

Commandments

Matthew 22:34-40

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First Presbyterian, Luling

What would you say if someone came up to you and asked you what was the most important traffic law? There are a lot to choose from. Speed limits? Safety inspections? Seatbelts? Pulling over for an emergency vehicle? Stopping at red lights and stop signs? Well, it's hard to choose the most important traffic law. They're all important, and they all kind of work together to create a more or less coherent system of moving cars and trucks about the countryside and city streets in a reasonably orderly fashion.

There are all kinds of lists of silly laws. For instance, it's illegal to kill Bigfoot in Washington state; in Tennessee, you're ineligible to hold public office if you have ever participated in a duel; Bingo is allowed no more than two days a week in Minnesota nursing homes; it's against the law to wrestle a bear in Louisiana, where I was unaware they even had bears; and for some reason it's not ok to put ice cream on cherry pie in Kansas.

Lists of silly laws, sure. But how would we even figure what is the most important, or greatest, or first, or primary law? Any number of them could be the most important.

So when the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" was this another in their series of trick questions they'd been asking him? Is it a genuine question? Is it even an answerable question? Is it one of the philosophical debates that the scholars of Jewish law like the Pharisees enjoyed debating among themselves, sort of a way to provoke an argument among themselves. Oh, you know old Simon, he thinks "do not covet" is the most important commandment. Have you ever heard of such a ridiculous idea?

It's not entirely clear how the Pharisees intend the question, especially when you compare all the gospel accounts to each other. But it's clear how Jesus receives the question. He receives it as a real question and answers it seriously.

Fred read the ten commandments, which are the ones we're certainly most familiar with in the Old Testament. But Jesus doesn't pick any of those. He kind of picks all of them. People have long divided the Ten Commandments into two chunks. The first few: you shall have no other gods before me, you shall not make any idols, and you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain—those are all about our relationship with God. Then there's the Sabbath commandment, which is literally and figuratively in the middle of the two chunks. The latter chunk are all commandments that have to do with our relationships with other people, our neighbors: honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness against your neighbor, and do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

These foundational commandments aren't ranked, unless you think that maybe the first or the last would get the most emphasis in a list of ten, but they don't in and of themselves say "this one is most important." So going back to the Ten Commandments won't answer the Pharisees' question, but there is this characteristic in the Ten Commandments that Jesus also uses in his answer.

It's that commandments about how we interact with God are equal in stature to commandments about how we interact with our neighbors. They're all together in the Ten

Commandments, and Jesus brings them together in his answer, too, maybe even more than in the Ten Commandments.

We know, of course, how Jesus responded to their question: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is in the law in Deuteronomy, just not in this form in the Ten Commandments. And then he kept going when maybe the Pharisees thought he was done. A second is like it “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s also in the law, in Leviticus. By citing these two commandments like he does, Jesus is doing just what the Ten Commandments do: tying love of God to love of neighbor, and tying love of neighbor to love of God.

Jesus is saying, as best I can figure, that we cannot really and truly love God if we do not ALSO love our neighbor. And we cannot really and truly love our neighbor if we do not ALSO love God. They go together.

To love our neighbor means to see them as God sees them, as beloved children, God’s creation, valuable and honorable and worthy of respect, just because they are human beings. To love our neighbor doesn’t mean just having warm and fuzzy feelings toward a generic “neighbor” that we picture. To love our neighbor means that we make decisions with others’ well-being and wholeness in mind. Who we vote for, what items we buy, where we shop, wearing masks are all ways we can love our neighbor. And to love our neighbor also means bigger things: laws and policies and who gets wages commensurate with their labor. To love our neighbor requires sacrifice on our part—Jesus himself is the model for loving, and loving took Jesus to the cross. To love our neighbor means no one is expendable or disposable or interchangeable. Every neighbor is important and worthy of love. Those people who look and worship and speak differently than we do. Those people that we can’t stand. Those neighbors that do everything that we think is evil. Those neighbors that agree with us all the time, too. Those neighbors all count and we are commanded to love them too.

And in loving allllll those neighbors, we are loving the God who made them and loves them as deeply as God loves us. God is clearly distinct and separate from our neighbors, but our love of God and love of neighbor are intertwined and mixed together such that they can’t really be separated. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. It’s a simple as that. And as difficult as that.