

**Not Far**  
**Mark 12:28-34**  
**ABC 4/7/24**

John Wesley was born in 1703, the 15<sup>th</sup> child of Samuel Wesley, the rector of Epworth, & his wife, Susanna. He enjoyed a good upbringing & had a brilliant career at Oxford & elsewhere serving as a professor of Greek & logic at Lincoln College. After serving as his father's assistant, he was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728. Returning to Oxford, he joined a group led by his brother, Charles, & George Whitefield that was dedicated to living holy lives. Though Wesley wasn't yet saved, he met with these men for prayer, the study of the Greek NT, & devotional exercises. He set aside an hour each day for prayer & reflection. He took communion each week & set himself to conquer every sin. He fasted twice weekly, visited prisons, & helped the poor & the sick. Doing this helped him think he was a Christian. In 1735, still unconverted, he accepted an invitation to become a missionary to the American Indians in Georgia. It was a fiasco. He failed miserably. When he returned to England, he wrote: *I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?* His mission experience taught him the wickedness of his own heart. However, all was not lost, because in his travels he met some German Moravian Christians whose simple faith impressed him. When he returned to London, he sought out one of their leaders. Through a series of conversations, to quote Wesley's own words, he was *clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved*. On the morning of May 24, 1738, something happened he'd never forget. He opened his Bible haphazardly & read Mk 12:34, **You are not far from the kingdom of God**. Wesley said those words reassured him. Before he went to bed that night, he crossed that invisible line & entered the Kingdom of God. This text became Wesley's life vs & a reminder of his 1<sup>st</sup> 35 years.<sup>1</sup> **You are not far from the kingdom of God**. That's part of our passage this morning. Let's read it & then look at it. **Mk 12:28-34**

This is the 5<sup>th</sup> encounter in the temple during Jesus' week before His death. It's somewhat different from the others because it takes a surprising turn as Jesus finds common ground with the scribe who questions Him.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, pp 113–114

## 1. The Question 28

Considering the various religious leaders approaching Jesus, the Pharisees & Herodians in 12:13 & the Sadducees in 12:18, it's not surprising to see an expert in the law, a scribe, coming with a question. Scribes were scholars of the interpretation & application of the OT. Scribes appear frequently in Mark's gospel, usually in an adversarial role,<sup>2</sup> but not here. This encounter is surprising because every other question & challenge has had a hostile intent. While this one may have been that originally, it didn't stay that way. Matthew tells us this scribe is a Pharisee & he asks the question to test Jesus (Mt 22:34). But hearing Jesus **arguing** with the Sadducees & being impressed with Him, the scribe seems to be sincere as he asks his question. Though sent by the Sanhedrin to discredit Jesus, he seems to have been more honest in his inquiry than the others. Not all of the Jewish leadership is as opposed to Jesus as it seems. This scribe comes with a different heart than the others. Even though he's sent to test Jesus, he has an interest in & respect for Him. The man's question concerns the *first or most important* of the commandments. Such questions concerning the greatest commandment were common in that day. The Jews believed there were 613 laws in the Pentateuch to match the 613 letters in the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments (in Numbers). The rabbis divided those laws into 248 positive commands (do this) & 365 negative prohibitions (don't do this). They further split them into heavy laws, which were absolutely binding, & light laws, which were less binding. Even Jesus did that when He talked about the least of the commandments (Mt 5:19) & weightier matters of the law (Mt 23:23). But the rabbis were never able to arrive at a consensus as to which laws were heavy & which were light. This is the dilemma that all legalists face. Knowing they couldn't possibly keep all 613 laws, the rabbis focused on keeping the heavy or more important ones (as they saw them). They hoped that doing so would satisfy God. But even that was a crushing, unbearable burden (Acts 15:5, 10), so they constantly sought to reduce their list of heavy laws to a few key ones. Unable to keep even those few laws,

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<sup>2</sup> Mk 1:22; 2:6, 16; 3:22; 7:1, 5; 8:31; 9:11, 14; 10:33; 11:18, 27; 12:35, 38; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1, 31

they focused instead on keeping their man-made traditions (cf Mk 7:5–13), which were easier to keep.<sup>3</sup> So the scribe asks Jesus, **what commandment is the foremost of all?**

## **2. The Answer** Jesus answers by reciting Dt 6:4–5 & Lev 19:17–18. **29-30**

**A. Love God** The vss in Dt 6 are the beginning of the Shema, the primary creed of the Jewish faith which was quoted by Jews every morning & evening & was the opening sentence of every synagogue service. The Shema itself is comprised of Dt 6:4–9, 11:13–21, & Num 14:37–41. Its title comes from the opening Hebrew word of Dt 6:4, *Shema*, meaning *hear*. Dt 6:4-5 says, **Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your might.** The object of their love wasn't an impersonal cosmic force or an unnamed, unknown higher power but **the Lord our God**. This God wants you to love Him. Jesus says, **You shall love the Lord your God** & He includes 4 modifiers: **with all your heart, soul, mind, & strength**. The Shema had only 3, equivalent to **heart, soul, & strength**. Why does Jesus add **mind**? Possibly because of the Greek influence at the time. We don't know & it changes nothing. There's a lot of overlap in meaning in all these terms.

**Heart** in Jewish thought was the seat of physical, spiritual, & mental life. It's the seat of desires, feelings, affections, passions, & impulses.<sup>4</sup> It's the source of all thoughts, words, & actions. For that reason, Prov 4:23 commands, **Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.** Love for God must flow from the deepest part of a person's being. Those who give God an hour in church once a week while ignoring Him the rest of the time don't love Him with all their heart. With God, it's all or nothing. Love can't be tithed like money. Few can honestly sing *All to Jesus I Surrender* but God requires nothing less.

**Soul** can mean the *life principle* or *seat of inner human life*.<sup>5</sup> It adds emotions to the equation. It's the motivating power that brings strength of will. In Mt 26:38 Jesus said, **My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death**, speaking of His soul as the seat of emotion.

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 199

<sup>4</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.

<sup>5</sup> BDAG, p 1098

**Mind** refers to our cognitive functions, *thinking, comprehending, & reasoning*.<sup>6</sup> The **mind** embraces the will, intentions, & purposes. We must love God with our intelligence. We're to love Him with the fullness of our understanding. We're to fully apply our minds to understand the riches & the depths of His revelation of Himself in His Word.

**Strength** is perhaps the most distinct of the 4 & refers to the vigor that motivates them all. The love that we're to have for God isn't to be a weak, impotent thing. We must call on all of our strength to express our love for Him.

The intellectual, emotional, volitional, & physical aspects are all involved in loving God. Love for God is to be an intelligent love, an emotional love, a willing love, & an active love. In short, it's a comprehensive, all-consuming love. Our love for Him must be seen in everything we do. It's not the idea that God is at the top of our list & after we check Him off we're free to do as we please. We spend time with God & walk away thinking we can now do what we need to do. Is that what God wants? No, He demands all of us. We're to love God in everything we do. It's the center of everything. Love God with all your activity, actions, behavior, & life. **Heart, soul, mind, & strength** aren't separate parts of human life, but function as a summary, meaning *all you are & do*. This is reinforced by the repetition of the qualifier **with all your...** with each one. How much **heart, soul, mind, & strength** must we love God with? **ALL**

If we're honest, we have to admit we haven't kept this commandment for even a single day of our lives. Think of it this way: If I were to ask, *What's the most serious sin of all?* what would you say? Murder? Adultery? Idolatry? Unbelief? It seems to me that if the foremost commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, & strength, the greatest sin is a failure to keep this commandment. That scares me because I haven't kept this command for even 5 straight minutes in my entire life. I've never loved God with my whole heart. My soul has never overflowed with affection for God as it should. My mind has been lazy concerning understanding God's Word. I've only used a portion of my strength in my affection for God. Were it not for Jesus, I'd perish because of this sin, & rightly so, & so would you. But thankfully, think of Jesus. Was there any part of His

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<sup>6</sup> BDAG, p 234

heart that wasn't completely in love with the Father? Did He ever restrain His soul from affection for His Father? Was there anything that the Father revealed that Jesus ignored as being unworthy of His attention? Was His love for His Father a spineless, weak affection, or did He have the most powerful, strong affection for the Father ever known? You know the answer. Jesus kept this command perfectly. Every second of His life He loved the Father with all of His heart, all of His soul, all of His mind, & all of His strength. Had He not done that, He wouldn't have fulfilled the law of God & wouldn't have been worthy to save Himself, let alone save us.<sup>7</sup> No one can perfectly love God or keep His law as He requires, since **there is no man who does not sin** (1 Kgs 8:46); **there is no one who does good** (Ps 14:1); in God's sight **no man living is righteous** (Ps 143:2); no one can say, **I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin** (Prov 20:9); & **there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good & who never sins** (Eccl 7:20). Thankfully, this command wasn't given as a means of salvation. Instead, it's **our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith** (Gal 3:24). The Shema & the rest of Moses' words in Dt should have convinced the Jews they could never keep that command on their own. The entire nation should have, like the tax collector in Lk 18:13, cried out, **God, be merciful to me, the sinner!** If we are in Christ, His righteousness, His keeping this command has been credited to our account & we will truly desire to keep the command ourselves. If this isn't hard enough, Jesus continues. **31**

**B. Love Neighbors** While the man asked only about the **foremost** commandment, Jesus gives the 2<sup>nd</sup> as well, quoting from Lev 19:18. The 2 are intimately related & belong together. Those who truly love God will also love those who are created in His image (1 Jn 4:20-21). Those who love God are reckoned as His children & are to reflect His divine nature, which is pure love (1 Jn 3:10; 4:8, 16; cf Jn 3:16). The pairing of these 2 commands, to love God & to love others, finds its pattern in the 10 Commandments (Ex 20:1-17; Dt 5:6-21), with the 1<sup>st</sup> 4 relating to love for God & the last 6 to love for fellow humans (cf Mk 10:19). Anyone who doesn't show love to others can't claim to love God. If you hate, are bitter, bear grudges, or seek vengeance you can't claim to love God. How are we to love others? As we love ourselves. This isn't a call for self-love. Biblically, there is

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<sup>7</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Mark*, p 319

no call to self-love. It takes for granted that you love yourself & act in your own best interest. That same concern you're to extend to others. To love others as yourself means we're to love our neighbor in the manner we already take care of & provide for our own needs. We're to have the same love & care for others that we have for ourselves. Loving God is the foundation for loving your neighbor. For the Jews of Jesus' day, love for one's neighbors meant fellow Jews. Jesus extended the definition of a *neighbor* to everyone, even one's enemies on several occasions (Mt 5:43–44; Lk 6:27, 35; 10:25–37). Don't say you love God if you don't love people, even difficult people. Of course, we don't live this perfectly but we want it desperately. Why? Because Jesus says love is our priority. **31b**

Or as Matthew records, **on these 2 commandments depend the whole Law & the Prophets** (Mt 22:40), that is, all of Scripture.

### **3. The Response 32-33**

Only Mark includes this positive response by the scribe & Jesus' praise of it. The man's answer confirms he no longer has devious purposes in questioning Jesus. Here we see that, when not motivated by pride or hypocrisy, even Israel's leaders recognize that Jesus' wisdom is from God. He 1<sup>st</sup> acknowledges that Jesus has answered **truly** or *beautifully*. When he recites back Dt 6:5, the scribe omits **with all your soul** & replaces **mind** with **understanding**, but he's confirming that, as a whole, it means to love God with your whole being. As the expert in the law expanded & emphasized Dt 6:4, he also expands on Dt 6:5 & Lev 19:18. To love God & love others are more **important than all burnt offerings & sacrifices**. These summarize & represent the entire sacrificial system. This isn't a new thought but is common in the OT, emphasizing the importance of a relationship of love & obedience over external rituals & activities (Ps 40:6; 51:16–17; Is 1:11; Jer 6:20; 7:21–23; Hos 6:6). We're to be dedicated, completely consumed, sold out, & in love with our God. Our love for God & for our neighbor is much more important than our religious observances. In 1 Sam 15:22, we read, **Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings & sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, & to heed, than the fat of rams.** What's the result of this interchange?

#### 4. The Result 34

Jesus is impressed with the man's discernment & priorities & commends him. He answered **intelligently** & wasn't far from God's kingdom. The kingdom of God has been central to Jesus' teaching in Mark's gospel. It means, essentially, submission to God's rule, values, & purpose in the world. Though Jesus doesn't yet identify the scribe as belonging to the kingdom of God, he's close & moving in the right direction. Though he was close, he wasn't in. It's possible to be within an inch of heaven & yet end up in hell. He needs only to cross the line of faith. The scribe stands in stark contrast to the rich man in Mk 10 (22–25), whose riches were a crippling hindrance to entering the kingdom & who turned away on a different road. To be in God's kingdom one must do more than simply approve of Jesus' teaching; one must submit to His authority & Person. Can this scribe make the next step & accept Jesus as the Son of David & David's Lord? We don't know. We're left to wonder what happened to this man & whether he ever believed. The text doesn't say. But he understood that the key that unlocked the door of the kingdom was love; God's own love for sinners, their all-out love for Him & for their neighbor. If this scribe would, by God's grace & power, take one more step & believe in Jesus as his Savior & Lord (Mt 11:28–30; Jn 6:35), he'd move from a position of being not far from to one of being in the kingdom of God. Jesus was urging him to do that very thing.

This is perhaps the greatest danger each of us faces, to be near but not in the Kingdom, to be a tare & not wheat, to be lukewarm & not hot, to sprout but produce no fruit, to think we've done much for Jesus yet have Him say to us, **Depart from Me, I never knew you** (Mt 7:23). This scribe was near, but he wasn't yet in. Neither can we love our way into the kingdom. We can't love God in our own strength. We must be born again, given a new heart that is saturated with God's love. We must be filled with His Spirit & walk according to His Word to love Him the way He commands. Maybe today you need to repent of the things that are competing with your love for God. A true believer loves God, loves His Word, loves His people, rejects the world, & longs to be with Him. True lovers of God want to obey His Word. & when you see your life disobeying His Word, you do something about it. You confess, repent, & deal with your sin. You walk in obedience because you

love Him & you never want God's wholehearted love toward you returned with a halfhearted love on your part.

The episode concludes with the comment that no one dared ask Jesus any more questions. The statement seems a bit surprising after such a positive exchange with the scribe. I believe it refers not just to this event but to the whole series of controversies we've been looking at. Jesus has decisively answered every challenge & will next respond with a question of His own (12:35-37), one they couldn't answer.

These two laws, love God & love others, are the greatest because they epitomize the nature & character of God from which all the other of God's laws arise. Obedience to God isn't about making sure every "I" is dotted & every "T" is crossed so we're worthy to enter God's presence. True obedience comes from a heart that's experienced God's love & amazing grace & been transformed by it. As Paul says, it's Christ's love, not merely a sense of duty, that **controls** & drives him forward in obedience (2 Cor 5:14). His great passion is to **know Him** (Phil 3:10). Is that your passion? This scribe also reminds us that not all of Israel's religious authorities rejected Jesus. Leaders such as Joseph of Arimathea & Nicodemus became His followers (15:43; Mt 27:57; Jn 19:38-39), even if sometimes in secret (Jn 19:38). The book of Acts shows that some Pharisees are positively disposed toward Christians (Acts 5:34-39; 23:9) & many priests come to believe (6:7). James reports to Paul that **many thousands** of law-keeping Jews had believed in the gospel (Acts 21:20). As Paul points out, a **remnant** has been saved even if a majority has turned away (Rom 11:1-5). Hope & opportunity remain. If we're to believe God's Word & the testimony of John Wesley, we must take to heart this truth: while the scribe & John Wesley weren't far from the Kingdom, they were still on the outside. Being almost there isn't being there. Some of you remember when Evel Knievel tried to jump the Snake River canyon in his skycycle (50 years ago this Sept). How he went up with a burst of power, then fizzled out across the canyon & landed in the river after deploying his parachute. Making it partway, or even 1 inch short, isn't making it. Remember the continental divide? 2 raindrops inches apart can end up oceans apart. If the scribe did enter the Kingdom of God, it was because he submitted to the logic of his own words. Loving God is more important than

the entire ceremonial system. Perhaps he attempted to love God with all his heart & failed, & then realized he could never achieve the moral excellence of the Law & that he was a lost sinner. Hopefully seeing himself for what he was, he cast himself on the mercy of God, & found salvation. When a religious man sees & acknowledges the seriousness of his sin, it's a great day. Sir James Simpson, the discoverer of chloroform, used to say that the greatest find he ever made was learning that he was a sinner & that Jesus was just the Savior he needed.<sup>8</sup> Such a discovery will lead to a casting of oneself on the mercy of God & receiving the gift of faith, repentance, & salvation. This is what happened to Wesley. His experience in America had brought him to the end of himself. Wesley's conversation with the Moravians brought conviction of his failure. On one occasion as he talked with them, he heard them speak of their personal faith as a gift from God. When he asked how this could be, *They replied with one mouth that this faith was a gift, the free gift of God, & that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly & perseveringly sought it.* Wesley wrote after the meeting: *I resolved to seek it to the end.* On May 24, 1738, Wesley opened his Bible & read, **You are not far from the kingdom of God.** Evening came & his journal tells the story:

*In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; & an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, & saved me from the law of sin & death.<sup>9</sup>*

He moved from not far from God's kingdom to being a citizen of that kingdom. The rest of the story is well-known. Wesley became a dynamo. He preached in Saint Mary's in Oxford. He preached in churches, mines, fields, & on the streets. He preached on horseback. He even preached on his father's tombstone. In his life he preached 42,000 sermons, often preaching 3 times a day.<sup>10</sup> Read about his life & you'll find an amazing story of love for God & a tenacious love for his lost neighbors. What are the lessons for us? 1<sup>st</sup>, it's possible to have grown up in the church, to have godly parents, & never come to a saving knowledge of Christ. 2<sup>nd</sup>, it's also possible to have studied theology &

<sup>8</sup> [www.christianheritageedinburgh.org.uk/2018/12/07/a-scientists-testimony-sir-james-young-simpson-pioneer-of-anaesthetics/](http://www.christianheritageedinburgh.org.uk/2018/12/07/a-scientists-testimony-sir-james-young-simpson-pioneer-of-anaesthetics/)

<sup>9</sup> Frank Boreham, *A Bunch of Everlastings*, p 199

<sup>10</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, p 289

know the Scriptures as the scribe & Wesley did, & still be unsaved. 3<sup>rd</sup>, it's even possible to have heard the grace & gospel of Jesus preached all your life & still be resting on your own goodness. 4<sup>th</sup>, it's entirely possible to become gospel-hardened & seal your damnation even within the church. It's possible to fool everyone & have the preacher preach your funeral & assure everyone that your soul is resting in heaven when it's really in hell. In other words, it's possible to be within an inch of the Kingdom of God & still be outside of it. Are you near to the Kingdom of God, but not in? There are times when a single step makes all the difference. Have you made that step & placed your faith in Jesus?<sup>11</sup> If so, a sign of that is you love God & your neighbors. It'll be an instinct. It'll be part of who you are. This is our goal, to glorify God in how we approach everything. We don't give God a sliver. We don't think an external act is enough because God is not fooled. We can't deceive Him. Our relationship to Him has to be all-encompassing. That's what Jesus says. Let that be true of us, people who are wholly & completely devoted to Him in everything, every conversation, every task, & every relationship that we encounter. Pray with me that we would love God & love each other as we're commanded & empowered to do. PRAY/MEN COME

From time to time I'm asked if communion is a celebration or a solemn event. Is it a feast or a funeral?<sup>12</sup> Are we rejoicing or are we mourning? Many have concluded that we're coming to a memorial. Jesus Himself says that the bread & wine are tokens of His gruesome & substitutionary death for us. Paul says in 1 Cor 11:26, **For as often as you eat this bread & drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.** Clearly, when we partake of the Lord's Supper Christ's death is central. But I believe when we approach the Lord's Supper we should do so with an attitude marked primarily by joy, not sorrow. We come singing & rejoicing, not mourning or weeping. How can this be if it's His death we're remembering? The answer is found in the gospel. The gospel flips our thinking about death in 2 ways when considering the Lord's Supper. 1<sup>st</sup>, we celebrate the death of our sin in communion. When we think about the crucifixion of Christ, it's good & right for us to mourn our sins that caused His pain & death. But if we stop there, at the sorrow over our sins, then

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<sup>11</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, pp 119–120

<sup>12</sup> Adapted from Jonathan Landry Cruse's article, [www.beautifulchristianlife.com/blog/is-the-lords-supper-a-feast-or-a-funeral](http://www.beautifulchristianlife.com/blog/is-the-lords-supper-a-feast-or-a-funeral)

we've done a disservice to His death. Why? Because in His death our sin died & that is the greatest news of all. This news is well worth celebrating. Paul says, **I have been crucified with Christ; & it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me** (Gal 2:20). Later he declares, **may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, & I to the world** (Gal 6:14). Or as he says in Rom 6:2-3, **How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?** As Paul exults in this glorious truth, so should we. This is what it means to **proclaim the Lord's death until He comes** at the Supper. Here at communion, we proclaim the fact that death & sin died in the death of Jesus. What a joyful proclamation!

Secondly, the gospel tells us that the death of Jesus isn't the end of the story. Indeed, if it were, that death wouldn't be good news at all. Instead, the gospel is the good news of the death & the resurrection of Jesus. Paul goes on to say in Rom 6:4, **we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.** Because Christ died, our sinful nature has been put to death. Because Christ was raised, we also live in our spiritual nature by the power of the life-giving Holy Spirit. Do you see it's a perversion of the gospel to only regard the death of Christ in the Lord's Supper? If we were to do that, at best we'd be leaving out half of the gospel story. It's amazing that we come to what seems to be a funeral or memorial service & yet still feast & celebrate with joy. Paul makes this point brilliantly in 1 Cor 5:7-8 where he argues that it's the very fact that Jesus was killed that should cause us to keep the feast, in other words, rejoice! **For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast** (1 Cor 5:7b-8a). The only way this makes sense is within the scope of the entire gospel story. Jesus' sacrifice isn't the end, there's also His resurrection. Christ has died, Christ is risen, & Christ will come again! This hopeful expectation is ours as we approach the table. What joy should fill our hearts as we remember that our sin died with our Savior so that we might live with Him & feast with Him eternally. **PASS**

By partaking of communion we're loving Him for who He is & for what He's lovingly done for us. **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son** (Jn 3:16). Because God loves us

He gave us His Son as a sacrifice in our place. As an act of love & obedience to Him, let's eat of the bread together.

**God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us** (Rom 5:8). By drinking of the cup we're acknowledging God's love for us & expressing our love for Him. Let's drink joyfully & with thanksgiving for God's love for us.

May our love for God & for each other grow from this day forward.