

October 29, 2017

## Which is the Greatest Commandment

Good morning!

Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? Now if you want to know how to get a sense of the controversy in the complicated nature of the heart of the Pharisee's question, then try asking a group of children who is the greatest superhero of all time. I did that one time (well some people would disagree with you) in church and it's the reason that I don't do children sermons. Like today, it was close to Halloween and I had the children come up and I began by asking that question. Who is the greatest superhero and what I thought was going to be a very simple kind of question to open up my sermon, it turned into a presidential debate in front of 250 people.

And I should have stopped there but I had a follow-up question. And I asked them well what superpower would you like to have? And it started out innocently enough. You know, the power to fly, the power for bullets to you know bounce off my chest, or the power to be invisible or x-ray vision. But I had forgotten about a 9-year-old boy named Charlie. Who like most 9-year-old boys was obsessed with his ability to make bodily sounds. And so, he thought it would be really cool to have that super power and he announced it to the whole church. And he said it would be really cool because I could knock everybody out.

Now my point to that is that there are questions that are more controversial than we may think they are. And they have many answers and sometimes the answers are not what you were expecting. And for every person that agrees with your answer like Superman, there are at least two or three other people who will disagree and say Spiderman.

And don't mind telling you so. That's how it was for Jesus, on a little more serious note.

To name the most important religious law was like picking out a needle in a proverbial haystack. But in less than ten rules or commandments had been turned into over 600 rules by the Pharisees that basically defined and dissected every aspect of life. Teacher, which of these 613 commandments is the greatest? It's a perfect track or so they thought.

And Jesus answers with words that are very familiar, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. It's called the Shema and back then it was a part of daily prayer for the Jews. So that was not very controversial. And sure, Jesus had answered well. But as you might expect, Jesus he ain't done yet. And then he says you should love your neighbor as yourself.

The novelty of what Jesus does in that moment is hard for us to grasp. Jesus has just picked out one arguably very obscure commandment from a list of over 600 and he has raised it and united it forever with the Shema. Forever united the love of God with the love of neighbor. It must have stunned them especially the Pharisees. And after all the Pharisees were experts on the love of God. It was their job. I mean they were paid to kind of raise the roof of the church and worship and rituals. They knew their Bible backwards and forwards. And they were the judge and the jury on what it said especially the part about sin. And what's right and wrong.

In other words, they were experts on talking about the love of God in church. They were experts on doing church. But when it came to taking that love out into the neighborhood, well let's just say they had room to grow. And Jesus calls them on it. Implying that when you love your neighbor you are loving God. And if you love God that invisible sign of that is how you love the people around you.

Well it's been 2000 years since Jesus uttered these words and now the commandment's now ours. Love your neighbor as yourself. And 2000 years later I would argue that we're still trying to figure it out. I used to think that the problem we have with keeping this commandment, is a very simple commandment, is that defining love can be tricky. I mean if I was to take a survey of everybody defining love we'd probably have as many definitions as there are people in this room.

Love is one of the most overused, misused, and even abused words in our language. And there's all kinds of books on love. How to love, why to love, scholars dissecting love. Into friendly love, erotic love, romantic love, Christian love, family love, on and on. So, how do you, when you love your neighbor, we don't even know what it means. But as I said that's what I used to think. And what I think now is that I've come to believe that I have a hard time loving my neighbor not because I don't know what it means. I know exactly what it means. And I know what love demands.

So, what does that mean to love our neighbor. I'm just going to toss out a few ideas as you kind of come up with your own. For one thing, it means that our life with God is not a private affair. You know, it's not just about you and Jesus. Which is where a lot of people go wrong when they say they are spiritual and not religious because they tend to think that being spiritual means that they don't need anybody else to know God. It's wrong. I only speak for myself. One of the hardest parts of following Jesus is all the other people I get with the deal. And I'm fine that Jesus loves me and that's really spiritual. Jesus loves everybody. And when I say I believe in Jesus, it's means that I'm pledging my life to love like he does. No exceptions. That's not easy.

To go a step further, to love is not always a warm and fuzzy feeling. I just don't feel like it. Well if you wait for your feelings you're not going

to do anything. Love is a decision. In fact, sometimes our feelings can get in the way of truly loving someone like telling the truth. Confronting someone. To love means being willing to risk our own well-being. Our own reputation for the sake of a higher good. It means giving our life rather than getting things in life. And to know that that kind of risk means that sometimes you are going to get hurt.

Sometimes you may be betrayed because love involves freedom. And there's never an assurance that love will be received or returned. And finally, maybe most importantly, to love is an act of justice. To choose to love is an act of justice that often shows up in things like forgiveness and mercy and peace. And it's the kind of justice that is contrary to much of the ways of the world. Love your neighbor as yourself.

I saw all of this represented recently as a kind of a demanding sacrificial love. Not long ago I saw it and you did too. Her name is Heather Heyer. She's the woman who was plowed over by a car in Charlottesville, Virginia. But did you hear what her dad said afterwards to the press. This is what he said, her father said, "Heather's life was not taken from her, she gave her life." He even referenced Jesus. He said, "My daughter had strong opinions about equality for everyone. For her it was not lip service. For her it was real. I am proud of her for standing up. She had more courage than I do. She would stand there and defy you. People have got to stop hating. They need to forgive, and I include myself in that. And that means forgiving the guy who did this."

Heather's father reminds me of the sacrifice and the demand of love and quite honestly, I'm not sure I could have done that. Heather's father also reminds me of another father. The father who gave his son. In Christ Jesus, God became our neighbor. Took on our nature but rather than love him back, we killed him. And it took about three days to decide what to do next.

And he sent his son back to us a second time with a verdict. And the verdict on all of us is this, Peace be with you. Peace, I forgive you. Peace be with you. This is how much love there is in the heart of God for you and for me. This is the truth that we are proclaiming and announcing over you who are being confirmed today. This is a truth that all of us I think too often forget. This is the perfect love of God that can cast out all fear. When it takes hold of our life, it has the power to drive out fear. It has the power to release us. It has the power to heal us. And to turn us into a new future.

It has the power to free us from the ways of this world so that we might live in a different way, his way. And truth and life which is first and foremost. Love, will we ever get the hang of it? Well that's not the point of it. Because our life is held within the perfect love of God which is grace. So, for God it's not the bottom line. It's not a grade. It's simply the desire. And the will to go forth and practice. So, if you want the world to look differently than it does. If you want your day to go differently than the way it's been going. Then go out into the world and practice love. And don't underestimate the power that you have when you do.