

Mark 12: 28-34

## Of Most Importance

In a Reader's Digest article, Morgan Cutolo wrote,

If you've ever come close to achieving something but didn't quite get to the goal, you've probably heard the saying, "Close, but no cigar." You probably just accept defeat and move on...The expression, "Close, but no cigar" means that a person fell slightly short of a successful outcome and therefore gets no reward.

The phrase most likely originated in the 1920s when fairs, or carnivals, would hand out cigars as prizes. At that time, the games were targeted towards adults, not kids. Yes, even in the '20s most carnival games were impossible to win which often led the owner of the game to say, "Close, but no cigar" when the player failed to get enough rings around bottles or was just shy of hitting the target. As fairs started to travel around the United States, the saying spread and became well-known.<sup>1</sup>

Makes one wonder about Jesus' response to the teacher who asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" And after a little back and forth, some agreement and Jesus determining that the man had answered wisely, he said to him. "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Not far from the kingdom. Close but no cigar.

There is another saying, "Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." It seems that maybe close is not quite enough when it comes to love. According to Jesus we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This not close or no cigar, this is "all in" thinking. We can't hope to love God just enough for God to notice that we are doing and saying all the right things. We are called to consider God's love for us, for others, and our love for God and how that moves us to love others in every thought, act, deed, and word.

That is a lot to consider, but let me give you a little context for this discussion. Jesus had entered Jerusalem and according to Mark's gospel, he had been fielding questions and been drawn in to debates with chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. They were testing him to see if they could trip him up...trap him into saying something blasphemous. So far that has not gone well for them. All the while and on the sidelines has been a teacher of the law listening to the debate and as the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rd.com/article/close-but-no-cigar-origin/> Accessed October 29, 2021.

scripture says, “Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked of Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Of all that is those pages of story about God and his people that is the Old Testament, the question is, what is of most importance in Jesus’ mind?

Before we hear Jesus’ answer again, ponder for yourself...If I asked you what was of most importance to you, how would you answer that. Many of us would not answer with “Love God.” We might think that is how we should answer, but how we actually live and think can paint a different picture. Many parents would answer that their children are their highest priority, others may say having a good job so that they can support themselves and others. Given our society’s propensity for wealth, power, and prestige, it is pretty easy to get caught up in striving for any one of those things through family, our work, or online presence.

How we prioritize things in our lives can be a pretty clear indication as to what is of most importance to us. Even well-intentioned pastors can get caught up in what needs doing, giving that priority over who it is being done for. This was something I recognized this past week as I found myself feeling depleted in energy and enthusiasm. There have been many demands and requests on my time in the last two months and so spending time with God in prayer and study ended up sidelined as I have worked to meet deadlines and answer inquiries, prepare worship services, as well as be leadership presence at a number of funeral and internments as people were finally able to gather to bury loved ones.

I hit a wall last week, God’s reminder that what had become of most importance to me was work rather than for whom I was working. To that end I am taking study leave to set aside time to study, pray, and rest in God. I desire to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, but when one doesn’t give that priority on a daily basis, well things get a little or a lot out of alignment.

Makes me think about having one’s tires aligned. Have you ever traveled behind a vehicle and thought, hmmn, the back tires are not following the front, things are out of alignment? Well, our lives get like that too. God leads and loves us, has given us what we need to follow, but we get off track, a little off center, and if that is not dealt with then we can find it takes more to get things back on track. Repairs and reparations in our relationship to God and with others, whether family, friends, co-workers or colleagues, even our neighbours – in the house next door, or in another place – that work needs to be done and at times the work can be pretty difficult.

Of all the commandments, which is the most important?

The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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 second is this, Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

Did you catch it? Jesus gave what sounds like two commandments, the first to love God and the second, to love our neighbour as you love yourself. And then ends with “There is no commandment – singular, not plural – there is no commandment greater than these.

Loving God with all you heart, soul, mind and strength, is about understanding and demonstrating that love in how we love others and ourselves. You cannot say you love God and then go gossip about what someone did. You cannot love God and then cheat on your partner in love or business. Loving God means taking time for God, and taking time for those God brings into our lives. Loving God with everything that makes you you means that you will love others and yourself with dignity, value, forgiveness, and understanding.

This does not mean that you will be in perfect agreement with everyone all the time. One can disagree and still love. You need only watch the news or jump on social media to see how many good, loving, well-meaning Christians are caught up in arguing about mask and vaccine mandates, politics and policies. It is here that I think the example of the teacher who stood on the sidelines watching the debate can teach us a little something.

It is unlikely that the teacher started to follow Jesus, but the two of them found common ground in their faith, a starting place for dialogue. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 we read the words of the Shema. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” This was a place of commonality for Jesus and the teacher, and interestingly enough when Jesus expanded this saying to include, with all your *mind*, the teacher agreed, saying” 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.”

Jesus said *mind* and the teacher said *understanding*, words that are both about how we think. And our thinking, our priorities, what is of most importance to us, determines how we love. If we love God then we will love our neighbour. The two are so interconnected in action and in thought that they cannot be separated.

Now of course, none of us does this perfectly all the time. Few of us even do it consistently well. Still, we strive for these things, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and in so doing are able to love our neighbour and ourselves with compassion, kindness, generosity, and hope. Unlike a game of chance where it is close but no cigar, where we are not far from the kingdom of God, maybe being all in means that we love to the best of our ability and God honours that and we find ourselves as part of the kingdom of God, right now in our daily living.

We ask forgiveness, and do better as we know better. God knows our hearts, and whether or not God is of most importance in our being even when we fall short. May you take time to ponder this and answer it honestly. Look at how you treat yourself and

others, those you love dearly, and the stranger you don't know. Where is your heart, mind, soul, and strength? What do you pour all of that into?

May this reading from Mark remind each of us of what is of most importance, as we live our lives in the Spirit of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.