

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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SERMON: THE TOP TWO COMMANDMENTS
TEXT: MATTHEW 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Have you noticed how people like to boil things down to the essence? Complicated things get simplified till all that remains are bullet points.

Personally I love David Letterman's Top Ten lists. Not all of them, naturally, but quite a few. I've even made up a few in my day, such as:

- ✓ The Top Ten list of sermons that would get a pastor fired on the spot.
- ✓ The Top Ten list of favorite scriptures.
- ✓ The Top Ten list of favorite relatives!
- ✓ The Top Ten list of telemarketing companies that I'd like to have remove my name from their calling list.

To understand this scripture you have to understand that there are about 700 commandments in scripture. 700! How many of those can you name without looking? Many would get the 10 Commandments but how far beyond that could you go?

Some of us have been reading A. J. Jacob's book "The Year Of Living Biblically." It is about a non-religious man of Jewish descent who decides to spend a year trying to live out all of the Bible's commandments as literally as possible. As you might imagine, with 700 commandments, that is an uphill battle. The result was at times profound, often funny, and always provocative even when we disagreed with him.

Being a non-observant Jew he had a passing elementary knowledge of certain things just by his connection to other family members who were "religious." Compare him to the Pharisee who asked Jesus what the greatest commandment in the law was.

Pharisees focused their faith on interpreting and keeping the Law, that is the laws of God. They saw that keeping all the commandments was not only possible but imperative if one were to be blessed by God in the here-and-now as well as in the afterlife. Pharisees were fabulously zealous about living lives in perfect harmony with all of God's laws and to teach others how to correctly interpreting the laws!

Remember, there were hundreds of laws; if I remember correctly there are 613 in the Old Testament alone.

So, here came the Pharisee, in what is described as a trap, to test Jesus by asking him what was the most important, the greatest law.

OK, now imagine a modern day variation of this story. What if...at a Republican presidential primary debate someone asked the candidates to each name the single most important part of the Constitution of the United States. You know what would happen! No matter how wisely the candidates answered the question all the others would immediately attack them and use their answers to make people doubt them.

This was the trap laid for Jesus. He could pick almost any law and they would disagree and remind him of other vital laws and thereby question his theology, his understanding of the Law, and of his worthiness to be a Rabbi. They would use his answers to sow doubt about Jesus!

That might have worked if they had asked someone like me, someone with limited understanding, but they asked the Son of God, whose understanding was and is unlimited.

Jesus did not avoid their obvious trap. He walked right into it, smiling. He said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment."

Let's think about that answer.

The most important thing for anyone who believes in God is to love of God.

Not fear. And not obedience. Love.

But we are not talking about halfhearted love. That's easy. Too easy. I don't know about you but if I look back on my life I can name a number of people and things who/which I thought I really loved - only to find out that my love was not up to what was required. I loved them to the best of my abilities but my ability to love came up short. No reflection on them - but my love was halfhearted, incomplete, impure.

Jesus was not talking about halfhearted love for God. How did he put it? "...with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

That's the way we want to be loved, isn't it? That's the way we want our spouses to love us! Purely and completely. No half measures! Till death do us part. Halfhearted spouses are soon exes!

But with God, not even death shall part us from the God whom we love!

Fully loving God is the biggest challenge of our lives. It is something we have to grow into. It is something that we have to actively, consciously, faithfully, daily seek to accomplish.

- If you don't love God actively - you will fail.
- If you don't love God consciously - you will fail.
- If you don't love God faithfully - you will fail.
- If you don't love God daily - fail you will!

Tell me, is anyone here prepared to fail in your relationship with God? Anyone here thinking, "All this loving God and going to heaven for all eternity sounds like way too much work for me"? Anyone here ready to take the easy path and just hope all that scripture about God spitting the lukewarm people out of his mouth and all that about the horrors of Hell are overstated or just flat out wrong?

If so, why are you wasting your time here??? I think you ought to be out drinking and partying and doing anything and everything that feels good - you might as well have fun now because Jesus tells us that your end will be terrible.

Church is for people who are committed to developing a deep, life-giving relationship with Jesus. We are not all saints and we won't be tomorrow or next month or next year but we are working to become lovers of God, passionate lovers, enthusiastic lovers, unreserved lovers. God expects nothing less from us!

All law flows from that loving relationship. We obey them as a human response to God's love for us and our love for God. It's like taking out the trash or cleaning the toilets – not because we want to but because we love the person who wants us to.

If your love for God is a bright, burning flame that illuminates your life then your passion to respond to God's love though faithfulness will also be passionate.

But if your love for God is anemic then don't be surprised if your faith is also anemic.

If so, don't worry so much about the laws – focus 1st on your relationship with God. Seek to experience and return the love of God. Faithfulness will follow. (If not, well faithfulness without loving God won't buy you a DART bus token much less a ticket to heaven!)

Needless to say this left the poor Pharisee speechless. There was nothing he could disagree with! The trap was a complete failure. But as he turned to shuffle off the stage and into obscurity...Jesus kept talking.

Jesus said, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The Jesus did something extraordinary – he gave him a bonus! Something way better than an extra donut when you buy a dozen!

The second greatest commandment in the Bible is also about love – about how we are supposed to love our neighbors.

How are we supposed to love them – as we love ourselves!

Frankly, I'm still working on this one. Sometimes we spoil ourselves rotten. Other times we are our own harshest critics. There are people who are famously in love with themselves and there are people who seem to hate themselves.

I don't think that Jesus was telling self-loathing people to loath others. And I'm not sure he was telling the self-absorbed to overly indulge others.

What I think Jesus was saying is that love is the essential element which should define our relationship with others.

Do you love your neighbors?

Not just the ones you can see when you walk out your front door! Sometimes they can be either the easiest or hardest to love. But think about all your other neighbors:

- The ones who are in the other political party
- The ones who write letters to the editor that annoy you
- The ones who shake their fist and yell things at you as they pass you on the shoulder
- The ones who have late night noisy parties that keep you awake or who mow their lawn at 6:30 am and wake you up
- The ones who are in a church different than yours - or are in a different religion
- The ones who have a different skin color and a different culture than you

Do you love them? Even if you don't like them?

That's hard. It's hard for me. How about you?

But if you love them, even if you never ever like who they are or what they stand for...Then you can never hate them. And hate, which is the antithesis of love, is the ultimate cardiac disease which consumes love and corrupts your heart. Hate is the opposite of what God wants for us!

Love God and love your neighbors. It's as simple as that...and the work of an entire lifetime to master. Now's as good a time as any other to get to work!