

Sunday – October 23, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **The Great Commandment**

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Scripture: **Mathew 22:34-40**

The lawyer asks a question to “test” Jesus. The Greek word for “test,” Peirazo, is used in Matthew to describe the intention of only the Pharisees and the devil (in Mt. 4:1, translated as “tempted.”). The intention in either case is clear: they want to trick Jesus, to trip him up, to make him look bad.

The question is simple, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Did the lawyer want Jesus to choose one of the 613 laws we find in the OT? Or did he want Jesus to choose his favorite among The Ten Commandments? Either way, the lawyer could argue against the choice, pointing out better choices. Of course, as a professional student of the Law of Moses, he was sure he could shred this clown from the backwaters.

But, Jesus is really smart. We don’t always think about that particular attribute of Jesus Christ. We’ll think he’s kind and gentle and generous and loving, and he is. But, he’s also really smart. He is not going to be caught in any trap the Pharisees can come up with.

So, Jesus goes to the heart of the Jewish Law, the Shema. Moses speaks on behalf of God:

Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9)

You can see how important this commandment is. They are to remember it forever and teach it to their children and discuss it every chance they got. This is not the case with The Ten Commandments or any other law in the OT. So, picking this commandment was perfect.

But, Jesus doesn't stop there. He adds another one, this one coming from Leviticus 19:18 - "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

When this law was originally given to the Children of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, clearly "your neighbor" meant one of "your people," meaning one of that nation of Hebrew slaves that had escaped bondage and to whom God had promised a land flowing with milk and honey.

However, by the time Jesus says this is the second commandment, which is "like" the first commandment, he had extravagantly redefined who the neighbor would be. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he made the point that our neighbor is anyone in need. Period. No limitations whatsoever. It is in this context that Jesus tells the Pharisees, as well as the rest of us, that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.

And, just to make sure everyone understands, especially this Pharisee lawyer with his trick question, Jesus clearly implies that this is not up for debate. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." There can be no commandment any more important than that.

So, Jesus takes two laws from the Law of Moses and, as far as anyone can tell, he puts them together for the very first time. And, more than that, he melds them into one commandment. He is telling us that we cannot say we love God unless we love our neighbor as ourselves. Oh, it would be nice to take a break from loving our neighbor now and then, and still think of ourselves as good Christians. But, Jesus is having none of that.

And just to make it even more difficult, he had told his followers in the Sermon on the Mount that they had to love their enemies no less than the rest of their neighbors. And, this means all the time. If we decide we aren't going to love an enemy, we have decided we don't love God. Period. This is not just me preaching/meddling. This is straight from Jesus Christ himself.

One of the most important ways we love God is by loving our neighbor. There are other ways, as well. We love God when we gather for worship with an open heart, asking God to fill us. We love God when we study the

Bible with the intention of hearing his word for each of us in the scriptures. We love God when we pray, either by ourselves or with others, especially when we pray in order to listen to God.

But, we must remember that our love for God is perhaps most clearly expressed by our love for our neighbor, including our enemy. Think about how non-Christians perceive Christians. Do they say, “Look at them worship” or “Look at them pray” or “Look at them read their Bibles”? Or do they say, “Look at them being generous to the poor and being there for the sick and going out of their way to be kind to strangers”?

Are we not judged by how we relate to our community and beyond? Don't people decide whether or not they trust us or admire us or wish to unite with us because of how we do or do not love our neighbor?

We show God how much we love him by being kind and generous to our neighbor. We show our neighbor how much we love him/her by sharing with our neighbor the love of God. This Great Commandment, as it has come to be known, is a coin with two sides. If we refuse to love our neighbor, including our enemy, one side of the coin is badly marred. If we love our neighbor without giving any glory to God, but rather claiming all the credit for our own wonderfulness, the other side of that coin is badly marred.

Christ challenges us to present to the world a beautiful shiny coin, currency of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit fills us and empowers us to be able to fulfill this Great Commandment, to find the image of God in everybody, including our enemies, and to be Christ for the people who need Christ so badly.

May we, as individuals and as a congregation, find new and exciting ways to obey the Great Commandment, to share the love of God with everyone we possibly can.