

Mark Chapters 12-13: Our Work Fulfills the Great Commandment

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Mark

Seeing that Jesus is skilled at interpreting scripture, a scribe asks him a question that was already under contention among Jewish leaders. “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answers with two linked commandments that would be well known to his listeners. The first is a declaration to the Jewish people: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Then in the same breath Jesus adds, “The second is this,” and he quotes Leviticus 19:18 “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ wise answer gives us some insight into God’s priorities. If there are just two tasks God wants us to concentrate on more than any other they are loving God and loving those around us. It is worth mentioning that by saying, “as yourself,” Jesus also expects us to love ourselves.

Thankfully, work can be one of the primary ways we respond to the Great Commandment. Many jobs give Christians an opportunity to fulfill the basic needs of another person. Take health care, for example. A doctor who writes a prescription, a pharmacist who fills that prescription, and the person who stocks the shelves at CVS all play a role in delivering necessary health services to their neighbors. Further up and down the supply chain we see the invaluable work of scientists who test the effectiveness of medical interventions, construction workers who maintain the roads along which medication travels, and case workers who process health insurance claims, all participating in loving their neighbors by meeting their basic human needs.

But human needs do not only extend to healthcare. People also need food, shelter, laughter, and connection to meaning greater than themselves. So farmers and restaurant workers, home builders and home insurers, comedians and children, and philosophers and pastors all have a way to love others through their daily work, simply by doing their work well.

Practically speaking, this means that we love our neighbor by doing true work, that is, work as God would have us do it. This may or may not be what the other person would like us to do. For example our co-workers might want us to serve them by doing their work for them, but God would probably have us serve them by helping them do it themselves. Or a customer might want us to provide the product with the lowest price, whereas God might want us to educate the customer why the higher-priced item is better for the customer, the environment or the community. The first half of the Great Commandment plants our feet in

the solid ground of God's purposes. We are to work for others as servants of God, not as people-pleasers.

Upon hearing Jesus' answer to his question, the scribe concurs that Jesus is right in his priorities. Loving God and loving people are indeed more important than specific commandments required by the Jewish law. Jesus responds that his questioner is "not far from the kingdom of Heaven." Similarly, when we hold our own actions up to the standard of the Great Commandment, when we love God completely and care for others with the same care we show ourselves, we bring the kingdom of God to our places of work.