


The Greatest Commandment

March 29, 2020



Last week we began looking at the Passion Week – the week beginning with the King’s arrival in Jerusalem and concluding with his crucifixion and resurrection. When thinking about this week, I’m reminded that God had a plan to redeem mankind from their sin, and the sacrifice of the perfect lamb was part of that plan. When Jesus was celebrated into Jerusalem with palm branches and shouts of “Hosanna!”, he knew the suffering and agony that awaited him just a few days away. This is why he had come.

After the king arrived in Jerusalem and before he was crucified, Jesus also taught. In those days and in the few years of his earthly ministry Jesus’ teaching lifted hearts, minds and souls out of their captivity on earth, and upwards towards an eternal hope. Jesus taught people how to relate to their God, and how to think about and act towards others.

In the few days that Jesus was in Jerusalem before the Passover, he took advantage of the little time he had left to teach in the temple courts. The Jewish religious leaders attempted to discredit Jesus’ authority, but Jesus knew their motive and his answers were wiser than their questions.

One of the teachers of the law heard these discussions and was impressed with Jesus’ wisdom. He came to Jesus – with no apparent hostility or hidden motive – to apprise his skill at answering a much-debated subject.

Read Mark 12:28-34.

Traditionally, the scribes spoke of over 600 individual commandments in the Mosaic law. While all were binding, they assumed there was a distinction between weightier and lighter statutes and often attempted to sum up the whole Law in a single, unifying command.

Jesus responds first by quoting from the *Shema*, a creed recited by devout Jews in the morning and evening each day. This text is originally found in Deut. 6:4-8.

- The Shema begins with a confession that “The LORD” (Yahweh) is totally unique among other gods, and that He alone is the one true God.
- The call *to love* does not mean a feeling towards God as much as a commitment to be faithful and obedient to Him.

- We may think of *the heart* as the center of feeling or emotions. But for the ancient Jews, the heart was also the seat of knowledge, understanding and decisions, attributes we usually associate with our mind.
- Jews believed the *soul* or *being* was the source of life and strength. (Not referring to one's spiritual Soul.) If we think of the body as our physical, visible person, the soul is our inner nature, our character, including our personality.
- It is interesting that the word *strength* is used in the Shema, because the Hebrew word that's used is an adverb meaning *much* or *very*. The word is used in Genesis 1:31, when God looks at the creation and says it is "very good". It's used in Genesis 7:19 when the flood waters are said to have "increased *greatly*". But the ancient scholars who translated the Old Testament into Greek chose their word that means *might* or *power*. The idea being conveyed is that we are to love God greatly, with our whole person.
- The Shema does not include the word *mind*. Jesus is probably just bringing out to his New Testament audience what was already implied in the Old Testament, rather than introducing a new thought.

The Shema calls us to commit all our emotions to God and all our thoughts to Him. We are to be absolutely loyal to God with all our inner self and all our physical self. We are to love Yahweh, our God, with everything we've got!

And then Jesus adds a secondary command, to love one's neighbor as oneself (which implies a fundamental love for oneself). Again, Jesus is referencing the Old Testament Law (Lev. 19:18; 19:34). This is an unconditional, selfless, love for one another; having compassion and taking kindly action towards our fellow man (cf. Luke 10:25-37). One cannot truly love God without also loving others (1 John 4:19-21).

These are the two greatest commands because wholehearted love for God and one's neighbor are the sum and substance of the Law.

1. How do the Ten Commandments (Exodus) relate to these two commandments?

2. What does Jesus' response to the scribe teach you about Jesus? About the kingdom?

3. In what way do you want to grow in love today: towards God? Towards those in your family? Towards the needy? Towards yourself?

4. How might you do so?

Pray for God to give you new insight and understanding of His word. That this newfound understanding will also help you deepen your relationship with God, and increase your love for family, friends, and neighbors.

This week think about your neighbors across the street and behind you, and on each side of you. Remember them in your prayers. Send them a card or give them a call to let them know you're thinking of them and praying for them especially during these concerning times.