

The Greatest Commandment

Mark 12:28-34

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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I've spent a lot of time the last couple of weeks, working on getting this *awesome* series on The Ten Commandments together. There's lots to think about. So it all got me to thinking about *laws*. That's what we're dealing with, with The Ten Commandments, laws that God gave. When you look at the ten, it seems pretty simple, doesn't it? And when you consider what Jesus is saying to us in this passage from Mark, it *should* be simple.

But us human beings like to make things complicated. We'll take something that's awfully simple and easy to follow, and make it incredibly complicated. I think we do that because so many of us people try to find exceptions, try to say, "Well, that law doesn't really apply to this thing I'm doing." You know, "it all depends on what the meaning of 'is' is." But whatever law we're talking about, that law probably *does* apply, at least in spirit and intent. So every time a new situation comes up, instead of referring back to the simple principle, because people think first about themselves, we gotta write a new law!

Here's an example you all need to know, about why that's true. I doubt any of you have ever heard these figures before, but you could easily look them up online; that's where I got them from. The Constitution of the United States of America is 11 typewritten pages, normal type, on normal size paper. I know because I looked at that document before I printed it out, and the computer said "11 sheets, 8 and a half by eleven." Basically, it's the size of a good term paper! But do you know how many pages

there are in the U.S. Code – the code of law for the country, with all the Federal Laws in it? There are 43 “Titles” to the code, and each Title has subdivisions. Some Titles can be put with several other Titles into one bound book; other Titles are so big they span multiple books. Think “encyclopedia” here! The official printing office versions run to more than 30 volumes! And get this – that’s more than *200,000 pages* of laws! That’s just Federal; that doesn’t even include state laws. All that, to tell you how to do right. No wonder we need lawyers!

Why is it so hard to do right? Is it really hard? That’s sort of the subtext for this passage, but more importantly, for this next 10 weeks as we study the Commandments. Didn’t God try to make it easy for us to live *well*?

Let’s set the scene. In this section of Mark’s gospel, Jesus has been at the Temple, in this, the last week of his earthly life. The Scribes and Pharisees just couldn’t leave him alone! There was one debate after another. Earlier on this day, Mark records challenges to Jesus on his authority, on paying taxes, and about the resurrection from the dead. The scene was all about conflict; indeed, in these last weeks of Jesus’ life, there were constant challenges, from the Pharisees and scribes, about the Law. Those people were angry most of the time, because Jesus always made ‘em look bad.

But a scribe came forward who not only was *not* mad, but who actually seemed to *enjoy* the answers Jesus gave. This scribe gave Jesus credit for answering well. Scribes measured their worth in their expertness on questions about their Law. That was their job! Scribes often claimed to know what was right, even if they didn’t, to save face, and, maybe, to save their job. What made this scribe different from the others was

that he was willing to learn from someone else, an outsider! – to acknowledge that maybe somebody else had something good to offer him. At least, as far as *law*. We can hear that, and take it to heart. Not every know-it-all is really a know-it-all!

The question he asked Jesus was a pretty standard sort of scribal question, the kind of thing that scribes and Pharisees might sit around and debate for days on end. The question was also a standard part of the training of any Jewish male, much like we used to train people with catechisms. You remember the “little pink book?” So everybody should have known the answer. The words “Hear O Israel” was all anyone needed to hear, because every adult male was expected to recite the whole saying from Deuteronomy about the one God – called the Shema – every single day upon rising. That might not be a bad idea for us! - to recite some central scripture every morning first thing. The thing here is, the question this scribe asked Jesus is a simple question, and it shouldn't have been hard to come up with the answer.

Now, the scribe asked for the “*first* commandment”. The first of the Ten Commandments is “you shall have no other gods besides me.” Was that the right one? Matthew has the scribe asking “Which is the *greatest* commandment?” It's a clarification that makes sense; you could also translate Mark to have him saying “Which commandment *has priority*,” which the word in the original actually implies also. Luke has Jesus turn the question back to the scribe, and *the scribe* answers correctly. You get the point: everybody knows this answer! So no good church person of their day or ours should miss this one. If you didn't get it on the first try, you'd surely get it on the second. After all, if you're saying those words about God being one, and how you will

love him, every single day, then there's a certain *DUH* factor here, isn't it? Jesus doesn't hesitate; he gets it right the first time.

But then Jesus adds something new. To love of God he adds something from Leviticus chapter 18, which you heard read as your Old Testament lesson this morning. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Mark is a little spare here; he doesn't tell us much more. In Matthew, Jesus says, "a second is like it" meaning that this second command should be observed on a par with this first one. In Luke, the questioner supplies the answer, but then questions Jesus on who his neighbor is. Jesus replies with the story of the Good Samaritan. What that scribe in Mark, and all of Jesus' listeners, including us today, should be getting from Jesus when he combines these two commandments to love, is that loving God *means* loving your neighbor – no matter how hard that might be. That means that these two, together, are "the Greatest Commandment." Matthew even concludes this story by having Jesus say, "On this [commandment] hang all the Law and the Prophets."

So why did all those laws get made? Why is it that our simple U.S. constitution had to be blown up from 11 pages to over 200,000? It all comes down to this: People are self-centered. They don't want to worry about anyone else, they want what they want and that's that. It's actually a pretty short-sighted view of things; if they'd have just lived by the simple principles, either our Constitution or Jesus' Greatest Commandments, then the heavy burden of law might not have ever developed, then or now.

Consider what Jesus said to do: love God completely, love your neighbor as yourself. How do you do that? Loving God is all about showing gratitude for what God has given you, for what God has done. But how can you do that? God pretty much owns everything – so what can we give him that he doesn't already have? It has to be what we *do*, that's our gift. When you were a little kid – I mean *really* young, 4 or 5 years old young – what kinds of gifts did you give your parents? You might have made a mud-pie up and gave it to 'em, right? Or you might have picked a bunch of dandelions from the yard and made a bouquet to give to Mom. Maybe you even made up some bowls of cereal and some instant coffee, and brought it to them in bed on a Saturday. Do you remember? You didn't have any money, or anything of worth, to give. *But those gifts were more special to your Mom and Dad than anything else!* Go to any house with young children and look at the refrigerator – you'll see artwork the kids gave the parents that *they* received as a gift. And it wasn't because of any value – I mean, what's the value of mud or weeds? The gift you were giving was YOU. That's the value.

Okay, then what things will *we* do that'll be especially pleasing to God? We'll do things for and be right with our neighbors. If the gift you give is *you*, then you'll give yourself to your neighbors. THAT'S why Jesus said, "And a second is like it" when he gave the "love your neighbor" commandment. It's "like it" because if we want to show God our love, we'll do it by loving our neighbor. That scribe knew it right away. "This is greater than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices," he said. In other words, than all the things in their complicated Law that had anything to do with pleasing God.

I wonder what the world would have been like if humankind had stuck to that simple idea.

Go back to Genesis 3, the so-called “Fall of Man” chapter. It tells us that Adam and Eve had been placed in the Garden with the simplest of laws. All they were asked to do was to NOT eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They could do anything else they wanted to and they’d continue to live in bliss. The authors of Genesis knew human nature as well as any modern anthropologist or sociologist. We always think about ourselves, and what we want in the moment, rather than what God wants. The serpent knew how to appeal to that in Eve, but don’t blame the woman, like Adam tried to do. He’d have done the same thing if the roles had been reversed. Their lives got more complicated and harder from that moment on; and the theology is, you and I, descendants of those first people, have behaved in the same way. But would we, can we, get back to the simple life under God that they had?

In a very real sense, Yes we can! We do it by using these commandments of Jesus. Notice, I said “use” not “obey.” I say that because I’m convinced God has a reason for these things, these laws and especially these words from Jesus. Who would have known, back there in 33 A.D., that we’d have made our lives so complicated, made our lives so miserable for lack of clarity, that we’d wish for something easy to understand, easy to see as our basis for everything we do.

Well, then why do we even need to have these TEN Commandments we’re going to start living into in the next 10 weeks? I think God was trying to give us something more, something to be guidelines that everybody could agree on. So he did. The genius

of these 10 laws is how they cover all of life. The first three, as I've mentioned before, have to do with our relationship to God. You better put these first! The fourth one transitions us to humans by being about humans *and* God: Do what you're supposed to do in relationship to parents, to family, and God will do good for you. Then come the six that have to do with us – and all of them, if everybody followed them completely, would make life here like *heaven*. We really would have the “Life God intended,” as our doorhangers and literature have said. Each is so powerful in its implications, I'll have no problem teaching them and preaching them well.

Yet you could also look at the Ten Commandments in light of Jesus' Great Commandment, and see how they fit into the simple law Jesus laid on that scribe that day. If you obey those commandments, then you ARE loving God; three of them even tell you how to do it specifically! And all of the rest have to do with loving your neighbor. As we go through the next 10 weeks, you're going to learn a lot; but you'll also see that these Ten Commandments do indeed fulfill the Great Commandment Jesus gave.

So, do you understand now, how powerful this commandment is? If you will incorporate it into your life every day – well, you're just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you.