

Title: THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS DO GREAT THINGS, MARK 12:28-34
(Chatham, NJ; 11/04/12, AM) [Pt – Topical]

Theme: Obeying God above all else bring about major changes in society.

Purpose: To demonstrate how obeying the first commandment brought about changes in pagan culture and ultimately conquered paganism, but to give warnings about ignoring these commandments today.

Introduction:

1. This scribe is a good one: to obey is better than all burnt offerings.
 - Hosea 6:6 – I desire mercy not sacrifice
 - 1 Sam. 15:22 – to obey is better than sacrifice
2. Obedience still counts for something.
3. Obeying God has far-reaching consequences: we may take it for granted, but our society is becoming increasingly unaware of the consequences of disobedience.

I. Mercy was a pathology in many pagan philosophers but a virtue in Christianity.

- A. The philosophers (E. A. Judge 1986, quoted in Stark, *Rise*, p. 212)
 1. Defects of character to be avoided by all rational men.
 2. Humans must “curb the impulse” because it is not governed by reason and is contrary to justice
 3. See quote on p. 212.
 4. This was the moral climate of the 1st century.
- B. But Christianity...
 1. Mercy is a primary virtue, Mt. 5:7
 2. The new concept of Christianity: because God loves humanity we must love one another (2nd greatest command), also 1 John 3:16-18.
 3. Behavior demands were nothing new but God’s love for humanity was new.
 4. Even more: the love demand extends beyond family and friends, Mt. 5:43-48
 5. Cyprian’s quote, Stark 212.
 6. Not also his thesis, 211
 7. Obeying the 1st commandment change their whole outlook.

II. Women/abortions/marriage/response to epidemics

- A. Women and abortions
 1. Letter from Hilarion to his wife (Stark, *Rise* 97) – selective abortion is still prevalent
 2. Christians condemned all abortion and female infanticide
 3. Favorable view of women also seen in: condemnation of divorce, incest, adultery, and polygamy
 4. Christians also renounced the pagan double standard that demanded chastity in women but allowed sexual license in men (founder of Cosmopolitan took the opposite approach: men and women can both sleep around)
- B. Hebrews 13:4 & Eph. 5:22-33 elevated and sanctified marriage
 1. Today marriage is under assault not just by homosexuals but by heterosexuals who see it as unnecessary or an encumbrance to personal fulfillment
 2. Propositions 9, “What’s Missing from Our Middle Class Debate?”
 3. See the items marked in this newsletter.
 4. Loving God demands that we love the institution of marriage as He created it.
- C. Response to epidemics

1. One in Athens in 431 BC and one in Alexandria 251 AD
2. Historian Thucydides described the epidemic in Athens: “many died with no one to look after them,”
 - “men were indifferent to every rule of religion and law”
 - “no fear of gods or law of man had a restraining influence”
3. Similar pagan responses in Alexandria (Stark, Rise 83)
4. Christians responded differently, 82
5. They nursed many of the dying
6. Christian teachings of compassion, self-sacrifice, and care for people provided a “prescription for action”
7. The Christian way worked better
8. Christianity stressed love and charity (love of neighbor) as central duties of faith
9. These are sustained in everyday behavior

Conclusions:

1. Such crises and outlooks helped elevate Christianity and slowly topple paganism.
2. The two greatest commandments are the cornerstone of our faith.
3. God will judge those who do otherwise: often coming in the form of God letting whole societies simply go their own way, Romans 1:24, 26, 28.
4. Without the two commandments society will collapse under the weight of its own unrighteousness.
5. They have created a community of love and hope.
6. Don't take them for granted.
7. Let them continue to mold your life.
8. Love God; love your neighbor; it's that simple.