

“With All Your Heart”

Mark 12:28-34

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
August 17, 2008

Today I want to unveil the theme for the coming church year, **“With All Your Heart.”** It is taken from Mark’s account of a conversation Jesus had with one of the teachers of the law. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied, *“The most important one 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”* Mark 12:29-31.

You recall that last year’s theme was *Micah’s Challenge*, to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. This year we balance that with a theme from the New Testament, specifically the words of our Lord. As it did last year, the theme will help us better understand what it means to be a follower of Christ.

This morning, I would like to introduce the theme by looking at our text. While all three synoptic gospels carry this story, we’ll examine it through the lens that Mark provides, with occasional references to Matthew and Luke.

Why did this teacher ask Jesus this question? It appears that his motive was honorable, unlike the scribes in Matthew’s version. Their purpose was to trick Jesus and discredit him. This scribe did not seem to harbor those thoughts, but genuinely wanted to know what Jesus thought.

Sometimes it is hard to discern a person’s motive when they ask you a theological question, at least it is for me. I usually assume they are coming with an open mind and honestly seeking a deeper understanding of our faith. That’s not always the case and I am sorry it is not. Sinister motives impede understanding and growth.

Why did this teacher of the law want to know which commandment Jesus considered most important? Perhaps he had been in dialogue with others about this, which was not uncommon. Frequently, scribes debated which of the 613 commandments were most important. Since Jesus had been consulted on other issues of faith, this teacher decided to get his opinion on this topic of frequent discussion.

This question could have come from his heart and struggle, though. Keeping 613 commands must not have been easy. Actually, it was exhausting. So, it could be that religion had become a burden to him and in his despair he sought Jesus’ advice. If so, he made a wise decision.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that the scribe was impressed with Jesus’ answer to his question. He quickly paid Jesus a compliment and the Lord returned it. “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” I get the feeling he was much closer than most of his peers, don’t you?

Wouldn’t this be an interesting question to pursue this morning? **How far are you from the Kingdom of God?** Perhaps you will discover the answer as we unpack this theme throughout the year. I certainly hope so.

As a side note, I find it disappointing to read that from that point, no one asked Jesus any more questions. What a waste. In my opinion, this conversation alone should have been the catalyst for many more questions. What is the Kingdom of God? How does it differ from man’s kingdoms? How can it make the world a better place to live? How can we participate in it? I’ll leave these questions for further discussions throughout the year. Let’s return to the original question asked of Jesus. **What is the greatest commandment?**

He responded by repeating the most sacred of all Hebrew scripture found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, the *Shema*. *Shema* is the imperative of the Hebrew verb, to hear, and it is so

called from the first word in this passage. "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh One." I'm sure you connect the opening words of the *Shema* with those of the first commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai. "You shall have no other Gods before me."

There was no more beloved text in ancient scripture than the *Shema*. It became the foundation of Jewish monotheism. God was the object of Israel's exclusive attention, affection and worship. They were encouraged to express their feelings for Him in the most intimate and warmest of all human emotions, love.

You may be familiar with the fact that devout Jews carried a copy of the *Shema* in a small leather container attached to their wrist or on their forehead. This was referred to as a phylactery. It was also placed in a cylindrical box called a Mezuzah that was attached to the door frames of their house. Each time they passed through the doorways, they touched the Mezuzah as a reminder of its contents.

I am confident that even Jesus' adversaries could find no fault with this portion of his answer. No Jew would argue that this was an unworthy response to this strategic question.

However, he seems to have caught some by surprise when he combined this command with another found in Leviticus 19:18, "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself." Why did Jesus combine the two and why did this disturb some of his hearers?

According to Jesus, you cannot love God and refuse to love your neighbor. As a matter of fact, the way you love God is to love your neighbor. Many of his listeners knew they did not love their neighbors, or at least act lovingly toward them and his words indicted them.

What I find most interesting about Jesus' command to love our neighbor is how specific it is. He did not say, "Love everybody as yourself," or "Love the whole world as you love yourself." No, he connected names and faces with this command. Love the person standing in front of you. Sometimes that is hard to do because the person standing in front of you has faults and you don't want to love him or her.

I discovered years ago that it is easier to love some people from a distance than it is to love them close up. We don't have to deal with anything unpleasant that way and can live in our fantasy world.

Jesus won't allow us to fantasize about relationships, at least not for long. Every person is a combination of the good, bad and ugly and we must accept and love them even when the less desirable parts emerge. Some have labeled this "tough love" and it is. I'm sure it was tough for Jesus to love his tormentors while hanging on the cross. "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*" had to be some of the hardest words Jesus ever spoke. He certainly loved the people in front of him that day at their worst.

I recently read an article about a man and his neighbor. The author was relating how fortunate he was to have such a good neighbor. He was always cheerful and helpful. If he needed to borrow a tool, his neighbor was more than willing to loan it to him.

On the other hand, he had a neighbor that was very noisy at times. He loved to fish and went almost every Saturday. This created a problem because the neighbor would leave the house before the sun came up and he would not leave quietly. He made a lot of noise getting his gear ready, hooking up his boat and warming the truck up before he headed out on his weekly fishing trip. By the time this neighbor pulled out of the driveway, the sleeping neighbor was wide-awake, unable to go back to sleep.

What made this so interesting was that the good neighbor and the bad neighbor were the same guy. Loving his good neighbor meant accepting the fact that he was not perfect and could be very irritating. It means the same for us, too.

No one lives with or beside perfect people. No one works or goes to school with people that have no flaws. No one rides a plane, a bus or a taxi with only perfect people. Everyone we encounter or have a relationship with has imperfections. We must love them anyway just as we want to be accepted, embraced and loved by them.

I continue to receive comments on the marriage sermon I preached a few weeks ago. It was based upon the relationship between Jacob, Leah and Rachel. You recall that Jacob was in love with Rachel and wanted to marry her. He was deceived, however, and ended up marrying her less than desirable sister, Leah, and was quite upset. He had to work seven more years in order to marry Rachel.

In that sermon, I said that the person we marry is both Leah and Rachel. We marry Rachel only to discover that Leah has moved in, too. Our challenge is to love each other in spite of our flaws just as we want people to love us with our shortcomings.

Have you noticed that we are very good at trading love but not nearly as good at giving it away? I have. We trade love frequently with people that like us and are like us. There is nothing wrong with this unless you limit your desire and ability to love to this small circle of people with whom you are compatible. What do you do when you encounter the neighbor you do not like or with whom you disagree on important issues? As followers of Jesus, you have no choice but to love them, too, and treat them with dignity, kindness and respect. Anything less is an inappropriate response.

In Luke's account of our text, the scribe asked Jesus who his neighbor was upon hearing that he needed to love his neighbor as himself. How did Jesus respond? He told the story of the Good Samaritan. Followers of Jesus see everyone as a neighbor in need of love and attention.

How can you fulfill this command and love people "close-up?" How can you love people that are different and unlovable?

You can't, at least on your own. Look at the order of Jesus' response to the Pharisee's question about the greatest commandment. Loving your neighbor is second, isn't it? I don't think you can love your neighbor like Jesus instructed until you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Maybe this is why Jesus added to the *Shema* that we are to love God with all our mind as well as our heart, soul and strength. Loving our neighbor will require a change of thinking. It will require that we challenge the world's standard of behavior in relationships and adopt God's.

Who is the most difficult person for you to love? What makes it so tough for you right now? Do you think they know it? What needs to change for you to act more loving toward them? Talk to God about it during this final hymn. He knows what it is like to love people that are close enough to hammer nails into your hands and feet.