

The Foremost Command
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
April 6, 2008

Over the next twenty minutes I have one goal. We're gonna be spending time together in the word, and then we're gonna close our service with Communion...with a time of worship music and Communion. But between now and then, the next twenty minutes, my goal, my target, is to make sure by the time we come to Communion you know you need Jesus...that right at the very core of your soul this morning, when you come to that Communion table you know...you know that you need Jesus. Not only do you know you need Him, not just in an intellectual way; but your heart grips that reality. Not only do you know that you need Him—you know why you need Him, and you are grateful that you have Him.

Now, we're gonna do that by actually listening to the words of Jesus. We're not gonna...we're not gonna try to get there by working through somebody's speculation about Jesus and what He means to us; and we're not gonna be reading some book on theology. We're gonna read what Jesus said, and listen to it carefully, and let *that* shape our heart and impress profoundly, at the core of our being—we need Him. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven,

As we come into the words of Jesus this day, I pray and I ask that You would give us ears to hear, You would give us minds to grasp, and You would give us hearts to hold what He said in a shaping, transforming way.

In His name we pray, amen.

Let's turn to Mark, chapter 12, verses 28-40, and just follow along as I read. We're only gonna read down through...yeah, we're gonna read down through verse 40 today. And I'll just encourage you to follow along as I read. This will be the core of our text. We've been reading through the gospel of Mark and this is where we are right now, reading it out loud together as a congregation. It says in verse 28 that one of the scribes...one of the intellectual elites, one of the individuals who's life was devoted to studying the scriptures and was trained to be able to ascertain what is God's will, what is God's word, on any thing, any situation, any circumstance. And we're told that

One of these scribes,

...one of these individuals,

...came and heard them arguing.

Jesus had been in an argument with some individuals. They had been challenging Him, and He had been responding.

And recognizing that He had answered them well, this scribe asked Jesus, "What commandment is the foremost of all?"

And Jesus answered, "The foremost is this, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

Then He goes on and He says,

"And the second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe said to Jesus, then, "Right, Teacher. You have truly stated that He is One, and there is no one beside Him; 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 himself is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

And then, at the end of the day, finally, this scribe who had heard it throughout the day and he was impressed with how Jesus was answering those questions...this scribe comes to Him and asks him the final question that our text gives. And when Jesus is done answering that question, we're told that no one would venture to ask Him any more questions. No one dared raise another issue with Him after they'd heard how He handled everybody else, and handled this last question of the day.

So then He poses one last question. It's like the...it's like the ring is cleared. It's like He's defeated every foe. And He looks out at the crowd and He raises one last question to see if there's anybody else that wants to step up. And he raises that kinda riddle-like question about the Messiah, who everyone knew was gonna be the son of David. And He raises the question—'If He's the son of David in the messianic prophecies, how can He also be the Lord of David?' It was kinda out of their conceptual box when it came to the messiah, to think in those terms, and no one had a response. And as the learned men of scripture just had to stand there with no answer to say, not even daring to speak, we're told that the crowd enjoyed listening to Him. They just loved this. They just loved it.

I like it too. It's really neat to read. We've spent a couple weeks looking at this day of great debate, and you watch Jesus kinda handling on everybody who comes at Him; He just takes it on. And you just...I enjoy it. But you know what? If I really listen to it...if I really listen to what He says, I don't enjoy it so much. In fact, if I really listen to what He says, it's discouraging. And if I really listen to what He says, and I finish that day, I'm disheartened.

Think about it. The question that the scribe brings to Him, the question the scribe ends the day with, is "What is the greatest commandment? What is the foremost one?" It's a typical question that would be debated at the temple among the theologians, because when they went through the Old Testament they were very careful. And they had counted 613 different commands given by God in the Old Testament. Three hundred and sixty-five of those commands were positive in nature—do this, do that. And then there was about two hundred and forty-eight of those were negative commands—don't do this, don't do that. And they would analyze all these commands and they would classify them between what they would call 'great' or heavy commands and those they would call 'light' or little commands. And it was their way to sort out what are the really important ones; what are the things that really matter the most. And they would debate that among themselves.

And then they would also wrestle with...and it was a sign of a really good teacher...is if you could summarize the Old Testament into one little statement. When I work with students and I'm teaching 'em how to work with scripture, a lot of times I'll tell 'em "You know what? I want you to be able to summarize this chapter in seven words—one sentence, seven words long, no longer than that." And they'll groan; they'll wrestle with it; they'll say "It can't be done." And I'll press it and say "Yeah, you have to." That's what they would do with these teachers. They would say, "How would you summarize the Old Testament?" And they expected a teacher to be able to do that.

And Jesus did. He came back and He answered the question—"What's the heaviest command? What's the most important one? What's the one that's essential? What's the one that must be done?" And He did it in one summary statement, and it reads like this. He says,

"The foremost is..."

...the foremost command is...

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord."

That's the lead-in; it's a quote from the Old Testament. The Lord is only one. He's not a bunch of gods here; there's not a bunch of lords. Yahweh, the Lord God, is One. And here's the command:

"And you shall love the Lord your God; you shall love Him with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."

You shall love Him with all that you are. You need to hear that right. When He says this, He's not talking about simply sayin', 'Ok, I have got a determined devotion to God, where I'll do everything He says I need to do.' We are talking about a driving desire to enjoy God for all that He is. It's important to catch this. It's the difference between an individual that says, 'You know what? I want to be fit; I want to be in good condition,' so he keeps going to the gym and doin' that stair-stepper thing. And he does it, he's devoted to it; he's determined; he's gonna be there and he's gonna do it, 'cause it's important and it's good. And he values it. And he's healthier if he does it, and he feels better if he does it, and he's more effective. That's being determinedly devoted to something.

That is very different from the person who says, 'I'm gonna climb that mountain, 'cause I love it! I love the challenge, I love the stress, I love the sense of victory, I love the teamwork that goes into it, I love meeting the conditions, I love the view...I love it! And I am devoting everything I can, every part of my being to this task, because I desire to enjoy it to the fullest!'

When Jesus says, "*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,*" He's talking about that sort of love. I am setting out with every ounce of my being to enjoy Him to the fullest.

Now, He adds a second command to that. The man didn't really ask for two commands. But He adds a second one. He goes on and He says, "*The second is this,*" a follow-up. And the reason he adds it is 'cause the two really need to come together. There's one that's priority, there is no doubt about it, there is the foremost one. But there's a second one that comes with that—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." You should care just about as much for your neighbor as you care for yourself. And that's the second command; and these are the two great commands.

And the tendency is to say quickly, "Ok, we got the two great commands—'Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor.' We got it." Never summarize it this way. Remember what I said about boiling it down? If you boil it down to this, you've boiled it down too far; you've narrowed it too much. Jesus narrowed this down as far as it can be narrowed down. *You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* And when you say you love the Lord your God, if you don't add those qualifiers, you have not said enough. And you *love your neighbor as yourself.*

That's the standard God puts in front of us and says, "That's the essential. Nothing less is good enough. Nothing less is good enough."

The scribe understands that. And he comes right back, and it's almost...it's almost comical the way he does it. He says, "*Teacher, you've spoken well!*" That's like a student speaking to the master teacher, and acting like the greater. "I'll give you an 'A' on that answer." As if he's the authority. Jesus responds to him and He says, seein' that this scribe gets it, he understands it...Jesus, seein' that he's answering intelligently, he's not just rambling, he's not just coming up with speculation, he really sees and understands what it's about...Jesus says to him something very significant in here. He says, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*" 'You're not far.'

Now, in a way, that's encouragement. In a way, it's a discouragement. He's tellin' this man, 'You understand it, you know it. But you know what? You're still not in the kingdom. You're still not living under My rule. You know it, but you're not living it.' See, it's one thing to understand this, it's another thing to say it; it's another thing to be able to marshal a lot of other quotes of scripture like this scribe does to prove it and verify it; it's one thing to be able to articulate it; it's one thing to be able to diagram it; it's one thing to be able to define it. It's a whole other thing to live it. And what Jesus is sayin' to this scribe is, 'It's not enough to know it.'

Now, you need to understand it; you need to know it. 'Cause if you don't understand this and you don't know it, you're clueless about the kingdom of God. But even once you understand it, you're not in the kingdom. It has to be lived. See, there's a lot of people—a lot of people—who understand this, who know this, who can articulate it, but who don't live it. Jesus, later in this passage, will speak of the scribes; and He describes them...He speaks of them as those who "*walk around in long robes*"...they wear these long garments that would almost go down to their feet, with tassels on them, and it marked them out as teachers. It's almost like goin' to a graduation ceremony, and you see the professors comin' in with their long robes and their tassels, and their ribbons on, and you go 'Ok, that guy's got his doctorate; that guy's got his master's degree.' That's what it's like with these guys. They would go around the temple, and around Jerusalem, wearing these flowing robes that marked them out as scholars. And wherever they went, whether it was in the marketplace, and whether it was in the synagogue, and whether it was in the homes and banquets, they wanted privilege; they wanted to be noted; they wanted to be respected. And it's interesting, because they were not paid salaries. They were dependent upon patrons that would support them. And people would rally around them, and almost bring them on as their own personal tutors; or they would devote their money to make sure this scribe was heard by many people. And there would be individuals that would pour their wealth into a scribe's ministry and life, just trying to make sure he got to teach all that he wanted to teach. In fact, there were widows who would go into poverty tryin' to support some of these teachers.

And then they would pray, and pray, and pray—for show. And Jesus is saying 'Watch out for these guys. They know it, but they're not livin' it.'

He goes on, and I didn't read this portion. He'll go on and He will give us a picture of what it will look like when a person loves the Lord our God with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind, all their strength. What that looks like...begin at verse 41. His teaching was done. This is His last kind of 'teaching moment.' After this He would go pretty much into seclusion with his close discipleship group. He's in the temple, it's crowded and it's packed, and He sat down opposite the treasury, in verse 41,

...and He began observing how people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

And then He noted

...a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him,

...and it wasn't just the twelve here. Others had been around. And He calls them to Him. And the word He uses—He summons them. It's like "This is a really important moment, men and women. Gather around Me." So He summons His disciples. And then He says to them,

"Truly..."

...and that's like a red-letter word. It's like He's underlining it. He's saying 'pay attention to this. It's really important that you catch this.' He says

"...I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury."

They had these thirteen receptacles up on the wall. And people would come in and they would put their money in these. And this was a place that was...there was gold everywhere. And this temple was like the Swiss bank of the day. And there was money just flowing into that place...wealth from all over the world, wherever Jews lived; and they made their pilgrimage, they would bring money to the temple.

And Jesus says, 'This poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury with those two little coins,'

"...for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned,"

...and underscore that word all...

"...all she had to live on."

That's loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. And I'm not there. I hear that command. Jesus sets the standard. I see that example, and I know I'm not there.

Now, I've seen some people like her. I've known some people like her. I remember an odd little couple I met when I was in seminary. They were older than us. She had a genetic condition that she was very small, had feet that were deformed, hands that were deformed, and he was just kind of an odd person. And I say this very respectfully. He was a postman, and she was a teacher. One of my first experiences with them, we went over to their home for a bible study. And I've told this before, so it may ring with some of you. We walked in...we were ready to leave; they brought us out in their garage. They said, "Here, go shopping." And they gave us grocery bags, and lining their entire garage were canned goods, dry goods, paper products, all sorts of stuff. And they made us fill up garbage...I mean, not garbage...grocery bags full of stuff and just take it with us, because we were students and barely getting by. They wanted to help us.

That was my introduction to what they were like. They did this with all kinds of seminary students. They collected cardboard and recycled it. They collected...he would go to businesses as he went his rounds in the post office, and he says, you know, "Can I come back and get your garbage?" And he'd come back and get their garbage and collect the aluminum cans, and he would recycle it. And he was doing everything. And she would knit things and sell them. And they would go to craft fairs and put stuff out there. And they were doing everything they could, and their commitment was...their goal was...their target in life was to get to the point that 25 percent of all their money went right off the top to help people. We're not talking a rich couple!

There's the guy that came into our congregation years ago when we were facing our first building project. He had sold his business; and he came in from business and he was looking for investment, and where to go with his investment. And he came in and, when I look at our church history he's one of my favorite old characters. He had a big, bushy beard. And I'll never forget when he was dying and I went in the hospital, and I came in there and he looks at me and he says, "Larry, you know, when I'm dyin', don't do anything big. Just sharpen my toenails and pound me into the ground." I've told that before, but I love that. He lived in a small, very humble place out in Big Lake. I doubt if anybody knows—I've never said it in public—but instead of investing in high-yield CDs, instead of building a big, beautiful home, they financed our first church building. There are others that joined in that project...there were a lot of people that had a part in it. But they were the work horse, financially, that carried it.

There's my dad. People looked at him and thought, you know, he's ok financially. He loved to wear gold cuff links. When he had dementia, and we had to sort out his affairs, I brought in an accountant to help us do that. Went through all the paperwork and did all that. He was basically penniless. I mean there was some...there were a few things. He had his social security coming in. He put in a full career in a high-paying position, and he was basically penniless. I remember the accountant's response. When he said it, it just...it was so neat. The accountant looked at it and he goes, "He planned that well." He planned that well. See, my earliest memories of my dad is of him giving, and giving, and giving. And the only way, the *only* way I was able to start as a pastor is he paid half my salary for my first five years in the ministry.

I've seen some people who are *like* that widow, but they don't match her. And I don't. I sure don't. And that's why I need Jesus. That's why I need Jesus—because God'll never lower that standard. But in Jesus I find One who did perfectly, absolutely, live up to it. He gave...He loved the Lord His God with all His soul, with all His heart, with all His mind, with all His strength, and He loved us as He loved Himself. He went to the cross in loyalty to the Father and love for us. He met the standard. And not only did He meet the standard, He met it *for us*.

This is kind of a mystery. It's hard to get a grip on and understand, but it's like Jesus is one of those heroes in a war movie that steps forward and faces up to the opposing enemy and says, 'Listen—pick your best one. Bring out your strongest warrior, and I will meet them. And if I emerge victorious, all My followers, everybody with me, win. If I fail, they fail. But if I win, they win.' It's like when Jesus went to the cross, He said, 'I will take that on. I will meet that standard, so long as that everyone with Me gets to share in that victory.' And that's the way...that's the way God welcomed it.

I need Jesus, 'cause this is a standard I can't meet. But He met it for me. And the amazing wonder and promise that comes with it as He does is if we'll trust Him, if we'll believe in Him, not only will He meet that standard for us, not only will He be our Savior—He will be our heart-changer. And what the promise and the wonder is, that as we believe in Him He will change our hearts to become like His. And ultimately we *will* love the Lord our God with all our soul, with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength, and we will love each other the way we love ourselves. Jesus has not only promised it, He is committed to doing it.