

### Heart, mind, strength ... and soul.

“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

If we hear a question like that, we tend to jump first to the ten commandments, and we remember that God rescued his people from Egypt – and then, through Moses, gave the people the commandments. And we can sometimes forget the order those things happened in, which can lead to us thinking that we need to follow those commandments in order to be rescued by God. But no – the rescuing came first, and then the commandments came afterward.

And people can think the same way about how Jesus saving us works, too. People think that we have to be good people – doing what he wants us to do – to be saved by him. But that’s not how it works – Jesus himself said “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Luke 5:32) Yes, Jesus does want us to change our ways, but that’s in response to what he does for us... not to earn his favour.

But we do have these ten commandments. They are important, and they part of our scriptures, and they describe how we should be living if we are the people of God – because, if we are the people of God, then we will be having no other gods, we won’t be making graven images, we won’t be stealing, we will be honouring our parents and so on.

You may have noticed though, that people like to explore the edges of rules... that they like to find loopholes and exceptions, and so on. And so people develop their own rules to make sure they keep them.

In the Jewish tradition, the ten commandments had been rigorously considered and expanded. “Does lighting a fire count as work on the Sabbath?”, “What about a lighting a candle?”, “what about turning on an electric light?” and things like that.

I understand the Jewish Law, the Mosaic Law, consists of 613 commandments, out of which 365 are negative (thou shalt not) and 248 are positive (thou shalt).

By Jesus time, the Jewish people had added even more to that – remember when Jesus said “The scribes and the Pharisees...tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others”? The burdens were more rules to follow.

It all became very complex and hard to follow – wouldn’t it be good to simplify it?

If we turn to Psalm 15, we see that David had a go at simplifying the rules.

*Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?*

*Who may live on your holy mountain?*

*The one whose walk is blameless,*

*who does what is righteous,*

*who speaks the truth from their heart;*

*whose tongue utters no slander,  
who does no wrong to a neighbour,  
and casts no slur on others;  
who despises a vile person  
but honours those who fear the Lord;  
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,  
and does not change their mind;  
who lends money to the poor without interest;  
who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.  
Whoever does these things  
will never be shaken*

If you count the specifics in that – be blameless, be righteous, speak the truth, don't slander and so on – you can see that from 613, he got it down to 11.

But later, and I think a bit more famously, Micah simplified them to just three commandments:

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)*

Which brings us to our gospel reading today, where one of the teachers of the law comes to Jesus and asks that question: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Throughout the gospels, the Jewish hierarchy were suspicious of Jesus, jealous of Jesus, and they tried to trick him, find fault with him, and they tried to trap him.

Jesus had answered both questions in remarkable ways - in unexpected ways. The answers that his questioners hoped to receive in order to entrap him weren't forthcoming – instead they got responses from Jesus that left them confounded.

And so we heard that one of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked [Jesus], "*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*" (12:28)

Not ten, not 623, not fifteen, not even three, but Jesus brings it back to just two:

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind  
and with all your strength.*

*Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Note that he doesn't tell us that the ten commandments don't matter, and he doesn't say that the six hundred plus laws don't matter. What he does is tell us the very basis of the law. The first principles of the law. The essence of the law.

The ten commandments and indeed all the laws come back to these two commandments that Jesus nominates. all the commandments are ultimately about either loving God or loving each other.

Thou shalt not steal – it's about loving each other.

Honour thy mother and thy father – it's about loving each other too.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me – it's about loving God.

Honour the Sabbath and keep it holy – it's about loving God as well.

If we keep both the commandments that Jesus gives, then it follows that, even if we don't realise it, we will be following all the commandments in scripture.

Love God, and love your neighbour.

It couldn't be simpler.

Well, it's simple in theory, but our experience is that it's quite difficult in practice.

We can, and we should, test everything that we do against those two commandments. If there's something that we're doing – whether it be as individuals, as a community, even as church – which, at its heart isn't about loving God, or about loving our neighbours, then we shouldn't be doing it.

The teacher of the law was impressed with Jesus' answer:

*“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (33-34)*

It's not really surprising that he thinks Jesus is right about loving God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, because as we heard in our reading from Deuteronomy, that was central to Jewish life.

In our Old Testament reading, Moses urged the nation of Israel to *“Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”* (Deut 6:7-9) This was serious stuff indeed.

It is a bit more surprising that he thinks loving your neighbour as yourself is important, because, traditionally, Jewish people are separated from others.

Significantly, though, the teacher of the law agrees that loving others is more important than religious ceremonies. Or as he puts it: more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

But this shouldn't have been a surprise. Long before, the prophet Hosea had delivered God's message to the people: *"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."* (Hosea 6:6)

Or going back even further to 1 Samuel (15:22) where Samuel says *"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord?"*

What Jesus says here is not only good, but it is consistent with the scriptures which the teacher of the law would have known so well.

And we read in verse 34 that *When Jesus saw that [the teacher of the law] had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

You might wonder what more he needed to do? He came open to listen to Jesus. He heard the lesson that Jesus was teaching, and he understood it. So why was he only 'not far' from the kingdom?

Well, Jesus said the greatest commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your (1) heart and with all your (2) soul and with all your (3) mind and with all your (4) strength."

And the teacher responded by saying "To love him with all your (1) heart, with all your (2) understanding and with all your (3) strength"...

...something was missing.

The teacher had – perhaps unconsciously – left something out. Because he'd said that we should love God with all our heart and with all our understanding and all our strength.

And he'd left out soul.

To love God with all your heart is to agree that God is good that his commands are good. To love him with all your mind or understanding is to know what God wants of you and to love him with all your strength is to do all that you can to follow those commands.

But to love God with all your soul is to give your soul to him – to give your life to him. To turn to Jesus.

Being a follower of Jesus, isn't thinking that Jesus is a good idea, and it isn't reading the bible and memorising verses, and it isn't doing good deeds. Not that any of those things are wrong, it's just that that's not the full story.

Remember, this is Jesus who gave up the glories of heaven to become one of us, and to live and die as one of us, and in doing that taking the burden of all our wrongdoing on himself. And he calls us to follow him. All through life, through death and into everlasting life. To love him with all our heart and all our mind and all our strength, and with all our soul as well.

Mark tells us that after this exchange, *no one dared ask [Jesus] any more questions*.

And I think that's for two reasons – that Jesus had successfully and faithfully answered the trick and loaded questions of the scribes, the teachers of the law, the priests, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and in answering the question from the teacher, he'd said all he needed to say.

Which leaves us today to ponder Jesus' words to the teacher "*You are not far from the kingdom of God*" and ask ourselves if we are in God's kingdom, or if we, like the teacher who came to Jesus, still have a little way to go.

Amen.