

The number one rule of real estate: Location, location, location

The number one rule for writers: Write what you know.

The number one rule of investing: Don't lose money.

The number one rule for posting something online: Would you say it to someone's face?

The number one rule for surviving in Zombieland: Cardio. To escape a pursuing zombie you will need to out-run it.

If you were to ask Jesus what is the number one rule for life? What would he say? What is the single most important spiritual issue?

Well, we don't have to guess. We know the answer, because Jesus answered this question. In fact, he answered it twice. The second time he answered this question was the final week before his crucifixion, and Jesus had gone to the temple. It was here at the temple where some of his final conflicts with the religious leaders would take place.

Jesus Under Fire

The temple grounds were kind of like social media today. It's where everyone debated politics and argued their religious views. So every group has their representatives, their believers, and their trolls, at the temple making sure their viewpoint was heard, and to lure everyone else into a fight.

In Mark chapter 12, several of these groups take a stab at getting Jesus to say something stupid, something offensive they can use against him. This was 1st Century cancel culture. If we can get Jesus to say the wrong thing now, we can shut him up later.

Pharisees and Herodians

The first to go are the Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees you've heard a lot about. They are the super strict religious leaders. The Herodians, however, may be new to you. They were a political rather than a religious faction. They were strong supporters of the Herodian dynasty. Think King Herod. They were very accepting of Greek and Roman culture and customs, so they didn't care about sticking to traditional Judaism.

Under normal circumstances the Pharisees, who were devoutly Jewish and the Herodians were bitter enemies, but as they say 'politics makes strange bedfellows.' They team up here to question Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. Here's the trap they've set for Jesus. If he answers, "No, it's not right to pay taxes to Caesar, he pleases the Pharisees, but ticks off the Herodians and the civil authorities. If he answers, "Yes, we should all pay our taxes to Caesar," he angers the religious conservatives and ingratiates himself to the hated Romans. Either way, it stirs up trouble for Jesus. It's the classic no win scenario, but that's what both groups want.

Sadducees

Next, it's the Sadducees who tee off against Jesus. They mostly come from the wealthy upper crust of Jewish society. They were more interested in guarding their economic status than any spiritual or moral truth. They were the religious liberals. Like religious liberals today, they believe in everything and nothing at the same time. They reject most of the Old Testament. They didn't believe in angels and the supernatural. They don't believe in the resurrection or the afterlife.

The Sadducees ask Jesus a trick question about woman who marries a man, only for him to die and leave her a widow. She then marries one of her late husband's brothers, who also dies. This happens five more times with five more brothers, each in turn, and each one dies leaving her a grieving widow. In the afterlife, which the Sadducees don't even believe in, but they want to know whose wife will she be? It is one of those theoretical, theological conundrums designed to be impossible to disentangle.

Jesus, being the Son of God is able to cut through each proverbial Gordian knot with panache, and dispenses with each question with a divine wisdom that leaves each group of inquirers befuddled and silent.

The Scribe

The next to step up to the pitcher's mound to hurl questions high and inside at Jesus is a Scribe. Scribes were legal experts in the Law of Moses. They know the Old Covenant law inside and out. They know the dotting of every I, and the crossing of every T. They are the experts that everyone else goes to in order to win their arguments. Mark 12:28 says, *"And one the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another and seeing that he answers them well..."*

This scribe thinks he can do better than the Sadducees, so he winds up and slings this fastball at Jesus. *"Which commandment is the most important of all?"*

According to their studies, there were a total of 613 commandments in the Mosaic Law. There were 365 prohibitions. These are the "You shall nots"—things you were not allowed to do, and there were 248 positive commands. These are the "You shall" commands.

Moreover, the Scribes distinguished between what they called heavy or weighty commands and light commands. Light commands made less demand on one's life, whereas heavy or weighty commands concerned life's uncompromising essentials. These were the most serious commandments, and breaking them invoked the most serious penalties.

So, the scribe's question here is what is the weightiest command of them all. Out of all 613 commandments, out of all those do's and don'ts, which one is the most important? In God's eyes, what is rule number 1?

Jesus has a ready answer. In verses 29-31 we read,

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

The Greatest Command: Love God

This Scribe or any Jew would immediately recognize this. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This is known as the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for "hear," as in "Hear, O Israel."

It is the John 3:16 of the Old Testament. In Hebrew football games every time a field goal is kicked a Jewish guy stands up with Deuteronomy 6:4-5 written on a banner. Every devout Jew would quote these verses twice a day. These are the verses that the very religious would write on little scrolls and literally tie them to their wrists and their foreheads. They would attach these verses like fortune cookies to their doorframes. **It is called a Mezuzah. It's a little box with a little scroll of the Shema rolled up inside.** To this day, if you travel to Israel and stay in a hotel, you will find the Shema on the outside of the door to your room.

(Advance Slide) You can boil this whole command down to two words: "Love God." The Shema specifies we do this by loving God *"with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*

Some Bible Scholars get really analytical with this and break it down to loving God with emotions, with your spirit, with your intellect, and with your will. That sounds really nice and makes for four easy points in an outline, but the problem is that the Hebrew or Greek words don't necessarily breakdown into our modern western categories that exactly.

I've mentioned before how in Jewish culture they would repeat things in different ways to make a point. The more you repeat, the more important it is. That's what's going on here. **It's four different ways of saying Love God with everything you've got.** Don't hold anything back.

I love compartments. Compartments are handy. With compartments I can organize and I can understand. I can easily put away and retrieve. With compartments everything has its place and purpose. Everything has its place when I don't need it, and when I do, I know right where to find it. I've got compartments for all my little screws, and nuts and bolts and washers. I've got compartments for all my old computer parts. I even use an online cloud app that gives me compartments for all my ideas and sermon illustrations.

Marriage counselors even tell me that as man, my brain is made up of little compartments. Mark Gungor, in *Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage* says men have a box in their brain for everything. A box for work. A box for their wife. A box for their mother-in-law. A box for their friends. A box for their hobby. And the rule is the boxes never touch. We never want to have two boxes open at the same time.

There is one thing though that you can't put in a box, and that is God. We can't put God in compartment and keep him there for when we need Him, but most days, we don't need Him, so we can just put that box up on a shelf for later.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying here? **He's saying your whole life is the God compartment.** You love God with every box you have in your brain. You love him with every area of your life. There is no day of the week, no hour on the clock, no month on the calendar God, where God doesn't deserve anything less than your deepest and most devoted love.

Mark 12:30 doesn't say love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength except during summer, except during football, soccer, or baseball season, except hunting season. There are no exceptions. Love God with everything. Love God with all that you are.

The Second Greatest Commandment: Love People

So, Jesus has answered the Scribe's question. What is the greatest commandment? Love God. But Jesus doesn't stop there. It is BOGO day for Q and A with Jesus. Jesus throws in two for the price of one. Mark 12:31 says, **"The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."**

Here is the surprise. There isn't one greatest commandment. There are two. Love God and Love People. What does God want from you more than anything else? Love God and Love people. What is it essential that we get, even if we miss the other stuff? Love God and Love people.

Jesus gives 2 for 1 because one automatically leads to the other. Love for God releases the love of God. John writes in 1 John 4:11, 19-20, *"Dear friends since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another...We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar."*

Love God and Love People. You can accept both. You can reject both. What you cannot do is separate them, and pick one and not the other. You can't love God, but not love people. You can't say, "I love God," but then turn around and despise those he loves.

We must love others because we love God and God loves people. We demonstrate our love for Him by loving what He loves. It is the height of hypocrisy to say, "I love God, but I hate people." "I love Him, but I can do without them."

Think about this. **You will never meet another person that God does not love with all of his heart.** You will never meet another person that Jesus did not die on the cross to save. You will never meet another person that Jesus does not love as a brother or sister and He longs for them to share His home in heaven.

And you can't love people but not love God. He is how we know what love looks like. Loving people without loving God is like trying to put a puzzle together without a picture on the box. A

lot of people try to love without God, but then we're just making it up as we go along. We're just going by feelings. We're groping about in the dark. The love of God shows us how to love.

Why Love for God Must Come First

I want to clarify one other thing. Both love God and love people are essential commandments, but we must remember the commandment to love God is the greatest commandment. It must come first. Loving people comes second. When we switch those two around and we make loving God secondary to loving people, then we get all sorts of twisted with our morality. When doing what people want is more important than doing what God wants, we will end up doing what God hates every time.

Love for God must always come first. His holiness. His truth. His righteousness. His Word are the compass points that show us the true north for loving people. Love will drive you to fulfill what the other desires. Now God always desires the right thing, so loving Him first will never steer you wrong. But people's desires are all kinds of messed up, so if you make fulfilling their desires the most important thing, it will take us down all sorts of wrong roads.

If what God wants comes first, then what He wants comes first, not what other people want. Loving people within the context of loving God means we will always be willing to provide people what they need, without enabling them in their most sinful and destructive desires.

You see the addict, if you put your love for people first, will want you to enable their habit. They'll be borrowing money from you. You'll be paying for the necessities, so they can get another bottle, another pill. And they will look at you with tears in their eyes, if you really love, you will do this.

If you put loving people before loving God, they will want you to look the other way when they want to do something harmful, hurtful, or destructive. "Oh, just cover for me. It's no big deal. If you really love me, you'll do it."

It's this concept of loving people first, that the world loves to throw back into Christianity's face. You say you love people, but then you try to force your standards of right and wrong on us. You say you love people, but then you judge what we do. If you really love people, you'll will let them do what they want. What do you care? This is what the world says.

They see things this way, because loving God isn't a part of the equation at all. Loving people, for them, is not only the greatest commandment. It's the only commandment, so that means letting people do whatever they want. If loving people is the greatest commandment, then if they want to sleep around with whomever they want, it's okay. If they want to marry someone of the same sex, what does it matter to me? If they want to marry themselves, a dolphin, or a roller coaster, who am I to say anything. After all I'm only supposed to love them, so I should let them love whomever or whatever they want.

I'm not making any of that up, by the way. There are real people who married all those things. I don't know why anyone would want to marry a roller coaster, as a real human relationship have enough ups and downs of its own. Once we decided that what God wants doesn't matter, we opened the door to anything goes. There's no stopping it. There's no going back now.

As a follower of Jesus, though, what God wants must always come first. That doesn't mean that I judge my neighbor. God's job, not my job. It doesn't mean that I will try to force my morality on them. My job is to show them Jesus, not make them obey Jesus. It doesn't mean that I will treat my neighbor in any way that is mean, hateful, abusive, or in any way less than loving. I may be tolerant of their choices and actions in the classic sense, that is enduring behavior and opinions even though I disagree with them, but since I love God first and foremost, I can never accept, approve, or applaud anything that goes against what God wants.

My love for God and my love for them means I want for them what God wants for them. I love them enough that I don't want them to go to hell. I love them enough that I want them to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It means that I love them enough to at least tell them the truth, even if it's uncomfortable. It means I will continue to love them even if they don't agree with me, and even if they don't follow Jesus.

Let me be very clear. God wants us to love others, but that is a love that must come out of our love for God. Our love for others never supersedes our love and obedience to God. I love what Jon Bloom writes, "The most loving thing we can do for others is love God more than we love them." We love others best, when we love God most.

If you're not a Christian, I know this sounds preposterous. You might even have trouble swallowing it as a believer. But it's true. When we love Jesus first, there is a depth of love and grace that flows inexplicably from our lives. We find a supernatural ability to deny self and put others first. The biggest reason though that we love others best, when we love God most, is that love, in its purest and truest form, comes from God, because God is love. So when we love God first, we will love others according to the highest definition of love possible.

Love God and Love People. There's a reason Jesus says there are no other commandments greater than these. In Matthew's record of this encounter, he quotes Jesus as saying, "*On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.*" Every commandment can be boiled down to one of these two things: Love God, and Love people. Every do, every don't, every rule, every commandment is designed to help us do these two things: Love God and Love People.

Christian morality is very simple really. In every decision, in every action, and in every word we ask ourselves two questions: Number one: does this show my love for God, and number two does this show my love for people? If the answer is "Yes," it's the right thing to do. If the answer is, "No," then it's the wrong thing to do.

This is the point that the Apostle Paul makes so eloquently in 1 Corinthians 13 in that famous passage known as the Love Chapter. Paul takes all these Christian virtues. All these issues of Christian morality and he ties them directly to love.

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but have not love, I am nothing.
If I give away all I have,
and if I deliver up my body to be burned,
but have not love, I gain nothing.
Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful; [b] 6
it does not rejoice at wrongdoing,
but rejoices with the truth. 7
Love bears all things,
believes all things,
hopes all things,
endures all things.
Love never ends.
As for prophecies, they will pass away;
as for tongues, they will cease;
as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9
For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10
but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11
When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.
When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12
For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
Now I know in part;
then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.
So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love*