

Sunday February 6, 2022

Lesson 10: The Greatest Commandments

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40

Context:

The winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum continues its focus on engaging the world with the unit entitled “Wonder.” This set of lessons in the season of Epiphany will focus on how we are called to a sense of wonder in our faith. As we look to the glory of God, we are transformed and can engage in the world in new ways as disciples of Jesus. Today we are reminded of our commitment to the great commandments God gives us for life together.

Our lesson comes from two passages of scriptures, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. The Old Testament passage comes from the book of Deuteronomy. The passage referenced is one of the most important texts in Judaism and is known as the “Shema,” which means “to hear.”¹ This passage has become a daily prayer to repeat and the visual reminders come in the form of phylacteries and mezuzahs, in which the words themselves, written on tiny scrolls, are attached to the arms and head during prayer and to the door of the home, respectively.² In the Christian tradition, a parallel might be something like the creeds we confess and affirm in worship. They name who God is and how this is the one true God we worship.

This prayer would have been one Jesus knew by heart and would have recited alongside those who followed him. Thus it comes as no surprise after a debate with the Sadducees, Jesus is approached by those who want to see how far his knowledge goes and so some Pharisees ask him what is the greatest commandment in the law. The question is not innocuous as Matthew’s gospel present how there were competing views in first-century Judaism. Since all commandments are of equal importance in God’s eyes and are to be observed for God’s glory, it is sinful to argue that some are more important than others based on some merely human standard of judgment.³ This could be a trap for Jesus and yet he proceeds to sum up how the Shema fulfills one’s quest for holiness and goes on to inform how we love those around us. All the words of the Law and Prophets hang upon this understanding of loving God and loving humanity. Both commandments are vital to one another and connect each other together.

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 179.

² Ibid.

³ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 259.

Application

When most people think about the word commandment, there is the focus upon the ten commandments Moses given by God at Mt. Sinai. We can all remember the time we heard about these commandments whether it was in Sunday school or a history class where one learned about ancient legal codes. If you haven't heard of them, all you have to do is a google search and there you will find everything you need to know.

Yet the commandments we read today are ones which are somewhat of a cliff notes version to the ten commandments. We are reminded of the command to simultaneously love God and love other people. The two are joined together and for Christians who embrace both, we see their complementarian nature.

Often when we think of what it means to love the Lord our God with our all our heart, being, and mind, we can easily think of the spiritual disciplines which connect us to God. We read the scriptures and we see God's Word flooding our body, giving us counsel and direction. We go to worship and we give thanks to our God who is worthy to be exalted and glorified. We engage in prayer and feel the assurance of the Holy Spirit who comforts us. As we give of ourselves to the ways to experience God, God gives us a filling we could never quite find anywhere else.

Yet what all of us find is how our diet cannot be complete if we never connect these experiences with God to the journeys of those around us. While we might discover we read the Bible differently from others when we go to study, we also discover our similarities and how the Holy Spirit works in someone's else's life. As we worship, we see the other gifts God has given people and how all can glorify God. When we pray for our neighbors, and even our enemies, we can feel the peace of God as we are connected to those individuals spiritually.

The experience of loving God and loving our neighbors ties together. Because of the great love God has for us, we are called to share the love with one another and see the transformation to take effect in the lives of others. As we share in signs of love with one another, we too are transformed. God works to draw us all closer together to experience health and wholeness.

When I was in Israel, I loved seeing how the Shema was posted above the doors of almost every place we went. Holy sites, restaurants, and even some of the hotels had these words of loving the Lord your God with all your heart, your being, and all your strength. Despite the words being in Hebrew, I was able to learn the symbols and to think of the power of this blessing. What if we were to take the love we experience in God and take it with us wherever we go and whatever places we visit? It helps us to understand and internalize the words Jesus gives us in Matthew. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. The people in the places we go are meant to receive the care and love we have to offer.

Loving God and loving other people go hand in hand. Often the temptation in the church is to leverage the two. There are some people who sure do love the Lord yet the way they treat others is negligible. And then there are others who love people and yet sometimes they struggle in relationships because they have neglected their soul and being in touch with God. We need both to be nourished and healthy; to give of ourselves to God and to those with whom we have community beside.

What do you understand as the meaning of the word “commandment”? Which spiritual disciplines do you practice helping you feel connected to God? How does God help you to love your neighbor as yourself? Who are people who show you how to love God and love others? How are some ways you can make sure you are balanced when it comes to both loving God and loving people?

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