

# The Greatest Commandment -- Mark 12:28-34

by Travis Dean

April 6, 2013

Please bow your heads with me for prayer.

*Lord, we praise You for the power that's in Your Word. We praise You for the mighty presence of the Holy Spirit here today. As we continue this journey through the book of Mark, we pray for a supernatural experience. May we be so filled with and moved by Your Word and Spirit, that we leave here today forever changed and set free from slavery to this world and to our own self-centeredness. We come for the glory of Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Our story today highlights a man referred to as a scribe. He characterizes a very influential and important group in Jesus' day. Since we no longer have a group in our culture that would correspond to the scribes, it will perhaps be helpful if we spend a few minutes considering just who were the scribes. There are several texts in the Bible that refer to scribes. Some were men employed by the secular governments of Medo-Persia or Rome while others were a part of the theocracy of the Jews. Nehemiah 8:1-12 refers to Ezra, one of the most, if not the most, famous scribe in Jewish history, who also was a priest. In the early days of Judaism it was common for the priests to also serve as scribes. Esther 6:1-2 mentions a servant who was employed as a scribe by the Medo-Persian king, Ahasuerus. Acts 19:35-41 mentions a city clerk or scribe (the same Greek word is used for both) employed by the city of Ephesus under Roman rule. So, let's see how the responsibilities of the scribes would play out in our culture. You will notice that they "wore many hats". Their role covered anywhere from a city clerk to a lawyer, from a public notary to a school teacher, from a theologian or scholar to a pastor. Their responsibilities even included the influence and responsibilities of today's media, printed and electronic.

One of the Jewish scribes' main tasks involved copying the Torah manuscripts, which included the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy. According to an article on Wikipedia, the Jewish scribes used the following process for creating copies of the Torah: (1) They could only use clean animal skins to write on; (2) Each column of writing could have no less than 48, and no more than 60 lines; (3) The ink must be black, and of a special recipe; (4) They must say each word aloud while they were writing; (5) They must wipe the pen and wash their entire bodies before writing YHWH (the Hebrew name for the Lord); (6) There must be a review within 30 days, and if as many as three pages required corrections, the entire manuscript had to be redone; (7) The letters, words, and paragraphs had to be counted; (8) The document became invalid if two letters touched each other; (9) The documents could be stored only in sacred places (synagogues, etc.); (10) As no document containing God's Word could be destroyed, they were stored, or buried, in a genizah (special Jewish storehouse).

Perhaps we can see now the reasons why the scribes were so well-respected by the people in Jesus' day.

Let's now consider a summary of today's story:

*A scribe stepped forward, calling for Jesus to state which commandment was the most important. Jesus answered by stating that the greatest commandment is the one that declares the oneness of God and the supreme purpose for man - loving God. Jesus then extended His answer by citing a second commandment which calls upon humanity to love their neighbor. The scribe commended Jesus' answer, and Jesus commended the scribe's response. After this, no one else asked Jesus any more trick questions.*

As much as we might talk about the scribes today, Jesus is really the central character here. So, we are going to look at what He experienced in this story. First of all, He experienced a call to name God's top priority for man. Mark highlights in Mark 12:28 a man referred to as a scribe. I invite you to turn with me to another Scripture that helps us understand the reputation of the scribes. We will read 1 Corinthians 1:20. (Read) Scribe was a word synonymous with wise. According to the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (p. 56), the scribes were the "most influential" group in Jewish society.

Mark 12:28 mentions that the scribe perceived that Jesus had "answered them (the Sadducees) well". The Sadducees had thrown a very controversial question at Jesus and the scribe was pretty impressed with Jesus' answer. So he decided to see how well Jesus could handle another tough question. It was regarding "the first commandment of all" (vs. 28). This was a controversial topic. It's interesting to consider the scope of the scribe's question. Did he have in mind all of God's commands in the Old Testament or was he primarily thinking of the 10 Commandments? If you read Ellen White's commentary on this story in her book, Desire of Ages, you will find an interesting observation. If you remember, the first four commandments deal with our duty to God, while the last six deal with our duty to our fellow man. Apparently, Jesus had been accused of elevating the last six commandments above the first four. This did not settle well with the Pharisees, who tended to elevate the first four above the last six.

Second, Jesus also experienced identifying the uniqueness of Jehovah. Jesus' response to the scribe is found in Mark 12:29. It was immediate and very direct. This was not how He had answered the previous questions that had been posed to Him. Often He would respond to a question with another question. Other times He would minimize the importance of the question by pointing out something that was much more important. However, His response to this scribe was quite different. Notice the opening words in His response: "The first of all the commandments...." There was no commentary or questioning - only an immediate and direct answer. I can imagine everyone grabbing a pen, waiting with bated breath for what He was going to say. Jesus began by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4. It is called the Shema, which is the Aramaic name for the Lord, and declares, "The Lord our God, the Lord is one." According to the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary this has been "the watchword of Israel down through their long history". It has been recited at every morning and evening service in the Temple. The Jews have been taught for generations to say these words before going to sleep at night and as their parting words before death. Every other nation around Israel worshiped idols and honored a plurality of gods. However, Israel had been taught that the Lord, Jehovah (or Yahweh), was the one true Creator God.

Third, Jesus experienced revealing love as the essence of life. In Mark 12:30 Jesus continued to quote from Deuteronomy chapter 6. Verse 5 reveals the essence of life - loving God. Deuteronomy, as well as Matthew in recording this same story, goes on to describe the manner in which we ought to love God: "with all your heart, with all your soul...." The list is quite extensive. But it's also interesting to note Moses' and Matthew's choice of preposition. They use the preposition, "with". However, when Mark quoted Jesus, he used the preposition "from". These two prepositions give a different focus. The word, "with", explains what I am supposed to use or in what manner am I supposed to love God. The word, "from", reveals the source. For example, we can say, "I eat with a spoon." Or, "I eat with relish." But using the word, "from", we might say, "I eat from a ravenous appetite!" Mark emphasizes where this love to God comes from. The implication is that the act of loving God is a response. Another significant word in this great commandment, found in Deuteronomy 6:5, is the word, "all". There's not a single part of our being that is left out in this response of loving God. These words speak of complete devotion. The word translated, "heart", in the Hebrew speaks of who I am at the core. The word for "soul" means "life or breath". The word, "mind", is not actually in the passage as found in Deuteronomy. But this word gives the idea of "intelligence". The word for, "strength", can also be translated as "force, power, or might". It not only speaks of physical strength but also skills. So, all of this within me is for one ultimate, supreme purpose - loving the one Creator God.

I'm sure some of Jesus' listeners were surprised when in Mark 12:31, Jesus extended His answer with a second great commandment. In so doing he avoided giving the Pharisees an opportunity to accuse Him of elevating one part of God's law above the other. Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19:18, revealing that our love should not only be directed to God but also to our "neighbor". The word translated, "neighbor", means "one who is near". In describing how we should love our neighbor, the list is very brief: "as yourself". It's a different twist from the Golden Rule, which Jesus taught in Matthew 7:12. The Golden Rule says that we should treat others the way we want them to treat us. But this command from Leviticus 19:18 says that we should treat them the way we treat ourselves. We are naturally self-centered. And God wants us to become just as aware of other's needs as we are of our own.

As we consider what Jesus experienced in this story, number four is being commended. The scribe had been clearly impressed with Jesus' answer. In Mark 12:32-33 he, in essence, restated Jesus' answer. And in front of all his peers, who despised Jesus, this scribe confessed to Him, "You're right on. You nailed it. I've never heard anyone put it quite like that." This took courage. You can be sure that many frowns glared at him as he spoke. It would be like one of the members of the IRS saying, "Taxes don't matter so much. Just love each other." All the other IRS people would be saying, "What?! Are you kidding? You've got to be out of your mind! Hush up! Do you want to lose your job?!"

Last of all, Jesus experienced commending His interrogator. Jesus' words in Mark 12:34 basically said to the scribe, "Way to go. You've just made a big step towards the kingdom of God. Keep it up." We are not told what kind of impact this conversation had on the scribe. But one thing we do know. This was the end of the interrogations. No one else ventured to try to trick Jesus with any more questions.

Now that we've looked at what Jesus experienced in this story, let's consider our own experience. Jesus is revealed in this story as our example. He shows us how we ought to live and what it means to be a Christian. We will consider two ways in which Jesus is revealed as our example in this story. The first is that He began by defining God. Jesus' answer did not start with a to-do list. Before He even mentioned what God wants from us, He clarified what kind of God He was talking about. What were the common "gods" of Jesus' day? Well, the Romans believed in hundreds of gods. Collectively, they were referred to as the "Pantheon". There was a different god for various aspects of life. They worshiped a god of war, a goddess of fertility, and the list went on and on. Saturn was one of the gods believed in by the Romans. They called him the god of the harvest. He was supposedly the father of three other gods - Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto. One painting shows Saturn taking a scythe in order to cut off the wings of another god named, Cupid, who was just a baby. Cupid (also a supposed name of one of Santa's reindeer) was believed to be the god of love and the son of a goddess named, Venus, an equivalent to the Greek god, Eros (Often the Romans duplicated the Greek gods and gave them new names.)

What do you suppose are the "gods" commonly worshiped in our contemporary culture? Perhaps the religion of our secular society could be summed up as self-worship. Whether it is entertainment or pleasure, the promoted lifestyle is very self-centered. There's an interesting overlap in the culture in Jesus' day and that of our day. Some of you may have seen the advertisement by Gillette promoting their razors for women: "Venus Embrace - Reveal the goddess in you". There's even a razor that they've called Venus Divine. The name, Venus, takes us back to the culture of the Romans, whose influence in Jesus' day was only rivaled by that of the Greeks. The Romans worshiped the "goddess", Venus, whom they believed was the source of all love and beauty. Our culture has now taken this name and is telling us, "The divine goddess is in you!"

Truly our culture is just as much in need of understanding the one true God as the Roman culture in Jesus' day. Let us not be too quick to discuss God's commandments without helping people understand the nature and character of God Himself. The Lord Jehovah is the all-powerful Creator God. And He is also the all-loving Father who wants to be my friend and enjoys spending quality time with me.

Secondly, Jesus is revealed as our example in this story in that He revealed love as God's ultimate purpose for us. When Jesus stated what commandment was the greatest, He didn't cite the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, or any of the other nine. All of the Ten Commandments were simply explanations of the Great Commandment - to love God and our neighbor. So, in essence, what He was saying is, "God doesn't just want well-behaved children. He wants children whose breath, hearts, minds, and bodies are filled with love and devotion for Him. I invite you to turn with me to Romans 13:8-10. (Read) God's ultimate dream is for you to be consumed with love for Him and for those near you. In so doing, you have the Ten Commandments in your heart.

I have recently written down on 3x5 cards some dreams that God has placed on my heart. Each morning, as I am able, I have been praying over them and laying them before God. As I considered my dream for my children, several words went through my mind. Is my ultimate dream for them to be calm... nice... obedient... healthy... smart... educated? Sure those all would be nice, but what I really want for them is to have a real, meaningful, personal relationship with God. I dream of one day when the gospel of Jesus Christ touches their

hearts in such a powerful way that they respond with a warm and passionate faith. And to the core, this is also God's ultimate purpose and dream for you.

I have pondered why Jesus answered the scribe's question so directly and quickly. And to me Jesus' promptness speaks to God's eagerness for you to understand what is most important to Him. More than anything else, He wants you to know what His dream is for you.

Where is most of your energy and time being spent? In school? At work? At home? At church?

What do you think would happen if our top priority was a relationship with God? I know I've spent a lot of time and energy trying to find a career that I enjoy and pays well. After that, hopefully I have tried to find a way to fit in some time for ministry. As a pastor out of college most of my time and energy was spent in ministry. But I can't say that I loved what I was doing. Here's a different perspective that has come to me: What if I dreamed first about what ministry God is calling me to? And then I tried to find a job that fit that ministry. What would that look like for you?