

## ***The Greatest Commandment***

Moses and the Israelites were delivered from Egyptian bondage, through the Red Sea; then were given the miraculous provision of manna to eat and water to drink. At Mount Sinai, God established with them his covenant and gave the Ten Commandments. Over time, Israel's religious teachers added more than 600 laws. Of these, 365 were negative commandments and 248 were positive in nature, and these they divided into "heavy and light" Some were written laws derived from Scripture, but most were part of an oral tradition. The latter were extra laws written to interpret the given Law of Moses. The negative prohibitions included such laws as the one restricting how far one could walk on the Sabbath Day.

Let's note the answer Jesus gives to the religious lawyer who asked which is the most important of all these 613 commandments. The answer Jesus gives is a combination of the Shema, the passage every devout Jew recited daily from Deuteronomy (6:4-5) and Leviticus (19:18). Our New Testament reading is **Mark 12:28-34**:

*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?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 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'; 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." 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 religious leaders were throwing their best efforts at Jesus, trying to stump him, lead him to say something that would be self-incriminating, or cause him to lose his composure under the constant barrage of their questions. Their spokesman seemed to have an understanding beyond that of his colleagues. In fact, Jesus commends him as one who was not far from the kingdom. He had at least a beginning understanding of the most important message of Scripture, the meaning of the Great Commandment, which summarizes the meaning of the Ten Commandments.

The Great Commandment is about love, a word we've cheapened and weakened. We say we love good cheese and beautiful fall days in Wisconsin! "Love" expresses our personal preferences and pleasures. "I love you" can be a cover for a seducer, who really means "I lust for you."

In 1 John (4:8) we read that God is love. When you say *God* is love, you have said everything you can possibly say about this highest kind of love. John 3:16 is another verse that describes this costly love of God. It's a love that begins with and must come from God, and is "the costliest thing we can say about God." But for many, God's love is presumed. For them, God ought to love us. As Catherine the Great

said, "Ah, God is good; he's bound to forgive us; that's his job." After all, we're pretty good folks. O, really?

A few years ago there was a story in the newspaper about a Rwandan lady, from the Tutsi tribe, whose right hand was cut off and whose child was killed by a member of the Hutu tribe, during the genocide war in 1994. This woman eventually forgave her assailant, who was shown in the photo, holding her stump where he had severed her hand. The woman said it wasn't an easy thing to forgive the man. She had discussed and prayed with her husband whether or not she could or should forgive, but then decided to do so. Now the two families are friends. But forgiveness for them was not cheap or easy. As we hold to the cross of Christ, let's be forever reminded of the cost of our forgiveness.

CS Lewis says that our human ways of loving and being loved are "need loves." We need to be loved and to love others to experience our humanity. But God's love for us is his gift love, using the biblically unique Greek word *agape*. God had nothing to gain from loving us. God the triune Father/Son/Holy Spirit is and always has been complete within himself. Our existence does nothing to fulfill a need within God. The agape love God has for us, says Lewis, is entirely a gift love. "God so loved that he gave."

The Apostle Paul says God demonstrated his love for us when we were powerless, ungodly, and sinful. In fact, God rescued us while we were his enemies! (Romans 5) And nothing we do can make him love us anymore than he already does. We see his amazing love in Jesus on the cross. I'm beginning to see that it's as important to know God loves me unconditionally as it is for me to try to love him wholeheartedly. Knowledge of God's love helps keep my problems in perspective.

The Great Commandment is that we love God with the same kind of love he has for us, and that we love others with this costly type of love. How different is this love from the sentimental notions of love as a reciprocal exchange between mutual admirers! The Great Commandment has a two-fold direction, toward God and others. In this commandment, we first love God with our entire being. In the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, the first four have to do with our relationship with God. As the Israelites discovered as they tried to obey these commandments, we don't have a heart that naturally loves God. Our love for him must be in response to his grace. John writes, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:7-10,19).

The requirement of the Great Commandment that we love God with our entire being demands our unrivaled love for him. "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10: 37). Indeed, our love for the Lord Jesus is to be so absolute that other loyalties and loves pale in comparison. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters---yes, even his own life---he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Let's admit it—we haven't kept this commandment to love God with all our being as long as 10 minutes, much less for a lifetime. *The Message* paraphrases the Great Commandment in our text as "so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy." Soul is translated as prayer. So turning our lives into

a continual prayer is the way we're to live and the only way we can love God with all our being. As we focus on the Word and let Scripture shape our thoughts, we find that we grow in passion for God. We learn to delight in him and find our joy in him.

The command to love our neighbor, addressed in the last six of the Ten Commandments, is closely tied to the command to love God. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows how his followers are to interpret and fulfill the Ten Commandments, not only by the letter but by the full intent of the Law. If we love God and our neighbor, for example, we not only don't murder, we also refrain from unjustified anger. We not only don't commit adultery, but we also keep our minds and hearts free of lust (Matthew 5:21-30). We love God and others by "negative holiness" (what we don't do), but also by positive holiness, what we do to care for our neighbor.

The Apostle John writes, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). Jesus is living *within* those who are around us, and loving them is loving Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46). Our neighbor is anyone in need. This is what is behind Augustine's statement, "Love God and do as you please." If we truly love God we're going to relate with holy love toward our brother and sister.

The Jews had understood the command to love their neighbors as pertaining to their fellow Jews (Leviticus 19:33-34). The Old Covenant took neighbor to include aliens who sought to live among them. Jesus redefined neighbor to mean anyone in need of love. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to say that if we have the gift of eternal life, we'll regard anyone in need as our neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). In the case of the Good Samaritan, a needy man who was a despised enemy was the object of love. Jesus said specifically we must love even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48), including the tribal enemy who naturally "deserves" our hatred.

Sometimes, the hardest people to love are those in the church, particularly if they've offended or disappointed us, or simply annoy us. It's our love for one another, Jesus says, that's the distinguishing mark of his disciples (John 13:35).

I like the story of the elderly man who typically sat on his front porch, admiring the neighborhood children playing in his front yard. One evening he sat nervously watching for any child who might step into his freshly poured cement driveway. When a child stepped into his wet concrete while chasing a ball, the old man went berserk, yelling out his disgust over his misshapened concrete. "Why, Henry, you've never been angry with the children like this! I thought you loved them, cried his wife. "I *do* love them in the abstract, but *not* in the concrete!" he replied.

We may not like others' behavior, and they might annoy us. But if they're our brother or sister in Christ we're commanded to look out for their interests and care for their needs, which is agape love.

I'm sure we've all heard the concept that this Great Commandment proves we're to love ourselves, since Jesus says we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

The usual understanding of this verse is that we're commanded to love others as we already love ourselves. *But*, you might need a healthy dose of self-respect and the awareness of your worth to God. We should love and care for the life God has given us, and even our bodies as God's sacred temples.

Christlike love is evidence of God's saving grace. Jesus answered the expert in the law, who asked him "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked, "What do you think?" and the expert answered with the Great Commandment. Jesus said, "You have answered correctly...Do this and you will live." But this expert knew he hadn't been able to keep this Great Commandment, and he wanted to get himself off the hook, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29). Jesus then told the story of the Good Samaritan, and said at the end of the story, "Go and do likewise." The expert in the Law knew he didn't have the will or power to do likewise. He didn't have the will or power of love to keep the Great Commandment. He didn't have saving grace.

God's being-saved people *act with his love*. In our culture, love is too often a self-serving, self-affirming emotion. In fact, the only thing that seems to hold some marriage relationships together is the idea of being "in love," which is romantic emotion. As followers of Christ, we see love as a commitment to love even our enemies (Matthew 5: 43-48), and there may be times when your spouse becomes your enemy. And God gives grace to love, to respond in practical caring involvement to meet the needs of even your spousal "enemy." The Scriptural admonition to a lifelong marriage presupposes that spouses and parents treat each other with basic human dignity and regard for each other's health and safety. Loving an abusive spouse may mean to leave a dangerous relationship and pray that the abuser might find grace for redemption and reformation.

Love for our enemies doesn't come from within ourselves, but from Jesus, who prayed for our forgiveness as he was suffering and dying on the cross, experiencing our hell in our place (Luke 23:34). Only Christ within us can enable us to put love his in action. As we obey the Great Commandment, God reveals himself to others (1 John 4:12).

Martin and Gracia Burnham were missionaries serving in the Philippines with New Tribes Mission. In 2001 they were celebrating their wedding anniversary on a remote island when they were abducted by Muslim extremists. Martin and Gracia were for a year ruthlessly dragged by their brutal captors through the jungles during that horrendous ordeal that left them emaciated and almost hopeless of any rescue. Finally, Philippine forces located and stormed the guerilla forces in a heavy shootout in which Martin was fatally shot. Gracia was wounded in the rescue effort, but was delivered from her captivity and lives with her now grown children near my former home in Wichita, Kansas. Gracia told about Martin's servanthood attitude during their captivity. In her own words: "Jesus said, 'If you want to be great in God's kingdom, be the servant of all'.... I think when he said 'all,' he meant 'all.' He didn't mean 'all but these-really-bad-guys-who've-taken-us-hostage.' And I watched him be kind to them and I just watched him be a servant and love them. And I cherish those moments watching Martin."

Jesus will give you and me plenty of opportunities to show the love of Jesus, in and outside the home, to the obnoxious, the needy and the proud, but all of them needing our love, God's love. A church historian noted that observers of the fellowship of the early church remarked, "Behold, how they love one another!" When we're in tune with Jesus, we'll love the people he's placed in our lives. If love is the motive behind what we do, either in quiet, personal acts of kindness, or sacrificial acts of courage, what we do out of love for Jesus and his presence in others will count for eternity. Love is the Great Commandment.