

Title: What Matters Most - The First and Greatest Commandment
Video URL: <https://youtu.be/3TqNok14ahM>

As a hospice chaplain, the most common question people asked me was, “What is life’s purpose?” Many wondered since they had lost the ability to do much of anything, if having a purpose in life was even possible. Asking “what matters most in life” is critical. It is a question that comes up repeatedly in the lives of thinking people searching for significance.

The Pharisees and experts in the law come up to Jesus in our Gospel today and ask, ***“Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”***¹ They were not looking for significance. They only intended to trip Jesus up by asking a question commonly believed had no good answer. The Torah, with its 613 distinguishable laws and their commentary on the Mosaic Law called the Mishnah, left them unable to discern “the weightier matters of the Law: justice, mercy, and faith,”² much less find purpose.

But the answer Jesus gives to “Which commandment is first of all?” has everything to do with what matters most. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus responds,

“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.’”³

¹ Matthew 22:36

² Matthew 23:23

³ Mark 12:29-31

When Jesus used the Jewish Shema, “**Hear, O Israel, the LORD (Yahweh)⁴ our God, the LORD (Yahweh) is one,**”⁵ it was traditionally a way of centering one’s heart and life around life’s greatest priority, namely a relationship with God who personally revealed himself in Israel’s history.

To illustrate how our lives center around chosen priorities, Richard White, a pastor in Montreat, N.C., uses scientific information from the solar system. He explains:

“We are a planet on the move. Not only is the earth spinning at 1036 miles per hour, but the earth is hurtling through the solar system at 66,658 miles an hour (equal to about 18.5 miles a second). And the sun, with us in tow, is moving through the galaxy at 492,126 miles an hour. We are a planet on the move, but it’s not a random movement. Everything is in orbit around something else: the moon orbiting around the earth; the earth orbiting around the sun; the sun around (a supermassive black hole named Sagittarius A-star at the center of our Milky Way galaxy.)

Life can sometimes feel out of control. Our fast-paced movement (can feel) like we are racing through a universe of problems (and black holes that can suck the life out of us.) But with all the turning, spinning, and hurtling that you are experiencing in life, you are revolving around something. When you wake up tomorrow morning, what will your day be centered around? Will it be centered around what is pressing in on you at work or school or what is bothering you about life? If so, where is God in that system?”⁶

⁴ Strong’s Concordance # 3068 “Yehweh: The proper name of the God of Israel. It is the personal name of God who revealed Himself to Moses at Horeb

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁶ The Rev. Richard White, Sermon: “What Matters Most” February 7, 2010 on Mark 12:28-37 (Words in parentheses are not original to the quote, and scientific details listed have been updated.

Richard's point is that we are to love the God who made us and loves us, the God who has already demonstrated his great saving acts toward his people in Israel's history. And we are to love this God with all our being. Secondly, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In its essence, Jesus is redefining the spirit of the law, which is love. If you love God, you will love what God loves, namely our neighbors, our brothers and sisters who live close to us. Some people say they love people, but what they mean is an abstract idea that has no practical substance.

I love the story about a neighbor who was resurfacing his driveway. When his neighbor's child began drawing pictures in the wet concrete, he complained to their parents. When the bewildered parents asked if he loved their little Johnny, he replied, "I love little Johnny in the abstract, but not in the concrete!"

Perhaps you have heard the statement, "Christianity isn't about rules; it's about relationships."⁷ But since we are saved into a personal relationship with God and others, it is really about both. Jesus said, ***"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."***⁸ Rules show us how to live in those relationships, just as the Ten Commandments show us how to love God and our neighbor in concrete and practical ways. Therefore, Jesus did not pit rules against relationships. Instead, He "painted a picture ...in which law and love work together in complete integration,"⁹ ***"for on (the great and first commandment and second like it) hang all the law and the prophets."***¹⁰

⁷ Jen Wilkins, "Ten Words to Live By," p. 12

⁸ John 14:15

⁹ Timothy Keller

¹⁰ Matthew 22:40

The word for “hang” could also be translated as “depend.” To explain what this word means in its context, I like sharing the story about arriving at the Cathedral of St. Peter in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the altar guild furnishing me with a fancy black cassock (the long black robe that goes underneath other liturgical garments). It had 24 buttons up the front. The first time I tried it on, I started by putting the first button in the wrong buttonhole, and after that, the whole garment was out of whack. I had to unbutton it entirely and start over. Jesus says that if you do not get “first things first,” nothing else fits. The love of God has to come first, and the love of our neighbor will naturally follow. Everything else in the law and the prophets will “hang” correctly when these two commandments are placed in their proper perspective.

You can see something of what this looks like whenever humanists have tried to put the love of one’s neighbor first while leaving God entirely out of the picture. Their sincere attempt is meant to be more practical, but modern history has proved that you can multiply civil laws in pursuit of justice, but you will never change people’s hearts with it.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul states that the law was meant to be “...*a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.*”¹¹ Paul refers to this in his letter to Romans: “*For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.*”¹² In him, we find a Savior who changes our hearts and gives us the power to love God and our neighbor in tangible ways.

¹¹ Galatians 3:24

¹² Romans 8:3

Admittedly, none of us love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. So, “When fears arise that you haven’t done enough, you are not alone because none of us has. ***“But God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”***¹³ So, the humble admission that we haven’t loved God as much as we should actually brings us closer to God.

My own journey with God started when I went back to church as a teenager and heard the minister say, “If you want to be happy, keep God’s commandments.” When I took those words to heart and tried to live them, I became convinced that my efforts were hopeless. Yet, to my surprise, I was happier because of the effort.

Richard White’s concludes his sermon on this topic with, “Receive His love. Rest in His love. Believe in His love, and it will change you. God’s love is the difference maker. When you receive, rest, and marvel in it, you are changed and will begin to be captured by the things that matter most.”¹⁴ And loving God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself will become your life’s chief joy and delight. *Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

- How is the ideal of loving God calling you to live and act this week?
- What is the purpose of the law?
- When you think of the law as spiritual, but we as humans as unspiritual (See Romans 7:14), how do you find reconciliation and peace?
- What black holes do you frequently encounter that draw you away from the love of God?

¹³ Romans 5:8

¹⁴ Richard White, Ibid.