

November 4, 2018

“Big Answers”

Mark 12:28-34, Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Psalm 119:1-16

The passage from Mark that I’m about to read with a Big Question, and a lot of what I’m going to say needs to be heard and responded to within the context of the three foundational truths from last week. We are Desperately Lost, Deeply Loved, and Saved By Grace. If we don’t remember this “truth [meant to] set us free” – to use Jesus’ words from John 8 – then the answer Jesus gives to this very Big Question will be heard and applied through the lens of performance-based religion in which our primary task is to ‘try harder, do better, jump higher.’

We don’t have time to look back at all the questions asked in the passages since the end of Mark 10 – where we left off two weeks ago, but I will mention that most of what is asked are still questions to trap Jesus; they are not asked with a backbone or any real desire to live out the answers in obedience to Jesus. But this question is different. And it’s a Big Question, for sure.

**[Read Mark 12:28-34]**

Finally, someone is asking Jesus a question with the hope of learning and living out the answer. This is the only time that a “scribe” is portrayed positively in Mark’s Gospel. The NRSV says he “CAME near and HEARD them disputing with one another, and SEEING that Jesus answered well, he asked . . . .” (Mark 12:28a) This man approached Jesus to actually listen and look (really see) – to determine if this new ‘Rabbi’ was worthy of being followed and obeyed. After watching Jesus deal with a ridiculous question from the Sadducees about marriage and the afterlife (the Sadducees didn’t even believe in the afterlife!), this scribe is convinced that Jesus is qualified to answer any scribe’s **most central question**.

Scribes were experts in knowing and interpreting the law. But there were 613 ‘laws’ in the Old Testament that were taught, memorized, and applied to real life situations. They even distinguished between “heavy” and “light” commandments. That’s a lot to keep track of, categorize and apply. So getting a wise rabbi to clarify the center of “the Law” was an ongoing goal for scribes. Like us, they wanted someone to ‘boil it down’ – so that they had something to hang the whole law on. The question he asked wasn’t the first time such a Big Question had been asked. “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28b) Most of the famous rabbis had been asked and answered this question. We have many of their answers recorded in subsequent Jewish writings: the Talmud and Mishnah. 20 years before Jesus, Rabbi Hillel stated a negative version of the Golden Rule as his answer: “What you would not want done to you, do not do to your neighbor.” Others said the second half of what Jesus said: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) Others quoted Proverbs 3:6 or Habakkuk 2:4. **Jesus quotes both Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (Shema) and Leviticus 19:18.** The scribe only asked for one command, and Jesus gives him two. **‘Love God with everything you’ve got and love your**

**neighbor as you love yourself.** This is the center, the core, the thing on which everything else hangs.’ Matthew’s includes another detail from the conversation in his account: “The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40)

As far as anyone can tell, Jesus was the first to link or combine these two commandments and present them as a unified whole when answering the Big Question. So it’s a bit interesting that this scribe doesn’t say, “Wow! Nobody’s ever put it like that. You’re blowing my mind, Jesus. You’re like Rabbi so-and-so on steroids.” Instead, he says, ‘I’m going to go on record and say you are correct.’ And then he summarizes Jesus’ answer.

Notice Jesus doesn’t respond cynically? He doesn’t roll His eyes and say, ‘I’m glad you approve’ or ‘What? Did you think I was just going to agree with everyone else?’ He’s not defensive about His authority and wisdom. He keeps listening. Maybe this is one way Jesus models “loving one’s neighbor.” And because Jesus keeps listening, the scribe continues and adds: “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (Mark 12:33) He’s saying that instead of sacrificing animals and checking religious boxes, we should be sacrificing ourselves for God and each other.

To this statement, Jesus responds about as positively as He does anywhere in scripture: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:34) In other words, ‘You get it! Ding, ding, ding! Life lived under the authority of these two commandments is the best way to go. Everything else hangs on Loving God and Loving People.

Did you notice that Jesus will not allow our love for God and our love for people to be separated into two distinct categories? Jim Edwards points out that, “Jesus’ answer thus avoids the danger of mysticism, which results in a detached love of God, and the danger of secularism, which loves humanity without reference to God.” (Jim Edwards in *Mark’s Story of Jesus*) This is what was so revolutionary about Jesus and His Kingdom: He told people that Loving God and Loving People were two sides of the same coin.

The temptation to only do one at a time, Loving God OR Loving People – or be really good at one and ignore the other – is greater than you might think. Let’s just gather for worship and “fix our eyes on Jesus” without actually loving the person behind us who’s sort of annoying; or the person next to us – who we may have been very unloving to on the way to church. It’s also tempting to do our best to love one another, and leave God out of the equation. But God will have none of this false dichotomy, and He certainly won’t let us believe we are our own source of love.

In John’s first letter he seamlessly unites these two commands to love with the Source of Love itself. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God . . . Since God loved us so

much, we also ought to love one another . . . We love because He first loved us . . . Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars.” (1 John 4:7, 11, 19-20) Loving God and others is only possible with God as our source; it only happens as He continually fills our wells and reservoirs with His perfect love. But loving God and others only happens as we do both with all we’ve got. Every time we consciously or unconsciously choose to love only God OR people, we are doing something less than this “love” which He commanded.

But what does loving God and people look like? 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that “love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way . . . keeps no record of wrongs. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever truth wins out.” (1 Corinthians 13:4-6). That may be more specific than we want to admit. Sometimes it’s easier to keep ‘love’ vague, romantic, and toothless. But love needs to have specificity to it.

Loving God and others has to do with how we talk to and about God and others; how generous we are back to God and others with our time, skills and money. Loving God and others means honoring our bodies and the bodies of others – no abuse, self-centered lust, or self-harming; which is a part of what it means to “love ourselves.” Loving God and others means honoring and caring for the planet we live on, stewarding it so that everyone gets their “daily bread.” Loving God and others includes fighting and praying for justice – here and all around the world – for those we consider neighbors and those who live on the other side of the world. [What I love about International Justice Mission is that they are clear about both of these commandments and will not separate them in their work to end slavery. So even though they have plenty of work to do every day, and could benefit from another 30-60 minutes to roll up their sleeves, they stop every day to pray for an end to slavery, express their love to God, and be filled with more of His love and power.] Loving God and others means we don’t manipulate others – even with love – to sort of hook them into loving us in return.

This is a pretty high bar: to love God and neighbors with such integrity and depth. You can read Luke 10 for a clearer definition of neighbor in the Parable of the Good Samaritan to see an even higher bar. I hate to have to raise the bar too much more because it’s tempting to just give up when it’s so high, but there’s one more word about the commandment to love in John’s gospel that also connects with the Lord’s Supper we’re about to celebrate.

In John 13, just after Jesus has washed His disciples feet, but before they celebrate Passover together, Jesus says, “A new commandment I give you” . . . Wait a minute?! Something new? Something different from what He told the scribe in Mark 12? Is He switching gears on us just before He leaves planet earth? “A new commandment I give you . . . love one another.” Wait a minute?! Isn’t this what He already said? This isn’t new at all. Or is it? “A new commandment I give you, love one another . . . **as I have loved you**, so you must love one another. By this

everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35) “As I have loved you.” That’s pretty specific.

So, by love, Jesus, You don’t just mean a warm feeling or being nice when it suits us? We have to love as You have loved us? Sacrificially? Consistently? Humbly? And always? For the rest of our lives? His Big Answer to those Big Questions . . . is “YES! But I’ll fill you with My love so that you can actually do it.”

I want to end by reading what John says at the beginning of chapter 13, just before Jesus washed the disciples feet and celebrated Passover and told them to love as He had loved them. “Now before the festival of Passover, Jesus knew that His hour had come t depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the very end.” (John 13:1)

You are loved by God, and will be loved, “to the very end.” Do we dare to love God and others “to the very end” of our lives? What’s your answer to that Big Question?