

## Love God, Your Neighbor, Yourself, and Your Enemy

When a scribe asks Jesus which commandment is the most important, Jesus responds with not one, but two commandments (Mark 12:28–34). The first is taken, slightly modified, from Deuteronomy 6:4–5: to love God with all of one’s being. The second commandment is taken from Leviticus 19:18: to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The scribe agrees that these two commandments are “much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.” Jesus replies that he is “not far from the [kin-dom] of God” (Mark 12:33–34).

We have encountered this passage so often that we may have become inattentive to just how radical it is. Of the hundreds of commandments Jesus could have picked, he does not choose one about food restrictions, cleanliness, sexual practices, how to worship, or how to respond to someone who has caused harm. He does not choose any of the ten commandments (Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21). Jesus puts love first—love of God and love of humanity.

Moreover, Jesus does not need to mention the second commandment at all. The scribe asks only about the most important commandment. Jesus could answer to the scribe’s satisfaction with the commandment to love God. That Jesus feels it necessary to include love of humanity is telling. That Jesus apparently thinks of that second commandment as parallel in some sense to the first commandment (“like it”) is also telling. For Jesus, love of God and love of humanity are bound up with one another.

Finally, the scribe says something that Jesus finds to be so wise, true, and pious that he takes it as evidence that the scribe is “not far from the [kin-dom] of God.” What does the scribe say? First, he agrees with Jesus about the importance of the commandments to love God and neighbor. Perhaps that answer alone might have sufficed to draw praise from Jesus, but the scribe continues, adding that these commandments are more important than worshipping God correctly as instructed in the Torah (the first five books of the Jewish testament). Jesus says nothing about worship practices in this exchange. He does not bring up burnt-offerings or sacrifices. The scribe makes that connection on his own, and his prioritizing love over ritual appears to impress Jesus.

Beyond our obligations to love God, our neighbors, and (presumably) ourselves, Jesus invites us to love our enemies. The Sermon on the Mount includes a series of extensions in which Jesus begins, “You have heard that it was said...” and continues, “But I say to you...”. In the last of these extensions (Matthew 5:43), Jesus indicates that those listening to him have probably learned that they should hate their enemies. Jesus responds to this expectation by reversing it, encouraging people to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44). Moreover, Jesus goes on to indicate that people should do this because God cares for evil people as well as good ones, the unrighteous as well as the righteous. For Jesus, loving enemies is a way of acting as God acts. Luke’s version of this material (Luke 6:27–28) extends Matthew’s language: Jesus asks people to love their enemies, to do good to those who hate them, to bless those who curse them, and to pray for those who abuse them.

Jesus's two great commandments are not about principles, but about our obligation to love. If the greatest commandment is to love the holy, and if the commandment that follows from it is to love our neighbors as ourselves (which I take to include loving ourselves), and if the commandment to love is extended by Jesus even to our enemies, what does that say about Jesus's values and vision? It says that love is at the heart of Jesus's understanding. It's not that principles and religious practices are unimportant. It's that we follow those principles and observe those religious practices in the service of love.