

# The Greatest Commandment

Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9; Mark 12:28–34

# Context

Our first Old Testament text comes from Leviticus. This book includes many laws that Moses received from God on Mount Sinai; Moses was responsible for passing these on to the Israelites who left Egypt. Leviticus 19:18 is located in the heart of the Holiness Code of that book.

This section, spanning chapters 17 to 26, instructed the ancient Israelites how to live holy lives before their holy God.

# Context

Our second Old Testament passage is from Deuteronomy. Though Leviticus and Deuteronomy both belong to Torah, the five books of Moses, they were addressed to different audiences.

After the first generation of Israelites was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, Moses had to present God's laws anew to the second generation, which would enter instead. That's where Deuteronomy comes in.

# Context

After recounting the failure of the first generation in Deuteronomy 1–3, Moses prepared the second generation to renew the covenant in chapters 4–11.

Our passage in chapter 6 was a key part of that preparation, and Jesus later acknowledged its ongoing relevance for His followers.

# Context

Jesus had been challenged by priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. They had been coming at Him from every angle, trying to find fault.

But the scribe in today's text asked Jesus a frank question and received a frank answer. That answer drew upon the two Old Testament passages to which we now turn.

# Leviticus 19:18

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people,  
but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

# Leviticus 19:18

To love thy neighbor as thyself is closely connected with the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31).

But this connection can confuse the purpose behind neighbor love, as if we should love others only because we want favorable treatment in return.

# Leviticus 19:18

Another way to miss the thrust of this passage is to focus on the thyself part. In a culture of self-obsession, it is easy for us to hear this passage saying that we must first focus on loving ourselves because, if we cannot do that, then we will be unable to love our neighbors.

But that is not what this passage is saying either.



# Leviticus 19:18

This passage presumes that humans are accustomed to putting their own needs first. God is telling the people, through Moses, to think that way about other people. In the Law of Moses, non-Israelites who live in the land are referred to as “strangers.” An example is Leviticus 19:34, and there God commands the Israelites to love them as well.

# Leviticus 19:18

There is one more way to miss the thrust of this passage, and that is by ignoring how it begins and ends. It begins by commanding the original readers not to avenge themselves or to hold grudges (compare Deuteronomy 32:35; quoted in Romans 12:19 and Hebrews 10:30); this implies that the neighbors to be loved aren't just friends or neutral parties, but also include enemies.

# Leviticus 19:18

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'

Romans 12:19

# Leviticus 19:18

The passage ends with the reminder that the Lord is the one who gives this command; it is not optional.

The love that God's people are to express is grounded not in self-interest but in the identity and nature of God.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

As important as Leviticus 19 is to the ancient Israelite, the passage before us is arguably more so. Even today, Deuteronomy 6:4 is the centerpiece of a prayer that orthodox Jews pray every morning and evening. It is called the Shema, taking its name from the first Hebrew word of this verse, which we see translated as hear.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

In the original language, there is no verb in the statement The Lord our God is one Lord. Many editions of the King James Version designate this absence by putting the word *is* in italics.

The question is exactly where this implied verb should be placed. Is it implied for the first half of this statement, for the second half, or for both?

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

These alternatives can yield translations such as “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” or “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” or “The Lord is our God, the Lord is one,” respectively.

The first possibility focuses on the fact that Israel has one and only one God, the second focuses on God’s unity, while the third incorporates both ideas.



# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

We will see where Jesus puts the verb is when we get to Mark 12:29. But at this point we can affirm that all three alternatives are true and foundational for the instruction to follow.

This passage can be read in two ways as saying the ancient Israelite is to love God with one's entire being.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

One is the familiar way of saying that heart stands for the inner self, soul stands for the spiritual self, and might stands for the physical self. It is as if to say that one must love God with one's inner self, one's whole life, and everything that flows forth from one's being.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

(vv. 6–9)

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

Because Jeremiah later prophesies that the new covenant will be written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:31–33; quoted in Hebrews 8:8–12; 10:16, 17), some have concluded that the old covenant was concerned only with external rituals, not with the heart.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

It is better to interpret Jeremiah as saying that even though God intended His old covenant to be written on every Israelite heart, it did not happen due to the people's unfaithfulness. Many followed the rituals but were not devoted to God from the inside out (Isaiah 29:13).

According to Jeremiah, that will not be the case under the new covenant.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

If God's commands are to permeate the lives of His people, each generation must pass those decrees to the next; there must be no breach in transmitting them.

For this reason, God instructs the Israelites to talk about His laws everywhere and all the time. Any time is a good time to discuss God's commands!

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

We should realize that church services are not enough. The world fills our heads with lies so often that unless we constantly remind one another of what it means to follow Jesus, we will gradually forget and thereby fail to pass along the message that God has given us.

# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

God also knows that word of mouth is not enough. Therefore He gives His people several imperatives in terms of visual aids for remembering His commands.

The people are to inscribe those decrees on planks of wood or chunks of stone that they walk by daily, whether inside their homes or outside on the gateways of their towns. They are to write them on paper and bind them onto hands or foreheads.



# Deuteronomy 4:35; 6:1–9

Still today, orthodox Jews bind on their hands and heads little scrolls called phylacteries. These can be seen in pictures of people praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

These forms of reminder correspond with the times when God's people should convey His commands. When entering or leaving a house or village, people will remember to talk about the commands while on the move.

# Mark 12:28–34

## A Scribe's Question and Jesus Answer (v. 28-31)

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."

# Mark 12:28–34

Jesus has just finished answering difficult questions designed to trap Him (Mark 12:13–27). This man's question seems no different at first since Matthew 22:35 says that he is “tempting” Jesus.

Jewish tradition counts more than 600 commands in the Law of Moses, and this man wants to know which commandment Jesus considers to be most important.

# Mark 12:28–34

Jesus begins His answer by citing the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4). In so doing, He adds the term mind to the aspects of the human life that ought to love God. This may be an effort to counteract some Greek ideas that had become more prominent in Palestine as a result of the Greek occupation of 333 to 63 BC.

In the Jewish worldview, the heart is the intellectual seat, the place from which one's deepest thoughts originate. The Greeks are more likely to speak of the mind as the thinking organ. So Jesus may be expanding the formula so that no part of oneself can be exempted from loving God.

# Mark 12:28–34

Jesus is not content to answer the scribe's question at the level of love for God only. People may profess love for God yet have little regard for their neighbor. Yet Jesus knows that these two cannot be separated.

It is improper to say that people should love God as the first move, then love their neighbor whenever they get around to it.

# Mark 12:28–34

There is no way to love God truly without truly loving one's neighbor as well.  
We encounter God in our neighbor and show love for God by loving our  
neighbors (Matthew 25:31–46).

We cannot love God without loving one another (1 John 4:7–12)

# Mark 12:28–34

## Scribe's Agreement and Jesus' Approval (vv. 32, 33)

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

As much as Jesus and the scribes have butted heads, He is united with this one regarding the centrality of love. This particular scribe also adds commentary on the Shema. We noted above that the second clause of the Shema could mean that God is a unity or that there is only one God.

This scribe clearly sides with the second in claiming that there is none other than He.



# Mark 12:28–34

This scribe also connects the centrality of love with the words of the prophets. Several of them emphasize that God cares more for how His people treat one another than what sacrifices they offer to Him (Isaiah 1:11–17; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:7, 8).

Jesus says the same in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7.

# Mark 12:28–34

Micah 6:7, 8

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

# Mark 12:28–34

Matthew 9:13

Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

# Mark 12:28–34

Jesus is impressed with the scribe's response! Although the scribe started by "tempting" Jesus (Matthew 22:35), the man ends up acknowledging that Jesus teaches the truth.

In fact, this man's acknowledgement means that he is on the path to understanding God's heart; this puts the scribe close to Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God.

# Mark 12:28–34

Given the context described in Mark 12:28, this encounter seems to take place within earshot of others of the Jewish religious hierarchy. If so, this scribe is demonstrating a certain amount of courage in staking out an area of agreement with Jesus! The Jewish authorities often appear in packs and are emboldened by one another's obstinacy to the truths of Jesus.

This scribe seems to be an exception (John 3:1–12; 7:50–52; 19:39).

# Mark 12:28–34

Now that Jesus has shown himself to be adept at escaping traps and is orthodox by Old Testament standards, the questioning comes to an end. If Jesus' enemies are going to take Him down, they will have to find some other way.

# Conclusion

God wants His people to be set apart by their love for Him and for one another. Is it not true, however, that differences between the Old and New Testaments mean that God wanted something quite different in this regard from Old Testament Israel?

# Conclusion

An analogy to parenting is instructive. When parents ask different things of their children at different stages in their development, it does not mean that the parents' ultimate desires for their children are constantly changing.



# Conclusion

The same can be said about the way God has related to His people during different times. He has always wanted to form a people after the teachings of Jesus, empower them by His Spirit, and send them to make disciples of all nations.

But many preliminary preparations had to be made through Abraham, Moses, etc.

# Conclusion

Those preparations included shaping the ancient Israelites into a set-apart people in relative isolation in Palestine. When the time was right, God sent Jesus to finish their formation so they could in turn be sent to the nations in mission.

God's loving plan for this world does not change.

# Lessons

When we allow ourselves to hate or resent others, we harden our hearts to the love of God.

To experience God's love cause us to express that fulfillment to others in many ways.

Loving God requires we know and seek His will above our own.

Our love for one another serves as a reflection of God.

# Lessons

Thought to Remember:  
Love God and neighbor