

THIRTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (3 November 2024)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question (Mark 12:28-34 – NRSV).

Introductory notes

General

Similar accounts are found in Matthew 22:35–40 and Luke 10:25–28. However, it is a more polemical and confrontative exchange in Matthew and Luke. They omit the part where Mark says the interlocutor agrees with Jesus and is praised by him. Matthew and Luke refer to the man as a lawyer. Luke says the lawyer – rather than Jesus – recalls the *Shema*.

One commentator writes of this passage: “As with each of the previous questions Mark specifically mentions the questioner’s approach to Jesus (cf. 11:27; 12:13–14, 18); Jesus, the teacher in the temple, is the fixed point while others come and go. But whereas other questions have been posed by groups, giving the impression of official delegations, this comes from an individual, and it soon becomes clear that his attitude is not that of the majority of the (religious authorities). He comes already favourably disposed towards Jesus, and leaves even more so. Such an open-minded enquirer prefigures the minority support which Jesus and his followers will find even in the Sanhedrin (15:43; Acts 5:33–39; cf. Jn. 7:50–51; 19:38–40). His favourable impression derives from listening to the previous dialogues. *Kalos* (καλῶς) in this context means not just ‘cleverly’ (so as to escape the intended trap or even to win the argument), but that Jesus’ answers have been good, wholesome, satisfying, leading the scribe to hope for an equally enlightening (not just clever) answer to his own more fundamental question” (R T France, *The Gospel of Mark: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002, 478-479).

Specific

“Which commandment is the first of all?": “The rabbis would later count 613 commandments in the Torah—248 of them positive in form and 365 negative in form. They

also debated about the distinction between ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ commandments (see Matt 5:19). The ‘first’ or most important commandment was a common topic in Jewish circles and it is reasonable to assume that a teacher like Jesus would be asked for his response as a matter of course” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 354).

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one: Jesus recalls the first words of the *Shema*, the prayer said by pious Jews then and now. The complete prayer is found in three separate places in the Hebrew Scriptures – Deuteronomy 6:4–9 & 11:13–21 and Numbers 15:37–41. The word translated as “Lord” in Deuteronomy 6:4, is the same word – *YHWH* – we find in the description of the revelation to Moses on Horeb – see Exodus 3:14. This reference suggests that all the commandments derive from and take us back to the “Lord”. Thus our love should be total – “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”. This love will bring us into the world with a particular disposition – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” – see Leviticus 19:18. In other words, the relationship with God provides the context for our lives, defining our being in the world. Although the Leviticus understanding of “neighbor” suggests kin and people of one’s tribe, Jesus certainly extends that – see for example the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37, which follows immediately on Luke’s reporting of this interchange.

NOTE: On June 29, 2008, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship issued a directive that the use of the word ‘Yahweh’ in the Roman Catholic liturgy should be dropped in faithfulness to the Hebrew tradition and the practice of the early Church.

much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices: The Scribe is very much in tune with Jesus’ thinking. He follows Jesus’ train of thought and adds this reference to “offerings and sacrifices”. There is evidence of this kind of thinking in the Hebrew Scriptures – see for example 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6 and Proverbs 21:3. “Mark’s readers know how correct the scribe was, because they knew that Jesus practiced what he taught. He had loved God and his neighbor unto death. His sacrifice was love! As they leave the crowds, who no longer ‘dared to ask him any more questions’ (v. 34), Mark’s readers might well ask themselves how their love of God is verified by their love of neighbor. They might ask how their sacrifice and liturgical worship of God are made manifest in their sacrifices for others. Mark’s report of this encounter thus challenges his Christians to be like Jesus and also like this singular scribe, who had such insight into the ways of the kingdom. It also prepares them for the last two episodes of chapter 12, which will contrast the generous piety of the widow with the empty prayer of certain scribes (12:38–44)” (D Bergant, & R J Karris, *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989, 928).

“You are not far from the kingdom of God”: This has echoes of Jesus’ earlier encounter with the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34), the little children (10:13-16), his approval of the rich young man (10:21) and his response to the blind man he cured at Jericho (Mark 10:46-52). Right at the beginning of his Gospel, Mark has told us that Jesus began his

ministry with this message: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel” (Mark 1:15).