

The Great Commandment

I want to read what is probably the most familiar passage in the Bible. It is the foundation of both the Old and the New Testament literature. It is found in the Gospels. I want to read first from Matthew, and then I will read the same passage from Luke and then from Mark.

MATTHEW:

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it...

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and all the prophesy.”

That is the reason I say it is the most significant statement in all of the text. On these two commandments, you hang it all.

LUKE:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” and he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.”

MARK:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and will 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.”

And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that God is one, and there is not other but God; and to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

...And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The passage, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and strength; and your neighbor as yourself,” interested me. Religion, any religion, has at its core, something to do with communication between you and your Creator. That is what religion is about. It is not about anything else. It is not about being nice. It is not even about being ethical. It is not about conforming to what the culture thinks

is good, so that you have a nice image among your friends. Now it is all right for you to look nice to your friends, there is nothing wrong with that. But that is not our business. It is not even our business to be here trying to teach you how to behave. That is not the task of the Church.

But the Church has made that its primary task, and made religion prescriptive. Religion is written-up for you: You do this, and you don't do that, and you take this every hour on the hour, and you kneel here, and you look holy here, and you will go to heaven. That is what I mean when I talk about prescriptive religion. Just like when your doctor writes you a prescription, you do this and that, and take these pills, and you think you have got it made. You take them and you still die. Religion is about the fact that when you take all of the pills, you still die. You see, it is not about the pills. But the Church has become prescriptive. People think that if they go there and they look holy, and if they pay extra dues, that they are going to get a better place in heaven. And the Church confirms it.

The great English philosopher, Thomas Carlyle, said something once that has registered in my mind. To paraphrase Carlyle: Our unhappiness is about the fact that we have a greatness. That greatness is because there is an Infinite in us, that with all of our cunning and our smartness, we cannot quite bring under finite control. There is an Infinite in us that we are unable to put under the control of our latest scheme. We wish we could, but we can't. And another way to say it is, there is a God consciousness in us. No matter how good we are, there is a part of us that is outside of the cultural understanding of goodness. And that outside part keeps us agonizing, and lets us know that we haven't quite done it yet.

Loren Eiseley said it this way. The terror of our age is our concept of ourselves. In other words, the most frightening thing about our time is the image we have of who we are the small definition of who we are. What do we say when we have not measured-up to that greatness that Carlyle talked about? "Oh, you know we are just human." "I am only a human being." It is a lie that you are just human. We say that all the time: "I am just a human being." You are not! And what is amazing is that somewhere inside you, you knew it before we told you.

I come to the text: "Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all Thy heart, mind, soul, and strength." It took me years to realize it, and then Jesus made the connection: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." And if you put those two things together, what Jesus is really saying is: To love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul and strength, is a statement of self-love. He says, and you should, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Which suggests he just got through telling you how you should properly love yourself. I never understood that. All of a sudden I realized that the text is about self-love, and that this is a proper reading of self-love. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength, and thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself." Well, how do you love yourself? I just told you. By loving God. The Great Commandment is about what I maintain all of the New Testament is about. It is about trying to get you and me, to understand that our selfhood, our reality, our presence is rooted in a transcendent principle built within it. Your selfhood has locked, built, structured into it a principle that is larger than earthly, historical, time-bound existence. An adequate self-image is a self-image that is

lodged in ultimacy. You can only experience who you are, as you make that awesome total commitment to the Source!

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all of thy heart” – with all of thy desiring, that is a synonym for heart; with all of thy willing, with all of thy deep passionate, urging and yearning – all synonyms for heart. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God in thy most private time, with all of thy secret desires. That shall be primary. With all of thy thoughts. Thy thinking apparatus should be joined in, because every time a thought enters your brain, you should recognize God and praise God you have another idea! “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all of thy mind” – with all of thy thought apparatus. “With all of thy soul.” What is that about? “With all of thy soul”...I translate that to mean, “With all of thy spiritual confidence.” There is a part of every one of you that is never, never, in trouble. When that place is discovered, you find the in-dwelling of God consciousness. It is the spiritual core that is always confident about you. It is God’s indwelling Presence. Soul – that quiet confidence, that spiritual confidence, where the idea is harbored that I am more than human. It is that consciousness that connects you beyond mean definitions of yourself. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” – even with God’s indwelling Presence. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all soul and with all of thy strength.” It wouldn’t be religion without that last word – strength. With all of thy energy! With all of thy actions. With all of thy work. With all of thy deeds. Religion is, in the last analysis, not just desiring, no; not just an idea, no; not just a spiritual certitude, no; in the last analysis, it is something you do for God. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” And then Jesus said, “You love your neighbor like you love yourself.” Adequate self-love is not doing something nice for myself, no! Adequate self-love is self-discovery. It is to discover that I live the Eternal. It is trying to find a way to increase my love for the One who made me. That is loving self. Loving self is not making sure that I am safe. Self-love is loving God and trusting God for the things you think you have got under control. The love of God is the proper love of self. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” This is a claim on the self, and it tells me that I am a potential participant in Eternity. That is the proper love of self! To know that I am more than you see! I could be God’s revelation in time. The proper love of self: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God.” God should have primary claim on me. Only then can I be a transcendent principle, a break-through in history, of something that is larger than history. And any time that you happen through your heart, soul, mind, strength to coincide and be on God’s program, you have that Principle behind you. And our only prayer should be: “Lord, in this life, help me to make those kinds of choices, though the world does not understand, that would allow me to participate with You.” God, I want You on the Board. If I could have You on the board of directors, I will just wait for Your vote.

And I say, we should lift God’s name again and say, it is under this kind of Power, that we must struggle to do God’s bidding. It is under this kind of Power that we must try to bring beauty, and justice, and righteousness in the world. Lift God’s name again. And not with...you do this, and you do that..no,no. Just lift the Name again, and say, God, I would be for Thee. Here am I! Send me! Help me to understand the nature of the purpose.

I know now that God is not running out of power so if I can, through religious consciousness, discern God's purpose and God's will and commit my life to it, there is one thing I know: I won't have to worry about energy, and energy shortages. I'm reminded of Job here: "Do you know where the storehouse of the snow is? Do you know where lightening is kept? Where do they box up the thunder, when it's not thundering?" Do you ever think about that? We are in the midst of mystery and we are walking around acting as if all were known. No, it is not all known. To be blessed is to become aware that I am more than human. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind, soul, and strength," and know that in the intimacy of your person that bears your name, you are of ultimate worth, and ultimate significance, and you should be making ultimate statement about God. You should intend to find out, before you leave this earth, something about God that we didn't know, and couldn't have known, had you not revealed it. I am going to be on the lookout. And I hope you are, too.