

June 11, 2017

“**Which is the first commandment of all?**” That was the question given to Jesus by a scribe. This was not as easy as it sounds! It’s like asking: *What is the greatest hymn ever written? What is the greatest car ever made? Who is the greatest hockey player that ever lived?* Questions like these can lead to endless discussions.

1. The Question about the Law

“**Which is the first commandment of all?**” led to endless discussion among the scribes. They were the Bible Scholars. They devoted their lives to studying the Bible and were the experts in Bible interpretation. They were the “front row” religious leaders of that time. If anybody knew the answer to a Bible question, it would be the scribes. They knew the law backward and forward – literally!

They counted 613 commandments in the first 5 books of the Bible. Of these commandments, 365 were negative and 248 were positive. Some of these were viewed as “heavier” commandments with heavier punishments, while others were “lighter” laws. Now they put their question to Jesus: *Which commandment is first or greatest or most important or heaviest of all God’s commandments?*

The question sounds innocent and friendly: ²⁸ **Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, “Which is the first commandment of all?”** But is it? Matthew records that this scribe came forward with a question **to test Jesus** (Matthew 22:35). Jesus was teaching in the temple. This happens about 2 days before His arrest and crucifixion. There’s a whole line-up of religious leaders coming with questions to trap Jesus so they can arrest and kill Him.

-First, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him and asked: **By what authority are you doing these things?** (Mk 11:28)

-Second, the Pharisees and Herodians came and asked Him, **Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?** (Mark 12:14)

-Third, the Sadducees came up and asked Him about the resurrection, trying to prove that resurrection is impossible. (Mark 12:18-27)

-Then it was the Scribes’ turn to send their man to ask a fourth and final question: **Which is the first**

commandment of all?

It was intended as a trap, but after hearing how Jesus was turning all the previous groups of people upside down with the truth, this scribe had a sinking feeling that he was up against a Master Teacher who was not going to be tested but was going to test him instead. In fact, by the time the scribe's turn came to ask his question he was considerably humbled by Jesus' wisdom and was ready to learn. *Many have come to Jesus that way: they started reading the Bible to prove Jesus wrong, and by the time they finished, Jesus had proved them wrong, and they were well on their way to being converted!*

Jesus' answer to the scribe came in three parts, but the three parts were really one answer: **the first of all the commandments.**

2. The Answer of the Law

a. The LORD of the Commandment

He began not with the *commandment* of God but the *God* of the commandment because if you obey the commandments but don't know the one true God of the commandments, your obedience is meaningless. He started with that great foundational truth of all the Bible found in Deuteronomy 6:4: **Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God...** (The Jews call this creed the "Shema" because the command "Hear" is *shema* in Hebrew.) You can be the greatest scribe, the best theologian, and win the Jeopardy Bible quiz, but if you don't know the Lord God of the Bible then the commandments make no sense. It's like reading and memorizing the Lego instructions without having any Lego blocks. Knowing the commandments without knowing God is empty.

Notice that "LORD" here is in all capitals. Three times. In Hebrew this name is "Jehovah" or "Yahveh," the covenant name for God who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush as "I AM WHO I AM." (see Exodus 3 and 6) This is the Savior God who keeps His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who comes down to save His people from their sin and misery. Many years later this same God came down to earth in Jesus, His Son, to His people from their sins. Do you know this God? Do you trust Him to save you from all your sins and troubles? When you know Him, then the greatest commandment of all makes perfect sense – and all the other ones too! Such a God is worthy of your total obedience, devotion, and dedication.

b. The Greatest Commandment of the LORD

And that leads Jesus directly into the first commandment of all: ³⁰ **And you shall love the LORD your**

God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. The greatest commandment of all is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. It is the greatest not so much because it is the highest commandment but because it summarizes all the commandments of God. If you compare the commandments to a ladder, then this commandment is not the top rung on the ladder, but the sides of the ladder that hold all the rungs together.

What does the LORD God want from us? He wants our love. Without love, says the Bible, all the good things we do are nothing but a sounding gong and a clanging symbol. (see I Cor. 13:1-3) What is love? It is giving yourself away to someone else to serve and bless him. Love is devoting or dedicating yourself to help or honor another at the cost of your own comfort, money, and even your life. Loving God is giving yourself up to Him in a life that honors & obeys Him, worships & prays to Him, and boasts about Him from the heart.

The most remarkable thing about this first commandment of all is the word ‘all’ that is stated 4x. God requires of us our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind, our whole strength. He wants us to devote all our brain power, all our emotions and feelings, all our wants and desires, all energies, talents, skills, and body to do what pleases Him. He wants all of us, all the time, in all we do. He made us and saved us for this very purpose. **This is the whole duty of man.** (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Applications:

1. Is this what you want to do with your life – give yourself completely to the one true God who made the world and reveals Himself in the Bible? This means that you would rather give up anything than go against His will in any way. Kent Hughes says, *“It does not take much of a man to be a believer, but it takes all there is of him!”* How many have been willing to let go of their jobs, their families, their civil liberties, even their lives in order to obey God because they loved God and he was far more important to them than anything or anyone else on earth. **Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.** (Ps. 73:25)

2. The command to *love* God means that God wants all our worship and service to be *voluntary*, from the *heart*, done for His glory; not *forced*, not just because someone else tells us to, not to try to look good in front of others, not because we’re afraid of what might happen if we don’t obey God. Only what is voluntary and done for God because we delight in Him is true obedience in His eyes.

-John Calvin: *We learn from this, that God does not rest satisfied with the outward appearance of works, but chiefly demands the inward feelings, that from a good root good fruits may grow.*

c. The LORD's Second Commandment

But that's not all there is to the first commandment of all! **And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.**" There's a second command, but it's *like* the first because the two go together as one. They can't be separated from each other. *How you respond to the first (loving God) will determine how you respond to the second (loving your neighbor). When you obey the second, it shows that you have embraced the first.* (Daniel Akin)

As John says: **If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?** (I John 4:20) The proof that you love God is seen in how you care for and protect your wife, how you respect and help your husband, how you teach and nurture your children, how you defend the cause of the unborn and needy, how concerned you are to be a blessing to everyone you meet, how you reach out to those stuck in the trap of addictions or enslaved to a false god. Your neighbor is God's image. Your love for God is reflected in your love for those who are made in His image.

Some people twist this and say there's a third commandment here: *You must also love yourself. You yourself are your closest neighbor.* But that's not what it says. We already *do* love ourselves. That is natural. The Bible says: **No man ever hated his own flesh.** (Ephesians 5:29) That would be *unnatural*. We are rightly concerned about our appearance, our clothing, our health, our hair, our food, our salary, our business, our lawn, our house. It would be wrong to hate ourselves. It's wrong for me not to care about the body, mind, and soul God has given me. But because of sin we are prone to love ourselves too much, and to ignore our neighbor and his needs. Paul warned that in the last days **men will be lovers of self.** (II Timothy 3:2)

So what does God seek from our lives? That just as we care about our own health and well-being, we must have at least as much concern for our neighbor. That is what Jesus meant when he called us to deny ourselves – that we must be willing to set ourselves aside for the sake of pleasing God and serving our neighbor. *The more I rightly love myself, the more I will deny myself and love others. I will serve the needs of others with all the energy, passion, and zeal with which I attempt to meet my own needs.* (Daniel Akin) God wants to see in us the law of kindness, a heart that wants our neighbor to do well. When He sees that in us He sees the evidence that we truly love God.

When we really love God, then we really care about those whom God cares about: people, especially fellow Christians, but all people. **So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to**

those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)

Application: The second command comes from Leviticus 19:18. If you want to reflect on some practical ways God calls us to love our neighbor, just look at the other verses in Leviticus 19 where God calls us to care for the poor, the deaf, and the blind; not to slander, lie or steal; to be fair in our business dealings; not to carry a grudge against your neighbor; to rebuke your neighbor when necessary for his good; not to disadvantage his life in any way. Think about the people God has put in your pathway: your church family; your wife and children, parents, siblings, aunts and uncles; the people you work with, the people you ride the bus with, your next-door neighbor. Do they know you as someone who truly loves and cares about them, and as someone who loves God above all?

3. The Verdict of the Law

When the scribe heard Jesus' answer, he responded with agreement. That shows he really understood and accepted Jesus' instruction.

³² So the scribe said to Him, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. ³³ And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” It seems he was actually delighted in Jesus' answer – far different than what the scribes intended when they sent this man to trap Jesus!

In fact, the scribe added further insight to Jesus' answer when he said that **such love is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.** True religion is ultimately a matter of the heart. Without supreme love for God and genuine love for your neighbor, doing your work, helping your neighbor, saying your prayers, keeping the commandments, coming to worship are all empty. As Samuel said to King Saul when Saul was more devoted to himself than to the LORD: **To obey God is better than sacrifice.** (1 Samuel 15:22) All the sacrifices you offer will go nowhere if your heart is not with the LORD. Also, Jesus said to the Pharisees when they showed they did not care about lost sinners: The Lord says, **I desire mercy and not sacrifice.** (Matthew 9:13, 12:3; see Hoses 6:6).

³⁴ Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Many treat this as a rebuke. But it is not. This is an encouragement to the scribe to say that he is moving in the right direction. He has given the right answer. But the right answer, having the right theology is not enough! That never put anybody in the kingdom of God. The scribe had the right answer; he showed the beginning signs of having a true understanding. What more did he need to enter the kingdom of God?

Here's what he still needed: **repentance**. He needed to see that he was far away from this life of perfect love for God and genuine love for neighbor. He needed to understand what Jesus said earlier to the scribes in Mark 7: ²⁰“**What comes out of a man, that defiles a man.**” ²¹ **For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,** ²² **thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.** ²³ **All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”**

God's Law requires a life of perfect love. We fall far short of that love and are condemned by His Law. We need not just a Rabbi, a good Teacher; we need a Savior!

When we hear Jesus' answer, **You are not far from the kingdom of God**, we are reminded of the Gospel of the kingdom which Jesus announced right at the beginning of his ministry, in the first chapter of Mark: **The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the gospel.** (1:15) How near is the kingdom to this scribe? Just a few feet away – in the Person and Teaching of Jesus! How is Jesus the Gospel? He is Good News for sinners, for every law-breaker who does not fulfill the law of love.

Jesus not only taught the truth about what God requires of us? He is the LORD God who came down to rescue us from our harsh, self-centred, lazy and love-less hearts and lives. He became a man, and in our place He Himself fulfilled the greatest commandment(s) to utmost perfection!

--He loved God His Father with all His heart and soul and mind and strength. He said: **Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.** (Hebrews 10:7) Whatever the Father wanted Jesus to do, Jesus did in perfect love and devotion, all the way unto death!

--He loved His neighbor too, even His enemies who hated him and were trying to trap Him! In the greatest demonstration of love ever given, Jesus offered up His life to God for the salvation of sinners.

And in our place He not only lived for us the life of perfect love we should have lived, but He paid the punishment we deserve for all the

ways in which we have failed to love God and our neighbor. We deserve God's just punishment, but the Good News of God's kingdom is that Jesus took that punishment for sinners on Himself, body and soul. All who repent and trust in Him are set free from all their sin.

We don't know the rest of the story of this scribe. What did he do after this conversation? Did he repent of his sin against God and man, and look to Jesus for his salvation? We aren't told. But we do know the rest of the story for Jesus. He loved God and His neighbor to the end. He offered up His life as a sacrifice of

perfect love to rescue us from our wickedness of heart and mind and soul and strength.

Come to Him with your needy, sinful life: a life of making your opinions and feelings more important than God, a life of forgetting and ignoring Him, a life of hypocrisy where you pretend to serve Him but don't give Him your heart, a life of worrying that God isn't ordering your life well rather than trusting Him to do all things for your good. Ask Jesus to save you from your lack of devotion to God.

Come to Him with your life of holding grudges, taking your wife for granted, dishonoring your parents, speaking evil of others, losing patience with the guy at work, flying into a rage, not taking time and effort to know your next-door neighbor, cheating your client out of a job-well done, working half-heartedly for your boss. Ask Jesus to save you from despising your neighbor.

Jesus will save you from the Law's guilty verdict upon your life. He will give you a new heart and new life that loves God and your neighbor. Then God will take you into His kingdom because of what Jesus did for you. Through Christ, God will regard you as someone who has loved God perfectly and loved your neighbor as yourself – because Jesus did that for you. God will take away all His anger and punishment from you because Jesus took that for you when He suffered and died. Repent and believe – and enter the kingdom of God!

If you are a Christian, the greatest commandments of all will delight you because Jesus has filled you with His Spirit so that you love God and His law. You love Him because He first loved you. You love your neighbor because Jesus lives in you. But it will also pierce you to the heart because you see how far you still far short of full obedience every day and hour. When you see how much you fail God and your neighbor, run to Jesus Christ and find your safety in the Gospel daily. The love Jesus gave in His life and death covers all your sin in the sight of God. It makes your weak and incomplete life complete in His sight. Through faith in Jesus, don't give up the fight to love God with all your heart and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, because God delights in your life of love when you are in Christ.