

Mark 12:28

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

Analysis

Which is the first commandment of all? This scribe (γραμματεύς, grammateus), having observed Jesus' skillful responses to hostile questions, genuinely seeks truth. Unlike previous interrogators, he recognizes Jesus **had answered them well** and approaches with sincere inquiry. The question about the first (πρώτη, prōtē) commandment addresses a live rabbinic debate: which of the 613 Torah commands takes priority? Some rabbis ranked commandments as 'heavy' and 'light'; others sought a unifying principle.

Mark uniquely notes the scribe's positive assessment of Jesus' wisdom before asking his question—this scribe comes as a learner, not a trap-setter. Jesus' answer (vv. 29-31) will quote the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) and the love commandment (Leviticus 19:18), distilling God's law to its essence: total devotion to God and sacrificial love for neighbor. This exchange stands in sharp contrast to earlier confrontations (taxes to Caesar, resurrection debates with Sadducees), culminating in mutual respect between Jesus and this discerning scribe.

Historical Context

Scribes (experts in Mosaic law) devoted their lives to studying, interpreting, and teaching Torah. By the first century, rabbinic tradition had identified 613 commandments in the Torah (248 positive, 365 negative). Debates about which commandments were most important or foundational were common in Jewish

schools. Rabbi Hillel (c. 110 BC – 10 AD) famously summarized the law: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary.' Jesus' response to this scribe reflects similar concern for the heart of the law. This conversation occurs during Passion Week in Jerusalem's temple courts, where scribes and teachers regularly debated.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. Why does Jesus respond differently to this scribe than to previous questioners, and what does this teach about discerning genuine seekers from hostile critics?
2. How does the question about the 'first' commandment reveal the danger of elevating minor theological disputes over fundamental devotion to God?
3. In what ways might contemporary Christianity need to recover clarity about the 'first commandment' amid proliferating religious rules and traditions?

Interlinear Text

Kαὶ	προσελθὼν	εἷς	τῶν	γραμματέων	ἀκούσας	αὐτόν
And	came	one	G3588	of the scribes	and having heard	him
G2532	G4334	G1520		G1122	G191	G846
συζητούντων	εἰδὼς	ὅτι	καλῶς	αὐτόν	ἀπεκρίθη	
reasoning together	and perceiving	that	well	him	he had answered	
G4802	G1492	G3754	G2573	G846	G611	
ἐπηρώτησεν	αὐτόν	Ποία	ἐστὶν	πρώτη	πασῶν	ἐντολὴ
asked	him	Which	is	the first	of all	commandment
G1905	G846	G4169	G2076	G4413	G3956	G1785

