

Loving God and My Neighbor

THE *Greatest* COMMANDMENT



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Verbal Traps

This story is told in two of the Gospels, in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34. Mark gives us the most detail, starting this way:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28)

The scribe was pleased and impressed with Jesus for the way he had handled two previous questions posed to him by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and others. The Jewish leaders wanted to arrest Jesus but didn’t dare because the crowds liked him and they feared sparking a riot which would cause the Romans to crack down on them and restrict their freedom and power. Their questioning of Jesus was insincere, as Mark tells us: “But Jesus knew their hypocrisy” (Mark 12:15). These weren’t mere questions; they were verbal traps.

	Verbal Trap	Jesus’ Response
Taxes Mark 12:13–17	The Pharisees and Herodians tried to trick Jesus with a question about whether to pay taxes to Rome. Either possible answer could put Jesus in one or another political camp and alienate many of his followers.	Jesus asked them to show him a coin, and they dug out an imperial Roman coin with Caesar’s image on it. By doing this, Jesus made the point that they had no objection to using Caesar’s coins to their own economic advantage. He told them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”
Resurrection Mark 12:19–27	The Sadducees asked Jesus a question about marriage in heaven, one that leaned heavily on Jewish marital laws. Their question can be seen as mocking not only the idea of resurrection, but also the convoluted nature of the oral law.	With the Sadducees, Jesus is blunt. From the Scriptures (specifically the Torah), he showed that they were wrong about the resurrection. He challenged them with how limited their belief in God was.

Was the scribe’s question another trap? Possibly, but it seems the scribe was sincerely convinced that Jesus could help him solve a particularly difficult problem.

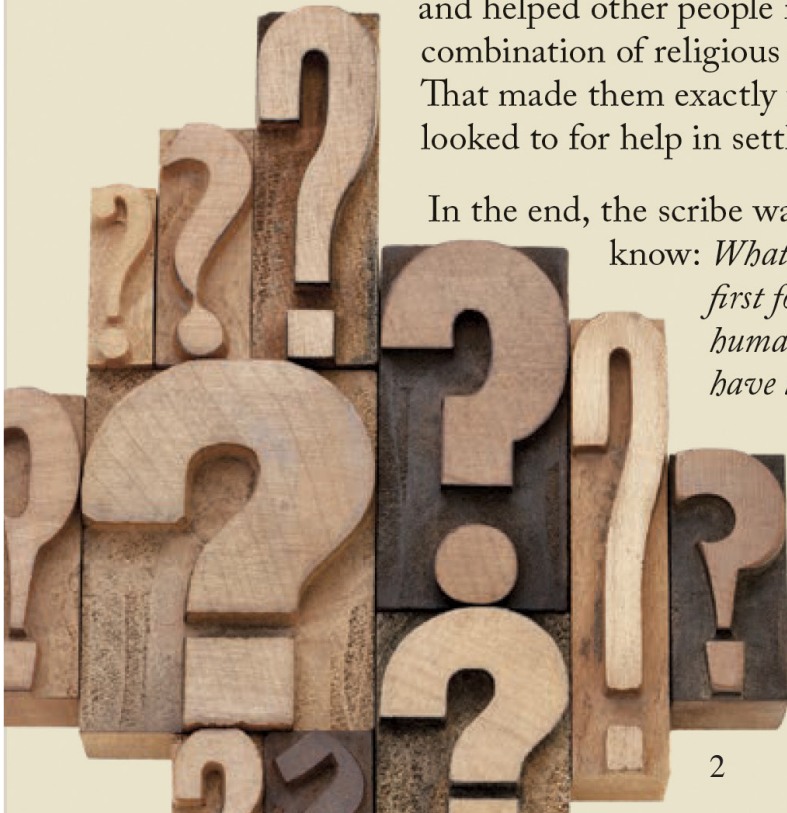
What Was the Scribe Really Asking?

Which commandment was the greatest was a hotly contested question in the time of Jesus. Some Jewish leaders argued that the commandment to bring sacrifices was the most important because the focus should be on lessening God's anger and atoning for sin. Others, however, said that the command to be circumcised was the most important, suggesting that personal purity and piety should be one's primary concern. There were also differing opinions about exactly what teachings and writings to consider part of the law, and also a lot of rules and standards—but which of these rose to the level of commandments?

Sometimes, with so many laws, there was tension between them. For example, there were commandments against lighting a lamp on the Sabbath, but there were also requirements to feed the hungry. What if one needed to light a lamp or start a fire to prepare food for hungry people on the Sabbath? Which of these commandments were greater? This tension was often the basis of the verbal traps the religious leaders would lay for Jesus. They would present him with situations intended to make him choose between different commandments (see John 8:1–11).

The question of the greatest commandment was of special interest to the scribe in this story because of his profession. As a scribe, he read and studied the law, and helped other people interpret it. Scribes were a combination of religious scholar, teacher, and attorney. That made them exactly the kind of people that others looked to for help in settling difficult questions.

In the end, the scribe was asking what we all want to know: *What commandment should be my first focus? Out of all of Scripture and human tradition, what is the thing I have to get right? Is there a singular guiding principle that will bring all the others into harmony?*



How Did Jesus Answer?

It's human nature to ask questions about what's most important. We want concrete expectations, things we can do. Jesus replied to the scribe's question by giving a task that is easy to understand but difficult to accomplish.

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (Mark 12:29–30)

Jesus' answer would have reminded people of the teachings of Moses. Using a passage from the Torah, he built his logic like this:

- ♥ "The Lord our God, the Lord is **one**." There is only one God, not a whole range of gods from which to choose. Since there is only one God, there is no other place to look for hope.
- ♥ "The Lord **our** God." This God is our God. We have a relationship with him. This phrase would have reminded faithful people of how God had revealed himself as their Shepherd, Father, and the Mighty Warrior who protects them. It would have brought to mind the words God spoke when he made a covenant with Abraham: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7).
- ♥ And then, the conclusion reached from the first two statements: Because this one and only God has entered into a personal relationship with humankind, we are to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

Jesus' answer could be summarized something like this: *Love God with everything you have, because God, the only God, cares about you.*

True love for God pushes out all devotion to other, lesser gods.



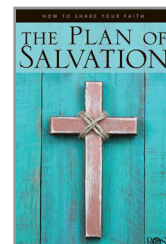
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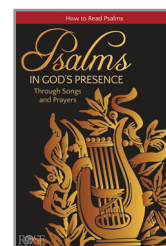
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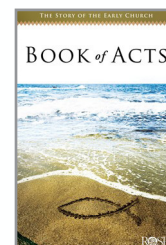
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