



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"THE RULE THAT IS BROKEN" – Bulletin Sermon Title

Sermon Title Was **"The Greatest Commandment"**

Sermon Series: "The Way of Jesus"

Mark 12:18-34

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Mark 12:18-34 (NIV)

Marriage at the Resurrection

¹⁸Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. ¹⁹"Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother.

²⁰Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. ²¹The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. ²²In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. ²³At the resurrection^[a] whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

²⁴Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? ²⁵When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. ²⁶Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'^[b]? ²⁷He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"

The Greatest Commandment

²⁸One 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?"

²⁹"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'^[c] ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'^[d] ³¹The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[e] There is no commandment greater than these."

³²"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To 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."

³⁴When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 12:23](#) Some manuscripts resurrection, when men rise from the dead,
- b. [Mark 12:26](#) Exodus 3:6
- c. [Mark 12:29](#) Or the Lord our God is one Lord
- d. [Mark 12:30](#) Deut. 6:4,5
- e. [Mark 12:31](#) Lev. 19:18

Introduction.

As a mother was preparing pancakes for her two sons, Johnny, age 5, and Alex, age 3, the boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. The mother saw this as an opportunity to teach her children about the value of sharing and loving your neighbor as yourself, so she said, "If Jesus was sitting here, He would say 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'"

Johnny quickly turned to his younger brother and said, "Okay, Alex, you be Jesus!"

The saying of Jesus about loving your neighbor as yourself is perhaps one of the best known and probably the least lived of all the things Jesus said. Our Lord's remarks regarding the greatest commandment come in the context of debates Jesus had with the Jewish leaders of His day, and they present a framework for godly living that is as important today as when He first spoke them. But before he talked about the commandments, Jesus had to answer a strange question about marriage in the afterlife. Let's look at these two matters together this morning.

I. The Question About Life After Death.

You will recall that after Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to celebrate the week of Passover with His disciples, almost immediately the leaders of the Jewish people began to criticize, question, and plot against Him. After



telling the parable of the tenants and answering a question concerning the paying of taxes, next we see another group, the Sadducees try to trip up Jesus with an unusual question.

The Sadducees were a branch of Judaism in Jesus' day, and they were a small, aristocratic, wealthy, and highly-educated group. Some call them the blue bloods of Jewish society. They were considered conservative theologically because they only believed in the books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. They were reductionists who boiled down the Word of God only to that which was written in the law, and they disregarded the historical books, the wisdom literature, and the prophets of the Old Testament. It's like if today we only wanted to read the Gospels and ignore the rest of the New Testament.

In addition, and perhaps most important as it relates to our passage, the Sadducees didn't believe in life after death. They thought this world is all there is and when a person dies his/her soul simply ceases to exist. The result was they believed the goal in life was to make it as predictable, trouble-free and comfortable as possible, and that's what they tried to do.

So the Sadducees came to Jesus with a question, and they presented a hypothetical situation involving seven brothers marrying a woman, one after the other and none of them having children. It had to do with a provision in the Old Testament law of Moses called Levirate marriage which was intended to preserve the family lineage and the family name, because the clan was all important in the ancient Near East. The question was ridiculous, of course, and they were hoping for a ridiculous answer to embarrass Jesus. What is important to notice here is that the Sadducees were mocking the idea of an afterlife.

Jesus responded by saying they were in error because they did not know either the Scriptures or the power of God, and He made two important statements about the afterlife and affirmed a strong conviction about the world to come. At first blush His remarks may appear confusing (and maybe even disheartening to those of us who are married!), but a closer look Jesus' answer reveals important truths.

Our Lord said, *"When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."* While it isn't true for everyone, for many Christians this is a big disappointment. They can't imagine how the next life could be any better or happier without being married to the person they love. I feel this way. My marriage is one of the happiest things in my life, and whenever I've read this passage in the past I've had some consternation over it. It would make me very happy to be married to Lorie forever – especially if both of us are going to be perfect in the world to come!

But Jesus was very clear – no marriage. So what does this tell us about the afterlife? Notice that Jesus was specifically talking about the resurrection. *"When the dead rise."* Pastor Andrew Siegenthaler¹ has said this saying of Jesus is an important reminder that heaven, in the sense of our souls being with God when we die, is not the final thing the Lord has planned for us. We are not going to exist as spirits forever. There will be a day of resurrection when Jesus returns, and the bodies of believers will be raised in a glorified state, like Christ. Our souls and our glorified bodies will be reunited, and we will live and reign in Christ's eternal kingdom in the new heaven and the new earth, as Scripture describes it. Heaven will come to earth and earth will become heaven.

The Bible just gives us hints and rumors of what that life will be like, and mostly it is described in terms of what we won't experience. For example, there will be no corruption, dishonor, and sin. Life will be without death, tears, crying or pain. So why won't marriage be a part of that picture? The reason seems to be this: because even the very best marriage in this life – the companionship, the intimacy, the trust, the shared jokes and laughter – is just training wheels for the greater life God has planned for us in the world to come. All of those deep and wonderful things that make marriage so great in this life we will experience in ways we can't even understand in the resurrection life to come.

I've done quite a few weddings over the last 30 years. It's one of my favorite things I get to do as a pastor, and at every wedding I have the best seat in the house. I see the bride come down the aisle in all her beauty, and I see the groom's reaction. I see the father's face when he gives his little girl away, and I see the eye contact the couple makes as they exchange their vows and rings. On occasion the thought comes to me – all these deep and wonderful things, these great hopes and joys, this standing on the threshold of a new life together, it's just a dress rehearsal for the great resurrection life God has planned for us.

There will be no marriage in heaven because our eternal life is described in Scripture as the bride of Christ, the Church, being joined together with the Lord at the wedding feast of the Lamb. All the greatest hopes and deepest joys we have experienced in this life, the companionship and the intimacy, are only a foretaste of the life we'll know in the resurrection through our union in Christ.



Do you and I live in the light of this truth today, whether you're married or not? Or are we, like the Sadducees, clinging to this life, looking to it to bring us the joy and satisfaction that only God can provide in the resurrection? Do we, like the Sadducees, make the focus of our days to try and make our lives as comfortable as possible – as easy, predictable, and trouble-free as we can, or do we live in the light of eternity and set our sights on a world that is to come? Are we expecting our marriage will bring us the kind of happiness and fulfillment that only God can supply? Then our expectations are sadly misdirected. This world is only a prelude for a greater world to come, and you and I are in training in this life for an eternity that awaits us.

That's one of the things that help me deal with the disappointments of this world. If this life is all there is, then eat drink and be merry. But we were made for something more – an eternity with Christ in a world made new!

II. The Greatest Commandment.

I think I've told you before that when Lorie and I and our kids moved to Colorado many years ago, we lived next door to a couple named Woody and Cathy. They had a ceramic tile next to the doorbell by their front door which kind of set the tone for the rules of engagement for our relationship. It read: "No Solicitors! Religious or otherwise! We like the way we are!" Woody and Cathy turned out to be great neighbors, but their little sign speaks of the way in which community has broken down in our world today.

Increasingly, people live isolated lives. We stick to ourselves, and we don't really know the people around us. Sociologists have developed a term to describe the average family's relational lifestyle nowadays, and they say most American families "cocoon" today. We hole ourselves up in our homes and don't interact that much with our neighbors, or we form virtual communities on the internet but never really have physical interaction with people. All too often we live isolated and lonely lives.

Be honest, how many of you know the first and last names of the people who live within five houses of you on both sides of the street? I'm ashamed to admit I don't either. We don't take the time to get to know those right around us, and as a result we experience very little community in our neighborhoods. We're too busy chasing the good life to really know the people near us even in the smallest of ways.

When asked of all the commandments in the Jewish law which was the most important, Jesus answered, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.*" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* There is no commandment greater than these" (Mk. 12:30,31). Elsewhere, He said all the law and the prophets of the Old Testament could be summed up in these two commandments. Jesus said our love for God will show up in our love for neighbor, and there is a horizontal dimension to a life of loving God as well as a vertical one.

There are several things we should note about the Great Commandment, as it has been called. First, Jesus started with our inborn defining human trait of self-love. All of us have a powerful instinct for self-preservation and self-fulfillment. We all want to be happy. Jesus began with love of self, and He didn't criticize it. That's an important distinction. To love God or to love others doesn't mean you need to hate yourself. Some Christians have a mistaken notion of this. Love of neighbor begins with love of self, and Jesus assumed it here in this passage. We are made in the image of God, and there is value in every human being.

But love of self can't simply remain there. It must move past itself to loving God and loving others, or it becomes twisted, jaded, and ingrown. True self-fulfillment is tied to relationship, and God invites us to move beyond ourselves and into relationships of love with Him and with other people.

The second thing we should notice about loving our neighbor as our selves is in answer to the question – who is my neighbor? A neighbor is anyone who is in close proximity to us. The word "neighbor" comes from two Old English words – "nigh" meaning "near" and "bur" meaning "dweller, especially a farmer." Literally, the word means the one who dwells near you. It came to mean anyone who is in proximity to a person, like the girl who sits next to you in class, or the person works in the office next to yours.

However, a neighbor is also someone you may encounter along the way. Their physical proximity makes them a neighbor to us, whether you know them or not. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan made that clear. The parable Jesus told also made it clear that a neighbor doesn't have to be anything like us in order to show them the love of Christ. The Jewish man who was beaten and the Samaritan in Jesus' parable could not have been more different. They were a different race, they didn't come from the same town, and they didn't worship God in the same way. But the



Lord brought them together for a time to be neighbors. In our love for Jesus Christ we must reach across race, class, and convenience to be a good neighbor to other people. It is our calling before Christ as this commandment reveals.

Most of us today don't have any significant relationships with seekers and people outside the faith. Unlike Jesus, we don't spend any considerable time regularly with those who don't know Him. Take a personal inventory. How many people do you know and spend time with who aren't already Christians? It's rather shocking, isn't it? If we aren't in relationship with the seekers of this community, in our neighborhoods, how do we expect to be as Christ and fulfill the incarnational calling of the Church? How does God want you to love your neighbor as yourself in the coming week?

In August 2008, John Buechner and his daughter Holly, who were members of my former congregation, were driving to Fort Worth for her sophomore year at TCU. (In one of those great ironies of God, Holly rooms with Vickie Gabriel's daughter Anna who is in our church.) Just as they crossed the pan handle of Oklahoma into Texas on highway 287, a 75-year-old woman turned into them and caused a head on collision. The cars were totaled, the woman died, and John and Holly were critically injured.

Lisa Crabtree and her husband Doak saw the accident and stopped to render aid, even though they were total strangers. She asked if they were alive, and when John and Holly answered "yes," she responded, "Are you believers?" She wanted to make sure no one went into eternity without knowing Jesus. Lisa called 911 and the paramedics arrived on the scene shortly. John and Holly were airlifted to Amarillo where emergency surgery was performed. John's wife Lori was notified of the accident at the school where she works, and her fellow teachers pooled their funds together so she could buy a ticket and fly down to be with her family in this time of crisis.

When I learned of the accident, I called two of my friends who are pastors in Amarillo. I asked them if they could check in on John and Holly at the hospital. Not only did Jim and Murray visit the Buechners, they also mobilized the church to rally around the family in wonderful ways. Members of the church in Boulder also came to the rescue, and it was an amazing outpouring of the love of God through the body of Christ across 2 different states. Some were friends and family; others were total strangers. All living out the Great Commandment to love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. John and Holly are fully recovered from their injuries and they're doing well.

Conclusion.

A couple of years ago, I heard a talk by Dr. Richard Swenson on the subject of margin, and one of the things he said in his message had to do with this whole notion of loving your neighbor as yourself. He suggested that as followers of Jesus we should be people who share, loan and borrow as part of our witness for Jesus.

Richard explained how one day he loaned his chainsaw to his neighbor, and the neighbor didn't return it right away. Someone asked him about it, and he said, "I'm not worried. I know where it is if I need it."

Then the chainsaw was broken, and he had to take it in to be repaired. When the guy at the hardware store found out that Richard had loaned his chainsaw to his neighbor, he said, "Oh, you should never loan your chainsaw out to anyone. That's a cardinal rule."

Richard thought to himself, "How sad to approach life like that, always hoarding and protecting your stuff." And then he added, "I couldn't help but think, 'Jesus thought so much of my neighbor that He died for him, but I think so little of my neighbor that I won't even lend him my chainsaw?'"

I was pulled up short by Richard's insight, and it called me to push past the selfishness of my own heart to begin to see my neighbors and my neighborhood as the people and the place in which I'm called to live my witness for Christ. How is God calling you to love your neighbor as yourself?

Take your bulletin and write the name of a person you're going to reach out to in the coming week and seek to love them. Pray for this person, and look for God to show up in your encounter with that individual. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no greater commandment than these"* (Mk. 12: 30,31). Look for God to show up this week and join Him on His mission of love for your neighbor! Amen.

ⁱ Andrew Seigenthaler, "Life After Death." A sermon preached at Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church, Cullman, AL, February 24, 2008. Some of the ideas of this point of the sermon are adapted from his message.

