

November 3, Ordinary 31B (Mark 12:28–34)

## **The scribe's question to Jesus is not merely an academic exercise.**

by [Niveen Ibrahim Sarras](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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This Sunday's gospel reading captures a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus, in which he articulates the core of his ethical teaching in response to a question about the greatest commandment.

Immediately prior to this, the Sadducees question Jesus about the resurrection, which they deny (Mark 12:18–27). Jesus affirms the resurrection, states that earthly institutions like marriage do not exist in the afterlife, emphasizes that God is the God of the living, and supports this with scriptural evidence. Then a scribe, recognizing the wisdom in Jesus' response, approaches him with an inquiry concerning the foremost commandment of all.

The question is not merely an academic exercise. It reflects a broader debate within Judaism about how to live faithfully according to God's will. The Torah contains 613 commandments, and the scribe's question seeks to distill these into a guiding principle.

Distinguished rabbis often encounter such questions—the scribe's inquiry is quite typical. Rabbi Hillel (40 BC–AD 10) was approached by a gentile who said, "Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole law while I stand on one foot."

Hillel responded, "'What is hateful to you, to your neighbor don't do.' That's the entirety of the law; everything else is commentary. So go, study." Jesus says something similar in Matthew 7:12.

Here, in response to inquiries about the greatest commandment, Jesus articulates two central commandments that form the foundation of his ethical teachings. The first is a recitation of the Shema (Hebrew: "Hear"), a fundamental declaration of Jewish faith that serves as a creed encapsulating monotheism: "Hear, O Israel: the

Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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,” a directive rooted in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. This call to love the one God with one’s entire being is the cornerstone of Jewish spirituality and identity. To this, Jesus appends a second commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” drawn from Leviticus 19:18.

The Shema has long been recited by the Jewish community twice daily, in the morning and evening, “when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut. 6:7). Throughout history, it has served as the final testament of faith for Jewish martyrs. Rabbi Akiva, a second-century scholar and martyr, famously recited the Shema as his last declaration of devotion. This proclamation not only affirmed Jewish monotheistic faith, setting Judaism apart from the polytheistic Greco-Roman religions, but also served as a rallying cry during periods of persecution. By combining these commandments, Jesus highlights the inseparable connection between them: steadfast devotion to God is demonstrated through love for others.

The scribe affirms Jesus’ answer, recognizing the wisdom in prioritizing love over ritual sacrifice. His response suggests his inquiry is genuine. As Mark Strauss argues in his commentary, the gospel writer’s theological assertion is that, in the absence of pride or hypocrisy, even Israel’s leaders acknowledge the divine origin of Jesus’ wisdom. A significant challenge Jesus faces during his earthly ministry is addressing how people prioritize the law’s legality over its intended purpose. The Pharisees, in particular, were prone to this error. In their commitment to strict obedience, they adopted a legalistic interpretation of the written law, sometimes losing sight of the underlying truths.

The mutual understanding between Jesus and the scribe highlights a shared vision of what it means to live faithfully before God. In a context in which Jesus often encounters entrapment by way of challenging inquiries, he perceives the scribe’s sincerity and authentic pursuit of truth and offers affirmation in return. Jesus commends the scribe, saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” suggesting that recognizing and embodying these commandments brings one closer to God’s kingdom—moving in the right direction toward the kingdom. Mark ends this episode by stating that no one dares ask Jesus any more questions because his response has silenced his interlocutor.

Jesus’ message calls for a faith characterized by love, which Paul describes the greatest Christian virtue (1 Cor. 13) that fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8–10). This passage

invites reflection on true discipleship, where love defines one's relationship with God and others, embodying the transformative vision of the kingdom of God.