

JESUS GIVES THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Mark 12; Joshua 22:1–5; 1 Peter 2:4–8

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I didn't grow up going to church, not at first. But somewhere along the way, my mother taught me the Lord's Prayer (yes, the King James Version). I didn't know it was spoken by Jesus, or that it was His instruction—an outline of sorts—for how to talk to God (Matthew 6:9–13). Still, it became a touchstone for me when I was afraid, an anchor when I was overwhelmed, and a hope for lasting connection to the God I had yet to meet.

The Jewish faith has a version of this. It's a prayer from Deuteronomy 6 that for many is spoken daily, morning and evening, and in temple services. It's called the Shema, and it's quoted by Jesus in today's reading from Mark 12. When the scribes and Sadducees came to probe Jesus about His understanding of Scripture, He was, naturally, able to answer their questions. One scribe in particular asked Him, "Which command is the most important of all?" (Mark 12:28). Jesus responded:

*"The most important is Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.
The second is, Love your neighbor as yourself.
There is no other command greater than these" (vv.29–31).*

The scribe agreed, as Jesus was referencing the central command of the Jewish faith, given to the Israelites after the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). This command begins with the Hebrew word *shema*, which means "to hear" or "listen" and also implies action—a life lived wholly loyal to God. It's as if Moses was saying, "Pay attention! This is important!" The Shema is a reminder of who God is: the one true God, who loves us. Because He loves us, we're to love Him back with everything we've got: our whole being, affection, intention, and will—our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The Shema is the foundational principle for every other commandment that comes before and after it. Perhaps, in giving His people a Law they could not keep (Joshua 22:5; 24:12–24; Matthew 5:17), God wanted to remind His people of the one thing truly necessary for covenant relationship with Him. Jesus praises the scribe for understanding what is at the heart of the entire Law.

God gave everything of Himself to restore relationship with us—from humbling Himself to be born as a baby to dying a painful death on the cross. He's devoted and wants our devotion. He wants us to actively love Him, and then display that love by loving our fellow image-bearers as He does (Genesis 1:27; Mark 12:31). No, we won't always get it right, but He knew that too! So, He sent His Spirit to make us more like Jesus, to love like Him and shape our lives around Him. Jesus is the touchstone and the cornerstone (Mark 12:10–11). Everything begins and ends—then begins again—with this God who loved us first (1 John 4:19).