

Seeking: Questions People Asked Jesus sermon series
What Is the Greatest Commandment? – Mathew 22:34-40
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Well, this one seems pretty straight-forward, doesn't it? Someone asks the greatest commandment and Jesus says, "Love God and love your neighbor." Simple right? How are we doing with that? I read a quote recently by spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, who said, "Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear and do harm." Pretty spot-on, right? That was written 30 years ago and we are no better at loving our neighbor now than we were then.

That's ironic, because loving our neighbor is a fundamental part of having faith, no matter what faith you have. Listen to these words: "Worship God and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the neighbor who is near of kin, the neighbor who is a stranger, the companion by your side the wayfarer you meet." Sounds a little like the passage from Matthew, doesn't it? Actually, it's from the Koran, the Islamic holy book. In fact, that book teaches that it is an offense to God if a person harms or annoys their neighbor. You can't even annoy your neighbor? If that's the case, I wouldn't make a very good Muslim. But to be fair, neither would my neighbors.

This passage comes near the end of Matthew's gospel, after Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Since then, he's overturned the tables in the temple, cursed a fig tree, had his authority questioned several times, and told a series of parables critiquing the religious elite. In other words, Jesus is NOT in a good mood. Starting in chapter 22, we have what's called "the Temple Disputes," a string of stories about the Jewish religious leaders trying to trap Jesus into violating the law and incriminate himself through blasphemy. After out-thinking the leaders on questions about to whom you should pay taxes and how marriage works in the afterlife, Jesus is hit with our question for today.

We're told right away what is happening. A lawyer asks Jesus a question to test him. That's not a condemnation of lawyers, but it does give you a sense of the prosecutorial spirit on the question. The lawyer calls Jesus "Teacher," an attempt at mock reverence, then asks him which commandment in the law is the greatest. If I were to ask you how many commandments there were, you'd probably guess 10, and for good reason. But the 10 we know are only the tip of the legal iceberg.

In the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, there are a total of 613 laws given by God to Moses to share with the Israelites. That breaks down to 248 things you should do and 365 things you shouldn't do. The law was given so the Israelites would know exactly what God expected of them in order for them to live holy lives. Do these 248 things, don't do these 365 things, and you will be holy people. Simple, right?

Six-hundred and thirteen commandments. So how could Jesus choose just one? It's a trap. If he names one, then he invalidates the authority of the other 612. And if he says they are all important, he'll have to explain why he's already broken several of them, like not working on the Sabbath. So, Jesus does what he typically does in this situation: he doesn't directly answer the question. The first part of the non-answer he gives is not a commandment. It is part of the *Shema*, a Jewish blessing from Deuteronomy that was read earlier. In that one sentence, Jesus

sums up the whole of the law. The 613 commandments can be fulfilled by loving God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.

If only Jesus would have stopped there with loving God. But he adds the part about loving your neighbor, which really messes things up. To be a person of faith, you have to follow the first commandment. You have to love God; that's kind of the point of faith in the first place. But to be a person of faith, according to the law, you don't have to follow the second one. In other words, based on the law, you can love God and not love your neighbor and still call yourself a believer.

Let's take the 10 commandments. Do you have to love your neighbor to fulfill any of them? Can you not kill and still hate your neighbor? Can you not lie and still hate your neighbor? Can you honor your parents and not worship idols and keep the Sabbath and not covet your neighbor's stuff and still hate your neighbor? Of course you can. You can follow all 613 commandments to the letter and still hate your neighbor.

That's why what Jesus does here is so radical. After he gives the first commandment, which he calls the greatest, he then says, "And a second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." He doesn't say, "And there's a second one, which is also kind of important." He doesn't say, "After you do the first one, you should probably strongly consider doing the second one." He says, "And a second is like the first," which says to me that Jesus believed that loving your neighbor was equally as important as loving God.

Well now, that's a whole different ball of wax. I'm fine not killing my neighbor and not stealing from my neighbor, but loving my neighbor? Have you met my neighbor? He uses his leaf blower at 7 a.m. and she doesn't bring in her garbage cans on time and I think they voted for somebody different than me. Love God? Hey, I'm not perfect, but I can do my best. But love my neighbor? Not so simple. Our world has made it a lot harder to be good neighbors to each other.

Because that isn't already hard enough to do, let's complicate this some more. You may remember that this issue of loving your neighbor has come up before with Jesus. In a passage from Luke, a lawyer tries to test Jesus by asking him, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, which we talked about last week. Jesus asks the lawyer who the neighbor was in the story, and he answers, "The one who showed him mercy," to which Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise."

So, according to Jesus, not only are we supposed to love God, we're also supposed to love our neighbor, and our neighbor is not defined as people who live near us or share our values or like our Facebook posts, but our neighbor is anyone who needs neighboring. So you are my neighbor. And the family who lives next to me are my neighbors. But my neighbor is also the Muslim woman at the local hot chocolate place who asked me what I did for a living, then asked what I was preaching about on Sunday. And my neighbor is the atheist woman with whom I worked on a project to help Lexington be a more compassionate city. And my neighbor is even that person I don't know in the car behind me who lets me change lanes at the last second because I wasn't paying attention, and waves back to me when I give a wave of thanks. That's my neighbor. And I'm called to love them. And what about the people around me who don't show mercy, but instead spew anger and vitriol? Well, I think we should try to love them, too, because the only alternative is to not love them, and that doesn't seem to be working very well.

The challenge for us in being good neighbors today is not only stepping out of our comfort zone; it's also that the boundaries of our neighborhood have been blurred by technology. In the Good Ol' Days, your neighborhood was defined by how far you could ride your bike before your mom got mad. But now, because of the internet, our world is a giant neighborhood.

Every morning, I read my email, or check a news website, or log into social media. By the middle of the day, I've checked on hundreds of people. I've sent them a text, or like their post, or commented on their status by saying, "I'm praying for you," which is like delivering a virtual casserole to their doorstep. Some of them live next door, some of them live across town, and some of them live around the world. And yet, Jesus says, they are all my neighbors.

Not only does Jesus call me to love our neighbor, but I'm called to love them as I love myself. There's a whole other sermon about the challenges of loving ourselves too much, or not loving ourselves enough, but we'll save that one. Here's what this means for me today: to love my neighbor as I love myself means that whatever perks and privileges, I want for myself, I must also extend to my neighbor. Whatever rights I believe I deserve, I should make sure my neighbor has, as well. Whatever fundamental protections I believe I should have, from a roof over my head to access to healthcare to the ability to speak and live and dress freely, I should work to ensure my neighbor has, as well. Under Jesus' definition, there's a world of people out there who are our neighbors but are being treated differently than us, who have so much less than us. So, what are we going to do about it? Because, after all, by loving and serving them, we are loving and serving God.

If Jesus had only given the first commandment, it would have let a whole lot of us off the hook and allowed us to piously proclaim our love for God while we treat one another badly. But he added the second part and said loving your neighbor is as important as loving your God. Here's the beauty of that command: if we all focus on loving our neighbors, then all of us will be loved, because we are all neighbors. Now, we all know that not everyone will do that. Some people will continue hating their neighbor, the neighbor who they deem is not worthy of love. That's all the more reason for us to love those who are being hated, to remind them that they are worthy of love. And – here's real challenge – we still are called to love those who hate others, because to be honest, they probably hate others because they haven't been loved enough. So, as I see it, the answer to all these problems is love. God knows there are a LOT of problems with this world, and we're the cause of most of them. They can be paralyzing at times. Where do you even start to make a difference? How about we start here: Love God and love your neighbor. Simple, right? What if we committed the rest of our lives to just those two commandments? If we can focus on doing those things, I have a feeling that will be enough.