

## The Greatest Commandment

- We love the GOAT question, don't we? "Greatest of All Time." Well, some love it. We all know that Michael Jordan is the GOAT when it comes to basketball. Don't even start with me about LeBron. We can also talk about Tom Brady and Tiger Woods and Wayne Gretzky and Mia Hamm and Pele and Djokovic and Serena. But they all are or were great at playing a *game*, and the discussions about who was the greatest in their respective sports are mere mortals like you and me.
- Today's encounter is not about a game but has to do with commandments, the laws of God. The arbiter of this discussion is not a mere mortal, a talking head on ESPN. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The one who comes to Jesus is a scribe, and it is the only friendly encounter between Jesus and the scribes in the Gospel. The scribes were considered experts in the law, not the laws of Rome, but the laws of God as found in the Torah. The scribes were the Supreme Court Justices of their day, experts in interpreting the law and rendering binding decisions on their interpretation. This man has just heard Jesus interpret Exodus 6:3 and putting the Sadducees in their place, and he was no doubt impressed. So, he comes to Jesus with a question. It was not uncommon in those days to ask reputable teachers about the law, and to ask them their opinion on the most important of the laws. It was a favorite pastime then to debate the question, of the 613 commandments in the written and oral laws, 248 positive and 365 negative, which is the foremost of all, which laws are heavy and which laws are light? Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for being way off track in what was important and what was not. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others." (Matthew 23:23) Twenty years before Jesus, the famous Rabbi Hillel summarized the Torah with a twist of the Golden Rule. He wrote, "What you would not want done to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah, everything else is interpretation." Hmmm. That seems to give me permission to never do anything to help my neighbor; all that is required is that I don't do anything to harm my neighbor. And here's something else. Hillel was speaking to Jews about Jews and how Jews are supposed to live. But the question this scribe presents to Jesus is bigger than that. The question is not, "of all the commandments, which is the most important for Jews to follow," or, which is the GOAT? The sense of the question is rather, "Which commandment supersedes *everything* and is incumbent on all humanity—including Gentiles?" (James Edwards) Let's look at this text under three main points: answer, response, and invitation.
- **Answer (verses 29-31)**
- Jesus responds first with the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This was recited every morning and evening by Jews and was a creedal summary of their faith. "Shema" means to hear and is the first word in the verse. It calls faithful Jews to hear and remember this foundational truth, that the Lord our God is one. There is no other God. The first word of Scripture proclaims it: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God said it himself more than once: "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is

no God.” (Isaiah 45:5) The final revelation makes it plain as John heard God say, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:3-4)

- That’s the creedal statement, the indicative, the “what is,” and is followed by the commandment, the imperative, the “what we are commanded to do”. William Hendricksen writes, “The whole duty of man, the whole moral-spiritual law, can be summed up in one word: *love*.” And 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.” Then Jesus adds, “The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Here he quotes from the Torah again, Leviticus 19:18. It takes two commandments to realize the one will of God.
- The order is important. First, we are commanded to love God. In fact, we cannot truly love our neighbor if we do not love God first. “We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (1 John 4:19-20) So, love God and love your neighbor. That’s the order. But how are we to love God? The manner is important.
- We are commanded to love God with all four facets of our person and personality, and Jesus lays rightful claim on each one with four “alls”: all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and of our strength. These are not rigid divisions of our lives, but together they make up all of who we are, and each has an effect on the others. The heart is mentioned first, perhaps because it is central in loving God. Solomon wrote, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Heart and soul are different words, but both can refer to the inner part of who we are, the immaterial substance of our lives. “Soul” could be translated “spirit,” the breath of life that God breathes into man or woman to make us living beings. Our mind is our faculty of understanding and as we feed it from the Word, our love for God should grow with it. Our strength is the power we have from God to love him with our will, to act and to speak and to stand for His name’s sake. Jesus says in effect to you and me, “All of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and all of your strength belong to me. Love me with them, and when you do, you will also love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus lifted these ancient laws out of the mire of tradition and legalism and made them live in the hearts of men and women who know him.
- **Response (verses 32-33)**
- The scribe agrees wholeheartedly with Jesus’ answer and his response shows that. He has just heard Jesus say to the Sadducees, “You are quite wrong,” and the scribe is delighted to be able to say to Jesus, “You are right.” And, “You (speak truth).” He agrees with the exclusivity of God, that there is no other. He agrees with the greatest commandment, and even acknowledges that they are better than any burnt offering or sacrifice. He understands that the law is given to turn our hearts toward God, and a right relationship with God and a moral relationship with others is more important than even the most holy of burnt sacrifices. This man seems to be at home in the Scriptures. The other scribes and the Pharisees may be grinding their teeth at him about

now, because this is NOT the way this is supposed to go. They are all in this conspiracy together, and the endgame is to destroy Jesus, not to pat him on the back and certainly not to agree with anything he says!

- This story illustrates an important point, that every Jewish leader was not in opposition to Jesus or to his teachings. We know that from Joseph of Arimathea, from Nicodemus, and here. The story also illustrates a correction to what some believe, that Jesus separated himself from all things Jewish. He did not. Here he uses the Torah to answer the man's question about the greatest commandment, and we know that Jesus grew up going to the synagogue with his family and observing the feasts and following the Jewish way of loving the one true God. He did not come to condemn the Jews but to be the completion of all that their faith in God was pointing them to, and to do what the law could not do for them or for us. He came to save them and to save all who would believe. So, he turns to the scribe and lovingly offers two things to him.
- **Invitation (verse 34)**
- On the one hand, Jesus answers the scribe with a judgment. Matthew's gospel says that this scribe, or lawyer, was sent to Jesus to test him. To judge him. But Jesus instead judges the scribe. Edwards writes, "The scribe is equipped and authorized to pass judgment on the law, but Jesus possesses a higher authority." Jesus says to the man, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Who can make such a judgment but God himself? Jesus has just affirmed the truth of the Torah, but he sits above the Torah. The scribe standing in front of him may be able to judge whether a person is faithful to the Torah or not, based on what his eyes see. But Jesus judges the man's heart. It is a judgment that amounts to Jesus saying to the man, "You are not yet righteous. Therefore, you are still outside the kingdom of God." You have great theology, but your heart is still captured by sin. But at the same time, Jesus offers an invitation.
- "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Oh, you are so close to the kingdom, scribe! In fact, Jesus could have said, you are standing right beside it. Access into the kingdom is not through sacrifice. It is not through proper theology. We draw near to the kingdom when we draw near to Jesus. We enter the kingdom not through the Torah but through the Lamb of God.
- Let me close today with this story from Bob Goff, the author of the book, *Love Does*.
- Goff and a friend were in Washington DC on business in 2007, close to Capital Hill at midnight. They saw a bunch of cars parked around the Library of Congress and barricades, so they decided to investigate. They discovered that it was a film set for *National Treasure 2*. They ran back to their hotel and changed into blue jeans and t-shirts to look the part of the film crew. They went back, dodged a couple of security guards, ran across a couple of lawns and through some bushes. They finally got to the side entrance for the crew and walked right in as if they belonged there. Nobody said a thing. They followed the signs that said, "Set." Finally, they got to a metal detector and a guard who said, "Where are your crew badges?" "We don't have them," they said. The guard mumbled something to his girlfriend about inept crew members and then waved them through and yelled at them, "Badges next time!" They turned a few corners until they found themselves on the set, in the middle of the Library of Congress at 2am with its millions of books on shelves. They watched them film the scene where they were

looking for the Presidential book of secrets. After the filming, they were trying to decide how to get out of there when Nicholas Cage and Diane Kruger rounded the corner and walked toward them. So they fell into their entourage as if they belonged and walked right out without a question being asked, marveling at the adventure they had stumbled into. And then Goff writes, "There are a lot of things I don't get invited to. I've never been invited to the Oscars or Paul McCartney's birthday or to a space shuttle launch. I'm waiting for my invitation to the National Treasure 3. If I got an invitation to any of those...I'd definitely go. There's nothing like the feeling of being included. There's only one invitation it would kill me to refuse, yet I'm tempted to turn it down all the time. I get the invitation every day when I wake up to actually live a life of complete engagement, a life where love does...It's an invitation to actually live, to fully participate in this amazing life (and God's plan of salvation) for one more day. Nobody turns down an invitation to the White House, but I've seen plenty of people turn down an invitation to fully live. Accepting an invitation to show up in life is about moving from the bleachers (or pews) to the field.... Simply put, Jesus is looking for us to accept the invitation to participate."

- Prayer
- **Communion**
- **Greet one another!**