

**How Far Do We Want to Go?**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

Mark 12:28-34

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>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."  
<sup>31</sup>The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor (עַר, rā' ah) as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.' <sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other"; <sup>33</sup>and "to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength", and "to love one's neighbor as oneself",—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.' <sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.

**Sermon:**

The other day as I was setting in front of the TV finishing up some sermon research while waiting for the Toledo vs Ball State football game to come on, I was constantly assaulted with back-to-back political ads. I will be so glad when the mid-term elections are over. I am sick and tired of candidates accusing each other of being crooks and incompetents. Isn't it bad enough that only 19% of the American public believe they can trust the government always or most of the time? And, seventy-four percent of our population believe that most elected officials put their own interest ahead of the country and are less honest than typical Americans or business leaders<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, according to TV, if we vote, we are going to elect some sinister and elitist crook regardless of his or her political party. Such thinking reminds me that as Christians, although we may live in this world now, our values are not supposed to be of this world. Our Christ values, regardless of such post-Enlightenment ideas of separation of Church and State, etc., means we are supposed to be morally and spiritually integrated citizens of the kingdom of God, first and foremost, whether we work or serve in government or not.

Speaking of elitist, in many Christian's minds, the scribes and Pharisees in our New Testament are often viewed as very sinister and conniving elitist religious leaders. Actually, they were not that much different from many religious people, lay or professional, across the ages, especially if they take their religious life and the well-being of their societies seriously. However, gospel writers saw some of the ancient scribes and Pharisees as having become so obsessed with their religious perspectives and imperatives, which benefited them in various honorific ways, that they had abandoned common sense and discounted the intrinsic value of others, especially those who didn't agree with them or couldn't comply with their religious perspectives due to life circumstances.

Let me add, that most of the religious elite and the common folks of Jesus' day were comfortable with their religious status quo, just as many of us are today. They didn't see a need to consider something new, especially when it would mean re-examining hundreds of years of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/>

religious traditions and making institutional and personal changes predicated upon the message of some country bumpkin, itinerant, miracle-working prophet, with his peasant-endorsed pedigree.

To this I add that Jesus was not some Marxist revolutionary, seeking to turn the social order upside down. Jesus simply advocated that the religious elite should keep faith with the spirit of the Mosaic Law and not employ religious traditions that made things worse for the poor. Also, cut the poor some slack when malevolent social, economic, or natural forces overtook them. The poor just wanted a world where justice, synonymous with righteousness, prevailed. A world where they could keep and maintain their honor and provide for their families without being victimized; in other words, they longed for the kingdom of God.

However, today, in our scriptures we have a scribe, a religious lawyer, who has overheard Jesus' disputations with several Pharisees and some officials in King Herod's court and evidently liked what he heard from Jesus. However, the scribe's question didn't appear to be an attempt to trap Jesus, although it was still a challenge. This scribe simply wanted to know what was Jesus' basis in Torah for his teachings.

Jesus' answer, as the scribe will confirm, was well within traditional Jewish understandings and teachings as Jesus recalled the words of the Shema from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-9), which were also the opening words of a devout Jew's morning and evening prayers. However, Jesus unbidden adds the second greatest commandment by citing a passage from Leviticus 19:18. Leviticus 19:18 falls within what is referred to as the Holiness Code that details things Jews should do or not do to be considered "set apart" from others as God's elect.

The Talmud, a body of Jewish civil ceremonial laws, and legends, tells a story of Rabbi Hillel, who lived around the time of Jesus. It seems a pagan came to him saying that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the whole of the Torah in the time he could stand on one foot. Rabbi Hillel replied, "What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole Torah; the rest is just commentary. Go and study it." (Talmud Shabbat 31a). This idea was a fundamental part of Judaism long before Hillel or Jesus. It is a common-sense application of the Torah commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:18) [However,] Judaism is not content to leave love and brotherhood as a lofty ideal to be fulfilled as each individual sees fit. Judaism spells out, in intricate detail, how a person is meant to show that love.<sup>2</sup>

I wish to highlight Rabbi Hillel's point to the pagan - go and study the commentary on the Torah; that is, study the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures and all their commentaries through the lenses of the Law of Reciprocity.

Sociologists of Religion, Malina and Rohrbaugh, tell us that "to love God with all one's heart" means total attachment to [God] at the exclusion of other deities (in other words, "Thou shall have no other gods before me."); "to love one's neighbor as oneself" is attachment to the people in one's neighborhood as to one's own family - a very normal thing in the group-oriented Mediterranean (see Lev. 19:18, where neighbor is understood to mean "sons of your own people"). Correspondingly, "hate" would mean "dis-attachment, nonattachment, indifference." Again, there may or may not be feelings of repulsion. But it is the inward feeling of nonattachment along with the outward behavior bound up with not being attached to a group and the persons that are part of that group that hate entails. Such understandings are the fitting context within which to understand our scriptures this morning.

Let me interject at this point that I think the idea of loving the self within the ANE context could be understood simply as a person taking good care of themselves and living and acting in

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<sup>2</sup> Kaiser Jr. , Walter C. , The Book of Leviticus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections. Ministry Matters, accessed 103018.

ways that maintain the family's honor status while protecting and providing for those dependent upon them. Love, as the Apostle Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 13, does not allow us to indulge in irresponsible or self-destructive behaviors nor condone such things in those we love. In fact, in 1 Cor. 13:13, Paul's trinity of faith, hope, and love could easily be translated as "personal loyalty, enduring trust in another, and group attachment," and, of course, the greatest of these is group attachment.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, neither Jesus, nor the author of Mark's Gospel, were airheads or hippie flower children of their day. Jesus, as did Mark, understood that the kingdom of God that had come near in the Good News was not of this world. To this point, Jesus in effect redefined what was honorable and godly behavior for those who would be holy in the coming new world.

The ancient Jewish sages, whose teachings obviously influenced Jesus' thinking, held that God's loyal care and attachment to God's people, God's love, was the reason for God creating the universe. Thus, these two great Laws of Love - love of God and love of neighbor as the self - reflect God's fundamental intentions in all creation, and as such, are the highest ways and means of being human in one's relationship to God and others. I believe it is in the human capacity to love beyond just empathy aided by the Holy Spirit that is a key to bringing the kingdom of God on earth and avoiding the destruction of the spiritual dimension of our species.

Love is not a second-hand emotion, regardless of what Tina Turner said. It is not the first or last retreat of the sentimentalist or uncritical thinkers. Love is not just biology or chemistry. Love, loyal care of self and others, is the intellectual and spiritual means of participating in God's presence and purposes in the world that brings its own unique emotional dimension - joy, regardless of one's station or plight in life.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, love of neighbor was extended beyond the loyal care and concern for one's families, community, or tribe to include what the Old Testament scriptures call the "Stranger." The Hebrew Scriptures anticipated and accommodated strangers, which could include non-attached Jews or Jewish refugees, but also non-Jews, coming to live among God's people in the holy lands. These people were to be extended hospitality, and protected while living among the Jews and the stranger was expected to respect the laws of the land, its people's beliefs and practices, and contribute to the general wellbeing of all.

So, to our text and its message for today. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit as the Gospel moved out of its original homeland and later under the influences of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century "the sons and daughters of your people" was reinterpreted and became understood more universally. In the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment perspectives on Jesus' teachings, although not culturally correct for Jesus' day, Christians have been encouraged to see all humankind as brothers and sisters. Well, that has had only limited success, hasn't it?

I think in all fairness though, this may be due in part to some innate psychological limitation. The further out we go in the circles of human relationships the more abstract others become. To this, I reiterate that Jesus' original teaching encompassed only his fellow Jews in Galilee, Judea, and those alienated Israelites known as the Samaritans, and possibly Jews in the Diaspora. Thus, Jesus' so-called worldview although expanded by the standards of his day were not as universal as we might think. However, this does not mean we don't strive in the Spirit's leadership to intellectually and spiritual overcome those original cultural and natural limitations.

As we are faced daily with the atrocities of terrorism, social and moral decay, and political upheaval, I pray that in an act of self-love or self-care, we will not allow malignant forms of indifference and hatred to take root in our hearts and minds. I pray that we will conscientiously and thoughtfully hear the ancient teachings of Rabbi Hillel and "go and study" God's laws through

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

the perspectives of universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind. Or, as we read in Isaiah, "Come now let us reason together", says the Lord." (Isaiah 1:18) In our Christian era, that would include studying and reasoning with the Lord in and through the teachings of Jesus the Christ also.

However, when attempts at reason, kindness, caring, and respect fail, and good people must do bad things for reasons of necessity to protect and preserve themselves, their families, communities, and nations, never let us think such things are good or right, they may simply be what is necessary.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God as he understood it and to proclaim the ways and means of kingdom citizenship. The organic idea of the kingdom of God with all its promises of universal peace, wholeness, and prosperity has lain at the heart of humankind's hopes from day one. That is, Eden regained. The reality of that kingdom of God, as Jesus revealed, resides in a paradigm of divine-human love - love of self, love of neighbor, which is in effect love of God, all fitting neatly into a circle of reciprocity and mutual benefit.

Please note that in Jesus' conversation with the scribe both men set aside "we", "us", "them", and "they" language, going beyond sectarian differences. We see both men agreeing that there is only one God and what truly endears one to God is to be found in a person's capacity to respond to God's creative and sustaining love by honoring and respecting their own humanity and personhood in others.

Jesus said that the scribe's insights placed him "not far from" the kingdom of God. This statement hangs in the air unexplained. Did you ever wonder, given the scribe's insights, why Jesus didn't say to him, "Man, you are dead on!" I think Jesus didn't say this because there was one more thing this scribe needed to do to be in the kingdom that had come near. Like others he needed to give up all he had, follow Jesus on the way, and to live out his understandings of the first and second greatest commandment to fully enter the Kingdom of God.

Sadly, I think sometimes I hear the voices of some Christians, including myself, who should have given up the ways of this world to follow Jesus, still living on the outskirts of the kingdom, singing an encouraging religious descant to the hate, discord, xenophobia, misogyny, racism, and intolerance of this world; thereby, validating, encouraging, and empowering sinister elitists as they lead us into decadence and destruction?

However, I take great comfort and assurance that those in Christ, citizens of God's kingdom, will inherit its fullness one day. So, I guess the only question that remains is how far from the center of God's joy do we want to be? Go and study it.

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