

Holy Textures

Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours

Mark 12:28-34

*Short, easy to use, thought provoking background commentary for your sermon, bible study lesson, or scripture reflection.
Listed on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com.*

Year B, Season of Pentecost

Proper 26, Ordinary Time 31

Sunday Between October 30 and November 5 Inclusive

22nd Sunday After Pentecost 2009

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

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This week's text is the climax of a day of confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities in Jerusalem. (See my comment, [Jesus' Last Week - Tuesday](#).)

However, just in case we were writing off all religious elites as hard-hearted, unseeing opponents of Jesus, Mark ends the series of hostile questions with a scribe asking a genuine one.

It is the narrator, Mark, who tells us that the scribe had been positively impressed by Jesus - "seeing that (Jesus) answered them well." We, the readers, should not gloss over this remarkable assessment of Jesus' honour by one of his opponents.

The question the scribe asks, "Which commandment is the greatest of all," is similar to the one asked by the rich, young man. ([Mark 10:17](#)) The concern behind the question is how to lead a life of moral integrity. A concern that can only be answered by thorough - and wise - understanding and practical application of the Torah. (See Bruce Malina below for the historical-cultural background used in this note.)

We can tell that Jesus knows the question is genuine and not hostile because he immediately gives a genuine and not hostile response.

Jesus simply and quickly (thus demonstrating his thorough knowledge of, and wisdom about, the Torah) quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

The scribe continues the genuine dialogue by affirming and elaborating Jesus' reply.

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But more shockingly, the scribe then says out loud the unspoken implication of Jesus linking "Love of God," and "Love of neighbour as oneself."

No one in that crowd of both opponents and admirers would dispute, "Love of God," as the greatest commandment. But when Jesus goes on and links it to, "Love of neighbour as oneself," he has lifted attachment to the welfare of one's neighbours above all other duties and obligations. And since Jesus is saying this while standing in the courtyard of the Temple just days before Passover, one of the most obvious implications would be, as the Scribe himself says:

"to love one's neighbour as oneself" - this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

Notice that the Scribe doesn't just say, "more important;" he says, "**MUCH** more important." And remember that the Scribe has just said that the source of his livelihood is much less important than attending to the well-being of our neighbours. (Let's have a show of hands of all those present who feel the same way as this Scribe.)

Notice that like the rich, young man ([Mark 10:17](#)) Jesus **SEES** the Scribe as having answered wisely. But unlike the rich, young man Jesus does not ask him to give up his occupation, nor does he ask him to follow him. Instead Jesus publically honours the Scribe with a word of praise:

You are not far from the Kingdom of God

Which of course is an indication of the fulfillment of Jesus' original mission to proclaim:

The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near.

Mark 1:15

Who knew that at the peak of confrontation between Jesus and the religious elites of Jerusalem, it would be one of them who would embody Jesus' proclamation of God's Good News?

After this no one dares to challenge Jesus again with hostile questions. And as any honourable man would do in such circumstances, Jesus now goes on the offensive - denouncing the elites and warning about the destruction of the Temple in the remaining verses of Chapter 12 and all of Chapter 13.

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* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.