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“The Greatest Commandment? Love.”

“Which commandment is the first of all?” That was the question a religious leader asked of Jesus. And as soon as he heard the question, Jesus knew it was a trap, and I’ll tell you why in a moment.

But first, a bit of Bible trivia. The rabbis of old had counted a total of 613 laws or commandments in all of holy scripture. There were 248 positive commands — *i.e.*, you *shall* do this — and 248 was a number which they believed corresponded to the number of parts of a human body. And there were 365 negative commands — *i.e.*, you *shall not* do that — and 365 is a number that corresponds to the number of days in a year. So, there you have it!

Now, back to the question that was asked of Jesus: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Why was it a trap? Well, while I’m sure that rabbis occasionally speculated about which laws or commandments were more important than others, there nevertheless seems to have been a general consensus that only God had the authority to prioritize his commands. And, therefore,

any human who might attempt to do so, was guilty of putting himself on a par with God. And that's blasphemy.

And so, that's where the trap lay, and if Jesus had answered as they had hoped he would, he would have fallen into their trap. But Jesus didn't fall into their trap. In fact, his answer was something they *had* to agree with. And this is what he said:

'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."

That statement from our gospel reading is what we generally refer to as the Summary of the Law. And so, instead of prioritizing the commands, and thus falling into their trap, Jesus simply summed up the intent and purpose of all of the laws and commandments, and he did so — and this is key — with words attributed to God.

As people of faith, I think it's good to be reminded that all of God's commands, and expectations, can be summed up in those two statements: Love God, and love our neighbor.

However, in a parallel version of this story — you know, where the same essential story is recounted by another gospel writer, like Matthew or Luke — Jesus says another thing that has some bearing on us today. After reciting the command about loving God, Jesus said that there was a second command that was “like” the first. That word “like” doesn't mean what it sounds like to us. The Greek word that Jesus used, that got translated into English as “like,” doesn't mean that the two commands are similar, but rather that the two commands are of equal importance, and more importantly, they're inseparable.

In other words, Jesus *isn't* saying that our first priority is to love God, and that our second priority is to love our neighbor. Rather, Jesus is saying that our love of neighbor is *intimately connected* to our love of God; and that our love of God is *intimately connected* to our love of neighbor.

So, what does that mean? In his own reflections on this

passage, the Rev. Dr. Reginald Fuller, one-time professor of New Testament at the Virginia Theological Seminary, came to this conclusion:

“There can be no love of God which does not express itself in love of neighbor.

“Yet conversely, there is no authentic love of neighbor which does not spring from love of God.”

In other words, if we ever meet someone who claims to be a follower of God, the proof for that claim will be seen in that person’s actions and attitude towards everyone else. And at the same time, if we ever see someone whose actions and attitudes are clearly in the best interests of everyone else, then we can take it to the bank that this person is acting in concert with the goals and purposes of God. *Even if they don't know it!* The love of God, and the love of neighbor, are that inextricably linked.

And that can pose a problem for some people. Because, while loving God is something most of us can undertake fairly easily,

loving our neighbor can sometimes be a challenge; and especially if that neighbor is someone we don't even like.

And that's why I'm grateful for something that William Temple, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944, once wrote: that Love of neighbor... (and I quote):

“...does not mean merely cordiality of affection for our personal friends; it means a zeal for the welfare of all men, whether they are congenial to us or not. It is not our friends that we are bidden to love but our neighbor. A man chooses his friends; but he finds his neighbors provided for him. It is our relations with those chance people with whom the accidents of life have brought us into contact which are the test of our Christian spirit. ... If a man can succeed in being invariably courteous and considerate in dealing with his neighbor, that man has some measure of the spirit of Christ.”

I like that quote because it reminds me that loving my neighbor does not necessarily mean that I have to feel any sort of *affection* for him; just that I *act* in ways that are beneficial and helpful to him. Or, at the very least, I *don't act* in ways that are detrimental or prejudicial towards him.

And this understanding is completely consistent with the context of the command to love neighbor. You see, the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” comes at the end of a section in Leviticus 19 that describes how we are to relate to our neighbor. Here are some of the things we’re told to do:

When you harvest your crops, you shall leave the corners and edges of your fields unharvested, so the poor can have what’s left.

You shall not steal from your neighbor.

You shall not cheat your neighbor.

You shall not lie *to* your neighbor. You shall not tell lies *about* your neighbor to others.

If you hire your neighbor to do a job, you pay him quickly and fairly.

You shall not take advantage of a neighbor with a disability.

When giving testimony in court, you shall tell the whole truth, and leave nothing out.

You shall treat *all* people with the same regard. And, you shall take no vengeance or bear any grudge against your neighbor.

Or, in other words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

When our girls were young, we made it clear to them that the main guiding principle for their behavior towards others was the Golden Rule, as explained by Jesus in Matthew 7: that they treat others in the same way that they themselves would want to be treated. And always to be considerate of the feelings of others. In other words, *you* set the example! And they’ve both grown into outstanding young women.

In fact, I'm convinced that if all people lived their lives according to the Golden Rule — and even if they were not people of any particular faith — that this would go a long way towards creating the sort of just and equitable human society envisioned by God. And so, as things go, living by the Golden Rule is not only a recipe for good piety, it's also a recipe for a good society.

And so, the religious authorities and scholars were trying to trick Jesus into committing blasphemy, so that they could take measures against him. But, in the end, they simply revealed that they themselves were *not* following the laws and commandments that they so ardently taught and promoted. They proved themselves to be mere hypocrites.

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Just this: that we love God, *and* one another, as God has loved us all. It's as simple as that.

Amen.