

The Greatest Commandment

Read Matthew 22:35-40. An expert in the Torah (the Law of Moses) asked Jesus the question, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” The Law had a total of 613 commandments, and the rabbis and sages had often discussed this question. But in essence, the religious expert was asking, “What matters most to God?” Jesus’ primary answer is a quote from the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is considered the core of God’s command to Israel. The Shema begins this way: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” What does God want from you? Nothing other than a love that is “with all your heart” and “with all your soul” and “with all your strength.” Nothing more and nothing less. This is what matters most to God, and this is what he has designed to be the core of the Christian life. The covenant may have changed, but the core issue has not.

Read Revelation 2:1-5. In this passage, Jesus speaks to the Ephesian church and starts by commending them in verses 2-3:

“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance...You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

You can’t get a better commendation than that! This is high praise, coming from the mouth of the Lord Jesus himself. Wouldn’t you like to get a commendation like that – to have worked hard and persevered, to have endured hardships for the sake of Jesus’ name, and not grown weary? Yet Jesus follows this glowing commendation with a rebuke in verse 4:

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”

J Oswald Sanders makes this observation: “At first blush this may not seem a matter of tremendous importance against the background of their admirable qualities, but such a view is terribly superficial. Is it a small thing to a wife if her husband abandons the love he had for her at the first? A beautiful home, a large bank account, good social position would be as ashes to her if he withdrew his love. No suffering is so poignant as that of unrequited love.”¹ What Jesus is saying is simple. As a church, we can be a shining example of all that a congregation should be – diligent, enduring, reaching out to the lost and the dispossessed – and yet have failed in the Greatest Commandment. As a believer, you may “have it all together” and yet still be lacking in what matters most to God. You may regularly give, pray, worship and read your Bible, but still be found wanting in the most important area. So what does Jesus tell the Ephesian church – a church that had received some of the most powerful apostolic input (from Paul and from John)? In verse 5, he says:

“Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first...”

Our love for God must be the prime motivation for all we do, for it is this love that God desires above all else. And it is out of this close love relationship with God that all else in the Christian life flows: our praying, our reading of the Bible, our worshiping, our witness to the

lost, our service to the poor and needy. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, I can do all the things that the Bible commands and yet if I don't have love (for God and for others), "I am nothing." Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, paraphrases these verses in a very powerful way:

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, 'Jump,' and it jumps, but I don't love, I am nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love."

A Lesson in Priorities

Read Luke 10:38-42. In this remarkable story, we find one of the most profound teachings from the Master. Two sisters – very different in personality and temperament – react to the presence of Jesus in two different ways. Martha is busy making preparations for the upcoming meal, and is annoyed (in a very sisterly way) at Mary, who is not helping her. Mary, rather than fulfilling her female obligations to prepare the meal, had opted instead to sit at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching just like one of the male disciples! This was a scandal in first-century Jewish culture, and Martha was upset at her sister and annoyed that Jesus didn't recognize such a brazen breach of etiquette. But what was Jesus' response to Martha? In verses 41-42, he replies:

"Martha, Martha...you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Martha had been "distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" and thus had become "worried and upset about many things." What she was doing was good – after all someone had to prepare the meal and serve the guests – but in being a good hostess she had lost sight of "what is better" – the presence of Jesus himself. Have you become distracted by all the "important" things of the Christian life – serving, praying, ministering, witnessing? Of course they are important! But by being distracted by these things, we can easily end up "worried and upset about many things" and, worst of all, missing out "what is better." It is clear that while service is important, the priority is to sit at the feet of Jesus. The Christian life starts with our relationship with God, and out of that flows all the "many things" of the Christian life. We sit at his feet first, and only then are we truly ready to serve God and others.

Next issue we will examine the secret to the Christian life revealed in Jesus' prayer.

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