

Heart, Mind, Soul and Strength

Micah 6:6-8

Mark 12:28-34

Please pray with me: We are your people, Lord, by your grace called and claimed and named by you. By your grace, crack open our souls, our minds, our hearts, our lives – that we may know you and respond to your great love for us. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I have a question for you: how many commandments are there? Ah yes! For Christians, we have been known to focus on ten, but actually Jewish law—as spelled out in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—includes (count them) no less than 612 commandments. Oh yes, you all know the story in Exodus where Moses climbs up Mount Sinai to meet God and receive the Ten Commandments, which are inscribed on two stone tablets. I guess it's a good thing the other 602 came later—I can't imagine how Moses would have managed to lug down a block of granite big enough to hold the whole Torah! These additional laws developed over time, as the people of Israel learned what it means to live as God's people.

These 612 commandments can be as obscure as the law to blow silver trumpets at the time of the new moon (Nu. 10:10), as practical as keeping the campsite clean (Deut. 23:9), and as contemporary as paying a worker his wages on time (Deut. 24:15). Those who study such matters argue convincingly that the purpose of these 612 commandments is to spell out in detail exactly what the Ten Commandments actually mean. It seems to be part of human nature that we want specificity. We want a prescription, a recipe for our salvation. Just tell me what to do, and I will do it. Spell it out for me. Make it clear.

We do this all the time. Take out the trash, says dad. Why do I have to take out the trash? When do I have to take out the trash? Where do I have to put the trashcans? Why can't my brother take out the trash? Thus, one simple commandment quickly becomes very complicated. One commandment proliferates into sixty, and Ten Commandments proliferate into 612. And by the time Jesus comes along, the priests and Pharisees, the scribes and Sadducees all want Jesus to answer the burning question of the day: Which commandment is the most important? Tell us, Jesus!

Listen to his answer as it comes to us from the Gospel of Mark 12:28-34:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, [the scribe] asked [Jesus], "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that 'he is one and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,— this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one dared to ask him any question.

So... which commandment is the greatest of all? Do we need to give equal heed to all 612? I mean, between laws prohibiting tattoos and linen/cotton blends and eating lobster, I think I could be in big trouble here! Tell me, Jesus, boil it down, spell it out, and make it clear! So Jesus does. In his direct, no-nonsense way. All 612 commandments spring from the short list of ten. And those ten? I'll make it easy on you. It all comes down to just two, and they are these: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and

with all your mind and with all your strength. Oh... and just one more... love your neighbor as yourself.

Thank you, Jesus! Thank God for the simplicity of it all. This I can focus on. Hallelujah. If the 612 boil down to just ten, the ten can be understood to boil down to just two: Love God and love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself. No problem! No problem? No problem! You see, all of the commandments, two, ten or 612, are about relationship. And all relationships—how I stand in relationship to myself and to everyone else—depend on how I relate to God.

And how shall we relate to God? Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, the depth of your soul, the breadth of your mind, the extent of your strength. If the heart is understood to be the seat of our volition, our will—if the soul is the place where our passions, emotions, and dynamic sense of the divine dwell—if the mind is the intellect, our understanding, our ability to think and decide and express—and if the strength is the fabric of our muscles and skeletons and sinews and guts... then love God with all that you are and with all the potential within you of the human being God designed you to become. Love God first, before you love anything else. Love God entirely. Anything else—everything else—hangs on this one thing.

More and more, as I consider these things, I think we have before us today the eternal equation, God's algebra. If A is true, then B is the result. The second part of the great commandment is not a second commandment, but the product of the first. Love the

Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your mind and all of your soul and all of your strength and you *shall* love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Know God with your life—yearn toward God with your spirit—bend your energies to God's... and then the rest shall follow. If you love God in this way, then you *won't* murder, you *won't* commit adultery, you *won't* steal, you *won't* lie. If you love God with every breath you take, with every fiber of your being, then what follows aren't proscriptions, but descriptions of what life can be like.

Moses' law begins with the basics: life lived in right relationship with God is a life where people don't lie, cheat, steal, or betray. And when the scriptures go on to describe how God's chosen people live—in what is called the Holiness Code—we find these details: love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the Lord your God (Lev. 19:18). Further, in the same chapter – love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Lev. 19:34).

Today when we consider the burning questions of our day—the issues of health care and hunger, welfare and warfare, economy and ecology, poverty and peace—we find these words from a dry and dusty time and place to be as vibrant, eloquent, and challenging as ever. Then as now, Jesus confronts us with the profound and disturbing truth that those who live in love with God go beyond the basics. The people of God love as God loves, and that includes the nice lady next door, the illegal immigrant in Pontiac, the uninsured mother in Keego Harbor, the unemployed father in Farmington, the starving child in Africa, and the angry Afghani half a world away—everyone is accounted for.

Love them, Jesus says: be as interested in them, have as much time for them, take as much care of them, provide for them in the same way you do for yourself... for in this way you prove God's presence in this world, you bear God's heartbeat into this world, you live God's love into the world. If you love God... if you love God... if you love God... then these things will follow.

How many commandments are there? Six hundred and twelve, ten, or two... no matter how many, we know that we have fallen short. God knows we can't keep 612, and we have all failed to keep ten. Jesus leaves with us with two. Only two and the second hangs off the first. Love God—just love God, with everything you've got, with all that you are, with all that you could ever hope to be... and you will know how to love your neighbor. There it is... just one commandment. Love God. And how do we do that? Jesus doesn't explain. He simply goes from this conversation into the Passover, on to the cross, up from the grave. Love God, is his commandment...or....is it a promise? Love God ... because God teaches us love... places love in our hearts... empowers us to love... You *shall* love the Lord your God, yes you shall. You *shall* love the Lord your God... not because of anything you do... not because of any sacrifices you make... not because of any commandments you keep... No. You *shall* love the Lord your God because God first loved you. That's not a commandment. That's a promise.