OUR GOD IS THE ONLY GOD

Mark 12:28-34  
Key Verse: 12:29

"The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this:  
"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

Today's passage is mainly Jesus' conversation with one of the teachers of the law. In contrast to the Pharisees and Sadducees who tried to trap Jesus with his words, this teacher of the law was one who was right in the sight of God. Let's see what kind of teacher of the law he was, why Jesus admired him, and what Jesus taught him.

I. Love the Lord your God (28-30)

First, a genuine teacher of the law (28). Look at verse 28. "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?'" For the most part, the teachers of the law, members of the Pharisees and Sadducees, were in character political and not spiritual at all. They were earthbound. But one of the teachers of the law was genuine and truth-seeking. He had the power of discernment between good and evil. He was not floating downstream like a dead fish according to the trend of the world. Most of all, he was a great scholar who could understand the word of truth from the mouth of Jesus, on hearing Jesus' debating with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He heard the debating between the Pharisees and Jesus and between the Sadducees and Jesus. He learned that Jesus was right by giving them the word of God. It is indeed surprising that this teacher of the law kept himself pure in the sight of God in that darkest generation in history. After two violent attacks by the enemies of God, what a comfort to Jesus this man's pure heart was! How could this teacher of the law keep himself pure? This young teacher reminds us of Psalm 119:9-12. It says, "How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O Lord; teach me your decrees." He was not born to be good. According to St. Paul, all human beings are both good and evil. In order to keep himself pure in the sight of God, the young teacher must have struggled hard to have the word of God in his heart. Psalm 119:15-16 says, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word." This young teacher was like a tree planted by the streams of water (Ps 1:3).

From time to time, we despair when we look at men and women of perversion. We despair when we look at men and women with no sense of honor or sense of shame. They are directed by their sinful feelings. They are ruled and overruled by their selfishness. They are ashamed of Jesus who gives eternal salvation to those who believe in him. But that is not all. There are many who are like the young teacher and happy to listen to the words of Jesus. Each week we study Bible 1 to 1 with about 15 students from WIU. To some, it may seem like a small number. But it is not a small matter. They could have been overruled by their sinful desires and American peer pressure. Instead, they come faithfully each week to study because they want to be free in Jesus. Their pure hearts to live before God are a great comfort to us. More than that, they are pleasing to God. A pure heart is good fruit to God.

To keep one's heart pure before God is not easy. In order to keep his heart pure, one young man drove home 6 hours one way every weekend while studying to get his Ph.D. in physics, so that he could attend his father’s worship service. He never missed even once. Now, as a physics professor at WIU, he receives nearly perfect teaching ratings, while conducting two worship services in his hometown. Another young man, while studying for his Ph.D. at Harvard in statistics, drove 500 miles one way every weekend for more than two years to help growing shepherds in New York UBF. He did so in order to have a pure heart as a shepherd for God's
sheep. One young man, in order to overcome his romantic feelings for one girl, would go to a bookstore and read a book standing up. Sometimes, he couldn’t even see the letters for the first half hour. But he fought like this for a month, until he could make a clear decision to give his life to God instead of to his romantic feelings. Since then, he has become the shepherd for a worldwide student evangelical movement. When we struggle hard to be pure, we can be free to love God and to love God’s sheep, even though we are living in this hard world. There was a time when my Ph.D. studies were faltering, my son was in and out of the hospital with a serious heart condition and I was responsible for translating Luke’s gospel messages into Russian each week. But one of my Bible students was struggling to teach several Bible students at Harper College, about 1 hour outside of Chicago. Because God’s word had cleansed and purified my heart, I could decide to go to Harper College and serve a weekly group Bible study there. When I was made free to serve God first, God gave me and our family the victory in all things.

When we study the Bible, we are greatly moved by the love of God. We are also moved by the faithfulness of God. At the same time, we are moved by those who kept themselves pure before God by having the word of God in their hearts. There was a young girl called Mary. She had been engaged to be married to Joseph, handsome and well-built and a descendant of David. But one day the angel of the Lord came and said to her, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (Lk 1:31). To a woman, marriage is a happy dream. But Mary had to confront the misunderstanding of the traditional people of the Jewish community. But Mary answered, "May it be to me as you have said" (Lk 1:38). Her love for God was pure.

At the time of the prophet Elijah the people of Israel all bowed down to the god Baal. The prophet Elijah worked hard preaching
and terminating the prophets of Baal in the Kishon Valley (1Ki 18:40). The prophet did not see his people turning their hearts to God. He completely despaired and cried out, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life..." (1Ki 19:4). When he saw his people's ungodly lifestyle and their acts as enemies against God, the prophet Elijah completely despaired and wanted to die, saying, "I have had enough, Lord," which meant, "I have suffered enough for your flock of sheep." But God said to the prophet Elijah sternly, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (1Ki 19:18). Sometimes we despair, thinking that there is no one who is pure or righteous before God. Sometimes we despair, saying, "I have suffered and had enough hardships to take care of God's sheep under my care. But no one seems to get better." Many a servant of God says, "I despair and I want to give up on God's sheep under my care." But we must believe that there are many pure people before God like the young teacher and like the seven thousand who did not bow down to Baal. This young teacher greatly pleased Jesus. Likewise, we must please Jesus by keeping ourselves pure before God. We firmly believe that there are many who are pleasing to God with their pure hearts.

The young teacher asked Jesus, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" (28) It is indeed amazing that he studied the Bible until he could have a question to know the core of the entire Bible. He was not a mere student who wanted to get good scores for the credit. But he wanted to grasp the whole truth of the Bible in one word. He wanted to obtain the spiritual enlightenment of the Bible. He wanted to know the secret of the Bible truth. The young teacher studied the Bible to the degree that he could ask, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" May God bless each of us to study the Bible like this young teacher of the law.

Second, the Lord is one (29). Look at verse 29. "The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'" Jesus' answer to the young teacher was
very short. "The Lord is one." But this short phrase answers all the questions the teacher had. First and last of all, we must know that our God is the one and only God and there are no other gods. There are ample reasons for this. But we want to think about a few things. In the first place, man-made gods do not talk about creation faith. Only our God, the Father of Jesus, says in Genesis 1:1, "God created the heavens and the earth." Our God tells us the first cause, who made man and the world and where man and the world came from and how the starry host keeps its course exactly. To the Creator God, the whole world is nothing but a drop in the bucket, and like dust on the scales (Isa 40:15).

In the second place, all other gods do not talk about where man came from and where man goes back to. In other words, they did not explain the way and the life and the truth (Jn 14:6). But our God gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ so that man can find the way and the truth and the life in Jesus. All other gods do not talk about man's eternal salvation. But our God made his one and only Son a ransom sacrifice for the sin of the world. Our God gave eternal salvation to those who believe in the Son.

In the third place, our God is the only God because he gave a living hope in the kingdom of God to those who believe in Jesus. In this world there is nothing which does not perish, spoil or fade away. No man can live forever. Everybody dies at the appointed time. In view of history, many kings and queens felt they were unlucky to become kings and queens and they were very fatalistic that they were kings and queens and not ordinary people. They thought that God was punishing them by making them so. In this world, even kings and queens feel great limitation of their lifetimes and become very fatalistic. But our God gave us living hope in the kingdom of God. Therefore our God is the only God. All other gods are nothing more than antique philosophers who talked about their own ideas which gave no solution to man's fundamental problems.

Third, love the Lord your God with all your heart (30). Look at verse 30. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your
soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." It is easy to eat a Big Mac. It is not so difficult to get a Ph.D. But it is not easy to love God, who is Spirit and who is invisible. In order to love God we must have a pure heart through which we can see the living God and the kingdom of God. God made man and he wanted to be Father to all men and have all men be his precious children. It is a Biblical constant that children obey their parents and are the object of parents' joy. The children love their father and the father will provide all the necessary things for them. It is the same with God. When we love the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds and with all our strength, we can grow in the image of God. We come to know the love of God. We come to know God, that he is our Everlasting Father. When we love God with all our hearts we become godly people. Otherwise we become ungodly and merciless people. When we love God, God blesses us and our descendants forever. This is the reason Exodus 20:5,6 says, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." On the other hand, when we love money more than God we must live by our own effort, like communists. They have no blessing of God. Young men and women want to choose whom they love, and whom they don't. But when we fail to love God first, then we become restless wanderers in our hearts, like Cain.

II. Love your neighbor as yourself (31-34)

First, love your neighbor as yourself (31). Look at verse 31a. "The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" When we study this part, love God and love your neighbor are not pieces of advice but they are precisely the commandments of God. To love God is our ultimate duty and the key to happiness and universal truth. To love the Lord your God with all your heart basically means to love our God. It also means that our basic principle of life and standard of life and meaning of life should be the love of God. So Jesus said,
"The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." God himself showed us how to love his children absolutely. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This verse is a comfort to our souls. God crucified his Son while we were still sinners. It is easy for us to love our own children or influential servants of God. It is easy to love those who look pretty like a cutie-pie Lizzy Grace or Joey. But it is not easy for anyone to love sinners whose meditation is how to make use of others or how to get some benefit from others. It is not easy for us to love those who are very rebellious and those who mastered in selfishness. But God sent his one and only Son to die for our sins while we were still 'sinners' in order to show us his divine love. "Love your neighbor" means to love the one lost in the sight of God.

There was a young couple. The wife of the family is three times smarter than her husband. So the wife did not respect her husband. Instead she gave him a hard time every day. But the husband embraced her with the love of God for the last 10 years. Then the wife began to taste the mystery of God's love through her husband. The more trouble his wife gave him, the more gracious he was to her. It was because her husband studied the love of God through one-to-one Bible study and practiced what he learned with his wife. Then the wife was melted by her husband's love and now she respects him next to God and a little more than St. Paul. It is intolerable for a couple to hate each other. In any situation, a couple must love and respect each other. God the Father gave his one and only Son for our sins; still we are sinners. In the course of living, we meet all kinds of life problems. But we must solve all the problems with the love of God. It requires suffering loss, heart-pain and sometimes false accusations, contempt and rejection. But we must live according to the greatest commandment of God, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart; love your neighbor as yourself." To become a Christian means to know the love of God and to practice the love of God and no more.
Second, the happiness of the young teacher of the law (32-33). When Jesus taught him the core of the Bible and the heart of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus by saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," and "love your neighbor as yourself," it was the exact answer he wanted to hear. So he said in verses 32-33, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When we read the young teacher of the law's reply repeatedly, we can experience how happy he was to know the universal truth which makes the world a paradise. In his answer happiness is overflowing.

Third, "you are not far from the kingdom of God" (34). When Jesus saw the young teacher of the law, that he was most happy and his soul was dancing a Russian dance, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (34). When Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God," it does not mean that he drove the circumference of the earth and is near the kingdom of God. It does not mean that he was launched by a space rocket and he is near the kingdom of God. It means that he has already seen the kingdom of God even while on earth. It means that he deserves to enter the kingdom of God. It means that he experienced the kingdom of God living among fallen men.

Sometimes we despair, thinking that there is no genuine Christian in the world. But there was one when Jesus was in the midst of persecutions. There were 7,000 at the time of the prophet Elijah. It is more than sure that there are uncountable genuine Christians in this country. We must look for them and raise them as one-to-one Bible teachers. When we do so, may God establish this country as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.