

“Greatest Commandment”
Deuteronomy 6:1-8; Romans 13:8-10;
Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 10:25-37

March 31, 2019
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We said that we were done with the Ten Commandments last week. We have gone through them all, and yet we’re also thinking about how Jesus takes those commandments and in some ways extends them. He helps us understand them in a more complete way.

You may have noticed in several of the passages today, we have somebody coming to Jesus and asking how to attain eternal life. I’ll get to the response in a minute, but first, let’s look at that question. What must I do to attain eternal life?

When we think of eternal life, we tend to think of a time when we go to be with God for the rest of whatever eternity is. And yet the word for “eternity” in Greek really has more to do with the quality of time than the passage of time or the length of time. So when these folks are coming and asking what they must do to attain eternal life, they aren’t necessarily thinking about how to get to heaven. They’re thinking, “How do I enter in to the life of God, or how do I have fully the life God created for me to have?”

Jesus, I think, is willing to invite them to remember that it begins with loving God with your heart, mind, soul, and strength. That’s what’s called *the Shema*, which we read out of Deuteronomy. It is central to their understanding of who they’re supposed to be. Then he goes on to say to just do what God tells you and you can enter into the life that God has given you.

That seems pretty straightforward. What gets in the way of just saying, “Okay, I’ll do what God tells me?” There’s a little bit of a trust issue. We’ve got to make sure we trust God. And, it feels like there’s a sense that I’ve got to listen to God, to someone outside myself. It feels like there begin to be some barriers. What’s the barrier to doing just what God tells me to do?

What does Jesus do with each of these people who come? First, you have the rich young ruler, as he is often described, who comes and asks Jesus, “What must I do to attain eternal life?” Jesus says, “Just follow the law and love your neighbor as yourself.” Why isn’t that enough? The man says, “I’ve done all that.” The interesting thing here to me is that my response would be, “Yeah, right.” In a way, I think that’s what Jesus is doing, but he’s doing it in a much kinder way. He says, “Okay, if you think you’ve done all that, what about this one thing? What if you were to give up all your power, privilege, and wealth, and then come follow me? If you’re going to love your neighbor, use what you’ve got to do that, and then come follow me.” There’s a barrier in giving up that power, and privilege, and wealth to follow Jesus, to get behind what Jesus is saying, and to really live out the law.

If that weren't enough, the other fellow comes to test Jesus. "I've done all this. What more do I need to do?" Jesus says, "Great! You follow the law? You love your neighbor as yourself? That's what you need to do." Then it says he has to justify himself. What does that phrase mean? Why does he have to justify himself? Why can't he simply accept what Jesus has said? It's almost like, "I have to show that I'm as right as you are," or "I have to show that it's coming from me and not from you." So he gives a clue to what his problem is by saying, "Who is my neighbor?"

You see, he wants to justify himself or he wants to justify his chosen people, whoever those chosen people might be. He can live it out with a certain group of people. That's where Jesus doesn't say, "Yeah, right." Instead, he helps him see, through this story, something he may not have seen already.

If you've been around church much, you have heard this story of the Good Samaritan. It gets told again and again. What we need to remember is that Samaritans were the folks that the Jews said were all wrong and should be gotten rid of. Have nothing to do with them. They are truly the other, and not the chosen people. Because they have some claim on God as well, it makes it even worse in the Jewish mind. Yet, Jesus chooses the Samaritan to demonstrate what it means to be a neighbor, to be the one who loves.

So, with the first man it's about his stuff, his power and privilege and wealth. The second one has got to be right and wants to show who he is. Then we've got that other group that comes to test Jesus. It's again about a rivalry. Who's better? Who gets to be in control? The Sadducees couldn't do it, so the Pharisees come to try to trip up Jesus. They come to trip him up, not to listen. How hard it can be to come to listen rather than to know what's the right way.

Jesus is inviting each of these groups, and us, to let go of that which defines us when that definition is not the love of God. He invites us to let go of the stuff, the power, the privilege; to let go of the need to be the best, to be right, to be in control; and to look to Jesus to guide us. But it's hard to let go.

Another way to think about this is to ask: What does this world owe us? This little phrase can too easily be a general way to approach the world: "The world doesn't owe you anything, but it owes *me* a lot." I want things to go well for *me*. I want *my* life to be good. I want *my* path to be smooth. Paul picks up on that sense that we human beings have a tendency to want something for ourselves, but find it hard to always extend that to others. What he suggests is that the world really doesn't owe us much, but perhaps we owe each other something, especially when we recognize that we've been given the gift of grace, the gift of God's love, and we owe it to one another to share that love. We aren't owed much, but because God has first loved us, we owe it to each other to love one another.

I always get a little hesitant around this point because it's so easy to just lift up the word "love" as if it's simple and straightforward. For me, this invitation to love has a

particular meaning. It means that we choose to do something. We don't just fall into it. We fall into love with people, but Christ is inviting us to choose to do something. It's choosing to care for others because they are valuable, loved children of God. As we've heard, it doesn't matter whether they're an enemy. It doesn't matter who they are. It doesn't matter whether they're a Samaritan. Who would it be in our world? It doesn't matter whether they're a refugee. It doesn't matter whether they are the same group we are. It doesn't matter who they are. He invites us to love one another.

The disciples think the people who are successful must be the ones who are getting close to heaven. After all, when this rich young ruler goes away, they say, "Who can get into heaven, then?" All this seems a little hard. It seems a little like putting a camel through the eye of a needle. I think Jesus says, "Yes, it is a little hard and you can't really do it on your own. But you have a God whose love never ends and you can depend on that love. And you have a God with whom all things are possible, and you can depend on that God."

We try to do what God tells us to do and recognize we don't have the wherewithal. We can't do it all on our own. It's not about our power and privilege. It's about the grace of God. As we rest our lives on that grace, we have the real possibility of sharing that grace—of loving one another.

These passages invite me to look at my life and see where I am setting up those barriers to listening to what God is doing, and recognizing that perhaps tearing down those barriers on my own is very difficult. But if I depend on the grace of God, if I keep listening to Jesus, if I keep trying to follow him, God will be at work in my life, and I may even find those barriers begin to disappear. And I may find, at times, the love of Jesus actually shines in my life. Amen.