

THE MARKS OF SPIRITUAL RELIGION

1) THE QUESTION OF THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT – MARK 12:28-34

“And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" [29] Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. [30] And 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.' [31] The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." [32] And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. [33] 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, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [34] And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

Matthew makes it a little bit clearer that even this question comes from mixed motives (**Matthew 22:35** - "...to *test* Him"). So again, Jesus is being put on the spot. The Scribes had the law of God (mixed with their man made traditions) sorted out into **613 commands**. Typical of manmade traditions, **248 of them were positive** and **365 were negative**.

2) SCRIPTURAL RELIGION IS MEASURED BY JESUS IN THE REORDERING OF OUR PRIORITIES – MARK 12:30-31

“And 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.' [31] The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.”

That's what love is all about. Our *beliefs*, by themselves, can't make us Christians. It's our *loves*. Demons know all of the right truths about God but are demons none the less - **James 2:19** - “**You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**”

This is also why Jesus doesn't just say we're to “*love God*”. That alone can be very theoretical and vague. The command is to love “*the LORD, your God*”. Our love must be deeper than mere emotions - and deeper than intellectual assent. It must manifest itself in practical, moral, and spiritual “*Lordship*” - very specifically and inclusively, the absolute control of God over all the territories and tendencies of heart, soul and mind.

3) WHILE SPIRITUAL RELIGION MANIFESTS ITSELF IN OUTWARD ACTION, IT IS NOT LIMITED TO MERE MORAL REFORM

It *includes*, but is not limited to *ethics*. This is a very important point. One is not a true disciple just because he doesn't cheat, steal, or lie. These are all the *fruits* of a relationship with God. They do not *create* a relationship with Him.

A classic example of this is the *rich young ruler* (**Matthew 19:16-24**). He was very *moral*, but he failed at the most important point in life. **He didn't love God more than he loved his wealth.**

The point is, many very **good** people break the very **greatest commandment**.

4) **OUR LOVE FOR GOD MUST BE ALL CONSUMING TO BE ADEQUATE – MARK 12:30**

“And 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.”

Notice the word **"all"** is used with striking repetition. Again, Jesus points out the obvious - **love only deals in wholes, never halves**. If I'm **mostly** faithful to my wife, I'm not faithful at all. That's the way matters of the heart work. If anything is held back, my love for God is wanting.

This is Jesus' way of striking a death dealing blow to mere religious tokenism - where I do my thing on Sunday, or in some stained glass sanctuary, or by giving some portion of my income to missions. Jesus says **God is after my love. And He is after every ounce of it. And He is after it all the time.**

But this love for God is not a bare religious duty. The Scriptures present it as my only proper response to the **way God has first loved me - Ephesians 4:32-5:2** - **“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. [5:1] Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”**

5) **MY LOVE FOR GOD MUST BE VISIBLY EXPRESSED IN PRACTICAL ACTS OF LOVE FOR MY NEIGHBOR**

This is because my neighbor is also **God's image bearer**. How can I love God and not my neighbor who is made by God and in His image? **1 John 4:20-21** - **"If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. [21] And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."**

Notice that Jesus gives **two answers to one question**. That's because this question must be answered in two ways. If I don't first love God as I should, my love for man will be **sporadic** (depending on my frame of mind at any given moment) or **selective** (extending to those who treat me well). But love for God puts love for man on a much firmer foundation. It **extends to enemies** (as God's love for me did). It includes **putting others above myself** (as God's love was giving and self-sacrificing) and it **sets no limits** (as Christ gave Himself completely on the cross).

Mere humanitarianism will rarely rise to these heights. And even if it does, I can never **earn** my standing with God on the basis of my loving acts for man. **Jesus teaches that those acts of love to mankind must spring from a true love for God in order to have kingdom significance.**

In short, these words of Jesus are important because **each commandment keeps the other pure and authentic**. Absolute love for God keeps my love for man from becoming dead work. Love for man keeps my devotion for the Lord from becoming dreamy and removed from this present world.