

Getting Your Fingers on the Right Keys

MARK 12:28-34 (NRSV) *One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"* ²⁹*Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;'* ³⁰*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.'* ³¹*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* *There is no other commandment greater than these."* ³²*Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';* ³³*and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."* ³⁴*When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."* *After that no one dared to ask him any question.*

The only failing grade I ever made in school was in typing. It was on a nine-week test. The grade was to be determined based on the number of words I could type in one minute, factoring in the number of errors.

In class, I sat between Lynda Bush and Joan Dean. Lynda was my steady girl; and Joan was also very special. Besides being a good friend, she was Drum Major of the High School marching band, which was a very important part of my life.

I wanted to beat both those girls on that test because, well, I'm a guy, and it was just too embarrassing to think about being beaten by a girl—even in an area where girls were supposed to be better.

So I got ready. I practiced at home on my little portable typewriter, and I got myself all "psyched-up" before class... I was ready!

Test time arrived. I put a sheet of paper in the typewriter; I set the margins and the tabs; I cracked my knuckles, took three deep breaths, and focused all my senses on the text of the letter that was in front of me.

When the teacher said, "Go!", my fingers began to fly. We had those old-fashioned manual typewriters with a bell that "dinged" when you reached the end of a line, and you had to throw the carriage by hand. My bell "dinged" before either of the girls' bells "dinged," and I threw my carriage before either of them threw theirs, and I knew I was ahead.

My fingers raced; I soared to new heights of excellence and speed in typing. Smoke was beginning to curl up from the keys as the teacher called, "Stop!"

I reached up and pulled the paper out of the machine, and... There was not a recognizable word on the page. I had set my fingers on the wrong "home keys," and every letter was one key to the right of the correct one.

I made "zero." I was devastated. I took the paper home and analyzed it, and every letter on the page was correct, relative to the keys on which I began. It would have been the only perfect paper I ever submitted in typing class. But because I started with my fingers on the wrong keys, it all was wrong.

I don't know of a better metaphor for life: life has a set of "Home Keys".

We may not be aware of it; but we live life based on some premise. We don't decide whether we have a set of "Home Keys". We have one: chosen or assumed: some basic value or philosophy or faith that influences every thought, word and deed.

Some people just sort of absorb it by default as life goes on around them. They get it from their parents, their teachers, their friends, TV, song lyrics...

Some get it by infusion: indoctrination. Some churches use that method; and some schools. Cults are infamous for it. In the 70's a breed of specialists emerged who "deprogrammed" youth who fell prey to cults. In the 1930s, a movement called "Hitler Youth" contaminated a whole generation of Germans.

Thankfully, some intentionally choose their "Home Keys" through continued reflection on life's experiences and guided by some chosen standard. For the Christian, hopefully that standard is the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the gospel today, a scribe comes to Jesus to ask, "Where are the "Home Keys" of life? And Jesus' response describes life as God intends it to be lived. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4: Israel's traditional "Call to Worship" for over 650 years.

The word, "Deuteronomy", means "the second law"; it was written, probably, as a part of the religious reform instituted by King Josiah. The whole religious life of Israel, the Temple itself—had suffered from generations of apathy and materialism and leadership corrupted by pagan influences. The "first" book of the law had been neglected and forgotten: replaced by religious traditions and rituals. But, when Josiah ordered the Temple restored, some workmen discovered the book in a storeroom. They took it to Josiah, he read it, and led the nation in a great revival. The Torah as it is known today probably is a product of that revival, and in one section, the first words are the Shema; calling Israel out of pagan idolatry back to monotheism: "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.*"

Aldous Huxley dramatized 20th-century polytheism, using the names of ancient Greek and Roman gods: "Venus" names our culture's preoccupation with sex; "Mars," identifies our human predisposition to place ultimate trust in military power; "Minerva," goddess of the intellect, names our assumption that education is the answer to all our problems; "Vulcan," the ironmonger, was for Huxley the symbol of the centrality of industrialization, and economics in our culture and in our lives. These are the "Premises"—the "Home Keys"—upon which modern Western culture is built.

But none of these 20th-century idols has provided an adequate set of "Home Keys" for life. Life built on any of these "Keys" produces only futility in the end.

Ultimate loyalty cannot be divided: "The Lord is one." Jesus' ministry is sprinkled throughout with this "home key:" "You cannot serve both God and mammon." And the truth is: not only can you not serve **both** God and mammon; you can't *fake* one or the other. Your life will parade your ultimate loyalty for all the world to see.

Jesus gives us a second "Home Key", again, quoting from Deuteronomy: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*" (MARK 12:30 NIV)

A familiarity with 7th century BC understanding of human physiology gives us some insight into the meaning of this verse. The heart was the seat of human "mo-

rality." The word for "soul", in New Testament Greek, is the root of our word, "Psyche"; so it refers basically to our "emotional nature." "Mind" is pretty much understood in the Old Testament as we understand it; and "strength" is a word that suggests physical energy or endurance.

And so, the second "Key" of life, according to Jesus, is to Love God with our moral, emotional, intellectual and physical selves; in other words, with our whole being. It's easy to say; right?

Love is not some obscure, blurry, vague, abstraction. Love—*ἀγάπη*, which is the word Mark uses in the text—is concrete. Behavioral. Observable.

Loving God with our morality ("all your heart") is bringing our relationships—and the behavior within those relationships—into harmony with the will of God.

Loving God with our motions ("all your soul") is to allow ourselves to become emotionally involved in the lives of those whom God loves; living in solidarity with the poor and the dispossessed; standing with them in their struggles for justice.

Loving God with our intellect ("all your mind") means a willingness to have our minds changed into harmony with God's mind, to give up our settled ways, to surrender our cherished prejudices. Nothing less is loving God.

And loving God with all our "strength" and endurance includes a tangible commitment of time and energy—a presence. God cannot be loved "en absentia."

Ultimate loyalties cannot be divided; and as the Lord God is one, so must our Love for God be singular and exclusive and tangible:

And the third "home key" is '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*' (MARK 12:31 NIV) These five words are crucial in a generation focused on self-love. Sammy Davis Jr's song, "I Gotta' Be Me!" gets it right: "I can't be right for somebody else if I'm not right for me!" And Bill Easom's book, *Put On Your Own Oxygen Mask First* reinforces Jesus' third "home key", self-love is not an end in itself; but it is a necessary prerequisite to loving one's neighbor: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

When Luke tells the story, it is a **scribe** who approaches Jesus, and following the words, "Love your neighbor as yourself," the scribe, to justify himself, asks, "But who is my neighbor?" And Jesus responds with the parable of the "Good Samaritan." And telling that parable to a 1st-century Judean lawyer would be akin to telling it to the Grand Dragon of the KKK and making the Samaritan any ethnic identity other than WASP.

How is your life? Do you feel broken? fragmented? torn apart and pulled in a hundred directions at once? Are your fingers on the right keys? Love God with your whole self; love your neighbor as yourself. What I know is that when I make time to focus on God—prayer, meditation, study—things get better. Stress levels go down. Schedules seem more manageable—most of the time (not always)—because my focus changes; my fingers are on the right home keys.

After Jesus had given his answers to the scribe, Luke says, "And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions." (Mark 12:34b NIV) Had I begun that typing test with my fingers on the right keys, it would have been a perfect paper.