAL man and I don't need no stinkin' assembly, thankyouverymuch. A FEW times, though, I was sorry I didn't just pay the money up front and get it done by someone else—ANYONE else. You know what I'm talking about. You pull out the instructions and they are not one page—but a half-dozen or even a dozen. You know, the kind of instructions that any 6 year old can follow—but what I've found out that in the moment, 6 year olds seem to be in short supply and clearly the instructions were not made for a 50-some guy at all.

I love to go to thrift stores—especially like the Habatat Restore in Richmond. For me it is kind of like a treasure hunt—except that you don't have any idea what the treasure is until you see it. That and buying something is also helping someone else. Anyway, one thing about those places is that when people give big items they are often disassembled and of course no one saves the box or the instructions.

The worst for me was a portable and adjustable basketball goal for Andrea. One of those things that “grow” with the kid and you can make it taller as they get taller. I found it new-in-the-box at the Salvation Army or some place like that. Since it was new, I decided to get it for Andrea as kind-of an “extra” birthday present just from me. After all it was new and perfect and everything was there, except—you guessed it—the instructions. But it was only about 6-8 pieces so I didn't think it would be that hard. I can rebuild a carburator or an engine, no way this plastic basketball goal was going to be a problem. One of those “eyes closed” and “one arm behind my back” sort of things.

Well the good part was that I started working on it several days before her birthday—because it was not as easy as it looked. It SEEMED to be an easy thing to do, but it almost beat me. It took several tries for me to get it together so that it worked like it was supposed to. If I remember right, I finished up just in time. It wasn't so easy after all.

There are lots of things like that—things that seem simple and easy and yet they are difficult, Yo-yos and hula-hoops and skateboards and pogo-sticks come to mind. Because of the age difference between our two kids, I sort of got to be a dad two different times. The first time I think I was wired up a little too tight and too worried about outcome instead of enjoying being Tom's dad to the fullest.

Maybe you remember me talking from the pulpit about living in the moment—being mindful—and I think that might have been what was missing. Anyway, the second time around I tried to commit things to memory and to be there and be a part of things more. I had a lot of fun helping Andrea learn to whistle and to blow bubble-gum bubbles. I can tell you it is hard to teach someone how blow a bubble or whistle. After you've done it thousands of times, it looks and feels and seems easy, but the whole process of doing those things is quite complicated. Looks easy and seems easy but it really isn't.

The passage for today reminds me of those things—things that are harder than they seem.

In his dealing with the lawyer or scribe, Jesus gives you and me some clues to finding the kingdom of God—in doing so he presents the two most basic (and most important) commandments. In a bit we'll talk about the importance of his declaration but first let me give some background.

At this point in his life and ministry, Jesus is both famous and infamous. He has become widely known and many love him—but many also hate him. On top of that, it is the fullness of time for Jesus. It is time for him to do the thing he came to earth to accomplish. Early in his ministry he healed and told them to keep quiet. In the past he skirted danger and death when he could. Now in the fullness of time he is more open with his discussions and his work and he is confronting his enemies as never before.

In our passage, Jesus has come to Jerusalem and in a real sense, he has come to Jerusalem to die. He has made a king's entry into the city. He has cleared the temple of cheats who were making a mockery of the court of gentiles and women while they lined the pockets of the religious leaders. He has used his wit and his knowledge to make fools of the teachers of the law. No matter how hard they try they can't seem to best him, to trap him and show him to be a fool. They tried to get him in trouble with the Romans by talking about taxes but that failed. When the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection, grilled him about that, he answered their questions and made a solid argument for resurrection from God's word.

Maybe the lawyer was impressed by what he had heard, in spite of himself. Maybe he thought there was something to Jesus after all and he wanted to hear more of his wisdom, or maybe he just saw a worthy adversary. Either way, it was Jesus' ability to answer his opposition that brought the man to him with his own question. In verse 28, the phrase translated as Jesus “answering well” one of honor or praise-worthiness or even beauty. It seems to me that he was not trying to trick Jesus as the others did but that this was a genuine question asked out of respect.

“Jesus, what is the most important commandment?” This is the kind of argument the scholars had among themselves every day. They would sit and discuss and try to come up with the answer to this kind of question all day long. Jesus had given beautiful, worthy answers to their tricks and traps and this seems to be neither. Like him or not, he knew his stuff.

Let me read the answer again—and include the lawyer's expansion:

29 Jesus answered, "The greatest is, 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one: 30 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.' This is the first commandment. 31 The second is like this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 The scribe said to him, "Truly, teacher, you have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he, 33 and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from God's Kingdom." (WEB)

So there is the answer he gave to them—and the answer he gave to us. When Jesus answers and says, "you are not far from the kingdom of God..." it applies to you and me just as it did the lawyer. If we know and understand and DO these simple things—things that are SO EASY—then we as individuals and as a church and we a people will be near to the kingdom of God.

I said, "will be" because I don't believe we have arrived yet. That is not where we are in our seeking of the kingdom of God as a church nor as a people—and for most of us, not as individuals. I also want to propose that if we were to genuinely follow these simple instructions and do these things that Zion Christian church would create a stir inside this building and in this community that stir would spread and grow from our spiritual ground zero.

The instruction given was taken from the *Shema*—which was well known to them because it was recited twice each day. The *Shema* is named for the first word—hear--which is *shema* in Hebrew.

Jesus begins with the *Shema*. HEAR THIS! God is one—he is the one and only GOD!

Simple enough. If we hear and follow this instruction we will be near to the kingdom. God is one God and God is the one and only God! If we hear and believe we will have no television gods or car gods or money gods or boat gods or motorcycle gods or house gods or materialism gods or even religion gods before him.

We we begin this command on the right feet, we will put no more gods before the REAL God. Not even ourselves. Our society keeps trying to convince you and me that we are our own gods. Many religious people—many Christians—have bought that line. Just like Adam and Eve, we claim to be God's people yet we scramble to sit on his throne and be our own gods. The price we have paid is our spiritual peace and comfort, because deep in our souls we know he is God and we aren't.

HE is one God and he is THE one God!

The first command is about how we see God—how we think about him. The next section is about how we are to act, how we are to TREAT God. How our understanding is put into action. We are to love him. What does that mean?

Men—I'm going to remind you today what love is and isn't. Love isn't just what you say. Really isn't just what

you do. Here comes a “Tommy-ism” just in case you want to write it down :) “Love isn't love until it is said and done.” BOTH are required. Our wives want to hear that we love them and then they want us to show them that we love them. (By the way, you women are not off the hook here—this goes both ways.) Husbands, wives, children, grandchildren, moms, dads—we all want to hear about it and we all want to see some action.

If we honestly believe that our God is one God and that he is THEone God then we will love him in word and in deed.

Then Jesus goes on to tell us HOW to love God. Look back to the passage—how does he say we are to love God? [heart, soul, mind, and strength] Here is where Christian groups, and individual Christians often fall short—denominationally or individually, we may pick one of these and major on it.

Some may love God with all their mind but not much else. Don't get me wrong, loving God with my mind appeals to me a lot. I tend to be a thinker instead of a feeler so it fits for me, but if I'm not careful I will reason and figure and decide and then go about loving God in a cold detached way. My mind and my head may have it together but the rest of me could be asleep. A church like this would have all the details worked out perfectly—from the order of service to their prayers to their confessions of faith. But there may be bit of a chill in the air unless there is more to their love of God besides the mind. It is good to reason and to understand. It is good to take scripture and dig through those layers of meaning like the layers of an onion. It is good to dissect the poetry and the traditions and the beauty. I don't believe you have to check your brain at the door to be a Christians. Christianity is reasonable and can be reasoned through—worthy of a second and third look. Yet, when we have this tendency, we may forget our soul and our heart.

Some may tend to love God with all their spirit—the seat of emotion. Maybe they DO check their brain at the door. Worship experiences may be a roller-coaster ride. Relationships to God may also be a roller-coaster. Deep study of scripture and traditions may not feel important—all you have to do is grab on to a few promises and then have an emotional experience. Now, let me remind you that here Jesus was commending the emotional side of a relationship to God to those who were there that day—and to us. Emotion and fire and deep feelings are VERY important to that relationship, but if that's all there is we may not be able to maintain that emotion in a way that sustains us long-term. Too much emotion and we may lack the depth to persevere in times of sadness and trouble. If we have too much logic and too little emotion, we may take on the character of a cold dead fish.

Then Jesus commends that we love God with all our soul. This is a deep and complete love—this is loving God with all we are from the inside. Our very core being. If we love God this way, with our souls, it has nothing to do with what we get in return. It has nothing to do with sheer emotion. It has nothing to do with logic. This is loving God when no one is looking.

Simple enough—we do these three things, all three at once. We are not to be cold fish. We are not to be all heart and no brain. We are to love God inside and outside. When things are good. When things are bad. And when things are indifferent. Loving God this way involves study of the word and study of the terms and study of the history. It involves overwhelming emotions and tears and joy and laughter and sadness and happiness. It requires shouts of praise and quiet, private, thankfulness. It requires both logic and emotion. Deep commitment—no pretending allowed. These are not things to be done because momma did them or because it is the right thing to do. This is serving God with all our being.

Just when you thought he was through, Jesus adds “with all your strength.” So, does that comfort us or is it the proverbial straw on our camel-backs? I'll tell you what it means to me and why it is a comfort for me. I am to love God with all MY strength. Your strength and mine may be different. My ability to hold onto God may be less than your ability. Even the nature and the direction of our service to God—as well as our love for God—will be affected by who we are and the strength you and I have. I wasn't commanded to love God with all your strength—but mine. You were not commanded to love God with all my strength—but yours. We are measured by our personal capacity. Love God for all you are worth—and I will do the same.

And love your neighbor as yourself.

I guess there is another sermon in that one line—but I'm actually going to run out of time before I finish the rest of it so I won't give you that one right now, so let me try to tie this up a bit.

Jesus tells us that these simple things, these easy to follow instructions will bring us close to the kingdom of God, and yest few of us seem to manage to follow them. I've got that “all my mind” part down pretty well but I struggle with the others sometimes. If we get one of them right we are pretty satisfied with ourselves, but I can tell you that God isn't.

If we had it all together, if we followed Jesus's instructions, here is what I imagine it would look like:

1. We would study—we would long for knowledge of God and his dealings with people, from the creation to now. We would read history—of God's work and of the scripture and of the church. We would seek out others to help in our quest for knowledge and understanding.
2. We would sing out during worship—no matter what our ability, we would be making a joyful noise for all we are worth. We would find ourselves responding to God emotionally in and out of worship. We would find ourselves laughing or crying in church sometimes. Maybe we would concentrate so deeply on the communion music with our hearts that we would forget to pass the plate.
3. Third, we would never again be Sunday Christians. Our vocabulary would be the same all week. God would figure into our lives moment by moment. No gossiping. No griping. No lyingcheatingstealingbendingtherules. No church fights. If we loved God with all our being, would be the same every day—only better today than yesterday and better tomorrow than today.

4. All of this to the best of our own ability—to the limits of our personal strength—so no one would look down on anyone else. We would acknowledge our differences and even our failings so that no one would have to pretend to be more or better than they were. We would recognize that God made me and that God made you and like the tee-shirt says, “God don't Make No Junk”.
5. Don't even let me get started on the “love your neighbor” thing. This is my pet thing. If we followed the rules, we would do all we could to ACTIVELY heal old wounds in the church and the community and in our own lives. Whatever WE did—last year or last week or 20 years ago, we would get it fixed and make it right. Whatever THEY did—last year or last week or 20 years ago, we would forget it. That's tight: no matter how righteous our indignation, we would swallow it and let it go.

These things hold us back as Christians as a church. It is time to forgive and be forgiven. It is time to honestly love our neighbors as ourselves.

Doing these things will put us near the kingdom of God.

Let me point out one more thing quickly. These are not external things—they are internal. AND they are not enough. The lawyer had probably done these things to the best of his ability all his life, but we should note that Jesus said he was NEAR the kingdom. He didn't say he was IN the kingdom.

Jesus said that HE is the door to the kingdom of God—his work and his sacrifice are the keys that open the door to the eternal kingdom.

The keys to the kingdom on earth—to being God's people—are found in these commandments. Know them and act on them: God is one God and he is THE one God. We are to love him with our mind and our emotions and our being—with all our ability and strength. We are also to love our fellow human beings as we love ourselves.