

## “What Counts Most?”

Time and again Jesus ran into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders. Mark writes how one day some of them were sent to deliberately trap Jesus. An expert in the Jewish law was nearby, listening to the dispute. Impressed with Jesus' answers, he afterwards asked Jesus: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28). *What's the most important commandment?*

Jewish religious leaders had differences of opinions on the commandments God gave. Some rabbis said God gave 613 commandments. Some divided these 613 into the “weighty” (more important ones) and the “light” (those of lesser importance). Others said, “No, they're all of equal value!” Some religious Jews expanded the commandments by adding rules and regulations to help explain the commandments; others tried to narrow them down to just a few that really mattered.

To the faithful Jew, it must have been confusing at times *just what to believe!* Yet, I think we have a similar situation today with Christianity and the church. It can be very confusing when you look at all the...laws...commands...rules...traditions...expectations...regarding what Christians are supposed to do, or not do!

Yeah, there are some basic things we pretty much agree on: Christians should read the Bible and pray. Obey the Ten Commandments. Be concerned about the hungry and needy. Give money to church and charities. But, different churches, different denominations, different individuals, emphasize certain teachings and traditions, certain rules and beliefs, and they all don't agree.

Conservative Christians say we ought to be concerned for the lost, and be witnessing to them. Liberal Christians downplay that and say we should be out in the community working for social justice. Some Christians stress Bible prophecy – how the Bible gives us a blueprint of the future. And we ought to be aware of how prophecies are being fulfilled right now concerning Jesus' return. Others ignore that, and even belittle these predictions. Some churches teach that Christians shouldn't drink alcohol; others say, no, the Bible stresses *moderation*, not total abstinence.

What about working on Sunday? Is it okay for Christians to work on Sunday? Is this breaking the commandment that says we should honor the Sabbath. Remember the local man who sued the U.S. Postal Service for making him work on Sunday? The court agreed with him. Other Christians work on Sunday and don't think that violates their faith or values.

Some time ago I received a mailing that promoted a new book, *What Shall the Redeemed Wear?* The flyer says, “Has it ever occurred to you that God may have some thoughts concerning your wardrobe? Did you ever wonder what the Bible has to say about the subject of appearance?” It bills this as a “must-read” book, great for group studies! (I notice it was sent from Harrisonburg, VA – Mennonite territory!).

So what about all the laws and commands related to the Bible and our faith? It points us back to the question the scribe asked Jesus: “Which commandment if the first of all?” (Mark 12:28). I can imagine when this expert in the Jewish law asked that question of Jesus, those standing

around must have stopped talking, and anxiously waited for Jesus' response.

How did Jesus answer? Verse 29: "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one.'" Every Israelite would know that! It was the "Shema" (Deuteronomy 6:4). This was the creed of Judaism. The sentence which began every synagogue service. The next verse in Deuteronomy is then quoted by Jesus. "And 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" (Mark 12:30).

Which command is #1? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! But Jesus continues: "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:31). Here, Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18. Jesus says to this scribe – this expert in the Jewish law – you want to reduce all of God's commandments to the core, to the central message, here it is: Love God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself.

The scribe replies, "Teacher, you're right!" "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" (Mark 12:32-34).

*Have we got that?* What's most important in this faith of ours? Say it with me: To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

There's a lot of stuff done in Jesus' name that's far off from this. Some years ago I saw one of the popular talk shows where one of the guests was the leader of a White Supremacist group whose members openly claimed to be Christians. These people were militantly opposed to Jews and Black Americans. I cringed as I watched this program.

Someone once called my attention to a website called "Jesus Is Lord.com". Great name for a website, I thought. But when I clicked on it, it was full of narrow-minded, hateful verbiage. Only the old King James Version of the Bible should be read. All newer translations are leading people astray. It called mental health professionals "witch doctors". It blasted Billy Graham for his association with Roman Catholics. It asked, "Is Mother Theresa a Christian?" (it was written before her death). It accused her of speaking blasphemy. (Now to be fair, I went on this website a few days ago, and I didn't find any of the hateful stuff about Billy Graham or Mother Theresa. All I found was a lengthy article about how to be saved and not go to hell, quoting many Scriptures – all from the King James Version! *I didn't find much, "love God with all your being, love your neighbor as yourself?!"*

Some Christians can get so gung-ho for doctrinal purity or correct interpretation of Scripture that they become mean-spirited towards anyone who disagrees. Some are so into Bible prophecy that it is emphasized more than the need to love. Some believers get so wrapped up in "Christian

causes” (opposing abortion, getting the Bible and prayer back into schools) that they see themselves as so much better and more righteous than those who have a different view of the situation.

We can be so focused on *our* version of Christianity, or *our* interpretation of the commands, that we miss the *what counts most*: (say it with me) “Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbor as ourself.”

So, this makes it easy, doesn’t it? Love God. Love people. I can almost hear someone who doesn’t go to church say, “See, I don’t need to go to church. I don’t need all this “you gotta do this if you’re a Christian” stuff! I just love God, and love people! You don’t have to go to church to do that!” But, to any of us – whether we claim to be a Christian or not, whether we go to church or not – to any of us who think loving God and loving others is easy, it isn’t. It’s simple, but it isn’t easy!

*Do I love God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength? Do I love God with that kind of intensity and passion?* What does it look like if I love God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength?

I’m going to want to spend time with God. If you love somebody, you’re going to want to spend some time with them. Imagine a husband saying, “My darling, I love you with all my heart!” But never wanting to be home. Rather out with guys hunting, or golfing, or spending 80 hours at work just to avoid being with “the wife”. Imagine being a Christian and having no desire to meditate or pray.

If I love God passionately I’m going to put my plans aside and seek His will. What God wants is more important than what I selfishly want.

If I love God with all my being I’m going to *want* to obey His commandments, I’m going to *want* to live as Jesus said we should live. I’m going to want to please God. Children who love their father or mother will not deliberately disobey them, or do things that are going to break their heart.

What about loving God with our *mind*? This will involve striving to glorify God through my intellect and intelligence. Thinking of God often throughout the day and night, keeping God in mind as we make our plans, and carry out our daily tasks. Trying to keep our mind and thought life clean and pure.

Loving God with our heart and soul and mind and strength is really a stretch, isn’t it!

*Likewise, it isn’t easy to love my neighbor as myself!* Sure, it’s easy to love people who are loveable and likeable? You’re kind of a jerk if you can’t even love these people. But what about truly caring about, and doing good to the people who hurt us, or offend us, the people who turn us off or rub us the wrong way!

Jesus said the most important commandment, the most important thing, is to love God with our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. It's *not* easy, and that's why we need God's help to do this. That's why we need Jesus, and His Spirit in us, to give us the capacity to love God passionately, and to love others as we love ourselves. But that's the essence of being a Jesus follower - the most important thing! Say it again with me: "To love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself."

I had something that happened to me just in the last few days that reminded me of this truth. Gregory Boyle is an ordained Jesuit priest, who since 1984 has been working with street gang members in downtown Los Angeles. I first became aware of him and his ministry a few years ago when he was a speaker at a Lancaster event. I read his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*. He has had an incredible ministry seeing God change and heal the lives of young gang members, providing jobs for them through Homeboy Industries (which he established), seeing many of them become productive citizens and followers of Jesus.

The book is filled with heartwarming – and heartbreaking – stories. While there are many success stories, there's also pain. He's had to conduct funerals for over 200 gang members who've been murdered - many of whom he's worked with and loved.

But his theology is interesting, to say the least. Some of the ways he interprets Scripture I find hard to accept. But his views are challenging, and it stretches my thinking. I'm sure it's shaped by a lifetime of working with gang members.

I loaned the book to our daughter-in-law Sarah to read. At the time, she was working as a probation officer in the juvenile court system. I thought it might interest and inspire her. Well, recently she and Kraig gave Father Boyle's new book to me as a birthday gift. The new book is titled *Barking to the Choir*. I just started to read it, and once again, his theology comes at me – and my response often is: "Well....I don't know about that!"

But you know what: On Judgment Day, I don't think Jesus is going to ask Father Boyle about his theology, because Jesus is going to see a man who loved God passionately – he wouldn't have devoted his life to this ministry if he didn't – and a man who loved some of the most difficult and desperate people on the planet.

And I don't think Jesus is going to ask me about my theology or how I interpret the Bible, but Jesus is going to ask me: "Did you love? Did you love God with all you had in you? Did you love your neighbor as yourself?" Because that's the most important thing about this faith we claim!

As we begin a new year, I hope we realize that this Christianity we're involved in, isn't mainly about a church building...or denominational practices...or religious rules and regulations. These can have their place, but *the most important thing is* what Jesus said: (say it again with me) - to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

