

Part 4 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Mandate. Merriam-Webster defines mandate as “an authoritative command.” Consistent with this definition, the most notable mandates in the Bible are the 10 Commandments found in Exodus 20. According to the Talmud, which is a collection of writings that cover all Jewish law and tradition, the original 10 grew to 613. This includes 365 negative commands to coincide with each day of the year and 248 positive commands to correspond to the number of bones and organs in the human body. Sounds quite sophisticated and complicated, doesn't it? This expansion of commands should come as no surprise, given the fact that human beings have consistently progressed (or regressed, based on your perspective) from simple to complex throughout history. Conversely, God keeps things simple in terms of what is true and right. This is especially apparent in the response of Jesus when a lawyer asks Him which commandment in God's Law is greatest. Before going on, let us always be mindful that our mandate is God's Mandate, whatever that may be, because He is the ultimate authority.

There are two accounts in the four gospels where the *Great Commandment* is presented. One account is in response to a question asked of Jesus, and the other is in response to a question asked by Jesus. In the first account, which appears in Matthew 22:36-40 & Mark 12:28-31, the scene opens with a Pharisee asking Jesus, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” This particular Pharisee is an expert in the law, a scribe, who is highly esteemed by his peers. The context shows this encounter to be adversarial in nature on the part of both Sadducees and Pharisees. These religious parties, which represented much of the Jewish supreme council known as the Sanhedrin, were theologically quite different. However, in spite of the liberal bent of the Sadducees and conservative bent of the Pharisees, these distinct groups were united in their opposition to the popular preacher from Nazareth. In tag-team fashion, the Sadducees, who had just unsuccessfully contested Jesus about the resurrection, are followed by the Pharisees, who step into the ring with a question about the law presented by one of their experts. His inquiry about which commandment is greatest was a common subject of debate among religious leaders and rabbis alike, who often discussed which of the commandments were heavier (i.e. more important), and which were lighter. In response to the question, Jesus follows Jewish interpretive technique by linking two commandments (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) with a common key word - love. These two verses were also linked in Jewish tradition, and some teachers believed they summarized their law. So, if the Pharisees were trying to set a theological trap for Jesus, their attempt proves to be as unsuccessful as that of the Sadducees when the Lord responds with an answer they cannot deny, but must affirm. Let's now take a closer look at this *Great Commandment* that Jesus quotes in His response to the lawyer.

First, notice that Jesus is not asked which two commandments are greatest, but which one. Although both verses (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) were linked in Jewish tradition, priority goes to the first, which is preceded in the text by *The Shema*: “Hear O Israel! The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” This prayer, which expresses the monotheistic essence of Judaism, is the centerpiece of both morning and evening Jewish prayer services. Literally, it is their statement of faith. So, by quoting *The Shema* first, as recorded in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus made it impossible for His opponents to refute Him. What follows immediately is known worldwide as the *Great Commandment*, because after quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, Jesus says, “This is the great and foremost commandment.” In Greek, adjectives like “great” had come to be used for superlatives, like “greatest.” The opening words of this verse, “love the LORD your God,” are repeated seven more times in

in Deuteronomy (11:1, 11:13, 11:22, 13:3, 19:9, 30:6, 30:16) and twice in Joshua (22:5, 23:11). What follows is a description of the extent to which hearers are called to love God. It is with all one's "heart, soul and might." The fact that "might" in Deuteronomy becomes "mind" in Matthew is inconsequential, since both words are implicit in the Hebrew understanding of "heart." The point is that God's people are called to love Him with their entire being (body, soul, spirit). Regarding the word, "love," which is central to applying the *Great Commandment*, we must correctly understand the meaning of this word as used here. In English we define love in a wide variety of ways, from taking pleasure in a person (e.g. I love you, because you make me happy) to taking pleasure in a thing (e.g. I love hot dogs, because they taste so good). The Greek verb used in both Matthew and Mark is *agapao*, which means to esteem someone by demonstrating benevolence, favor or goodwill. *Agapao* is an act of the will, not the emotions, so this expression of love is not based on a condition, but on a decision to do all that is necessary to ensure the welfare of others. With this definition in view, Jesus connects the *Great Commandment* to a second, which He says "is like it," and then quotes Leviticus 19:18 – "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In Matthew's account Jesus concludes by saying, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." In Mark's account, the Lord ends with, "There is no other commandment greater than these," to which the scribe follows with words of approval to the extent of affirming what Jesus said, and repeating the verses He quoted. Jesus replies in like manner by affirming the scribe in return, and then follows immediately with this perplexing statement, which would have stunned the lawyer and his fellow Pharisees: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Only God is qualified to give a remark like this, because only God determines who gets into heaven, and who does not. Throughout the four gospels, Jesus is constantly revealing His identity as the Son of Man and Son of God, who is one with the Father in heaven, and the only means of salvation for all of humanity.

We turn now to the account in Luke's gospel, where the *Great Commandment* appears again with its sidekick from Leviticus, but this time Jesus turns the tables by answering a question with a question. As before, a lawyer confronts Jesus with a theological matter of concern that was a common subject of discussion and debate among rabbis and teachers of the Mosaic Law. The scribe initiates by asking Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" to which Jesus responds by questioning His inquisitor, saying: "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" Suddenly, the proverbial "monkey" that was just put on the back of Jesus is now riding high on the back of the lawyer! Contrary to common assumptions, Jesus is not the ultimate Answer Man, but the Great Questioner. In fact, in the four gospels, Jesus asks 307 questions. Most surprising is that, of the 183 questions asked of Jesus, He answers only three. As Lord, Jesus is always in control of every situation and circumstance; this is just one case in point.

Returning to the question asked by the lawyer about what one must do to inherit eternal life, the word, "do," stands out. In practice, heirs don't receive benefits based on what they do, but who they are in relation to a benefactor. Therefore, there really is nothing one can "do" to inherit eternal life, because it is a gift given at the expense of another. However, instead of answering the question in this way or another way, Jesus asks the inquiring scribe how he reads what is already written in the Law of Moses on this subject. The legal expert responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, just as Jesus had done in the accounts from Matthew 22:36-40 and Mark 12:28-31. Clearly, such an answer was affirmed by the Jewish leadership and community at-large; thus, both Jesus and the lawyer are in agreement. In the same

way that the scribe affirmed Jesus in Mark's account (see 12:31-33), Jesus affirms this lawyer by saying, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." So, according to Jesus, all one must do to inherit eternal life is love God with all one's being, and love one's neighbor as oneself. The problem is that no one can do so. Not to be outdone, and in an attempt to gain control of the conversation, the scribe follows with a question concerning the second command, by asking, "And who is my neighbor?" Jewish teachers usually used "neighbor" in reference to a fellow Israelite, and this is the contextual meaning of Leviticus 19:18; yet, in the broader context of this verse, the principle applies to any non-Israelite in the land, which is what Jesus intends when He responds with *The Good Samaritan* parable. In this provocative allegory, pointed directly at this scribe in particular and Jewish religious leaders in general, the Lord gives the meaning of unconditional love. Jesus ends the parable with a climactic question for the lawyer, when He asks who among those passing by the injured man in the road proved to be a neighbor. The scribe, clearly aware that Jesus is in full control of where this conversation is going, and no doubt with some degree of humility, answers in the only way he can by saying that the neighbor was "the one who showed mercy to him" (Luke 10:37). Of course, "the one" who shows love in the story is a despised Samaritan, not a revered priest or Levite of the Jews. In this timeless story we have the best example of what it really means to love both God and our neighbor unconditionally.

In the spirit of *The Good Samaritan*, the following story is a real-life example of what unconditional love can and should look like. Although the faith of the German officer is not noted, the love expressed was more than his own. On November 12, 1944, Lieutenant Friedrich Lengfeld was commanding a German rifle company under siege by advancing American forces. Like most units on both sides, he had suffered heavy casualties. Early that morning, a wounded American could be heard calling from the midst of a German minefield in a no-man's land separating the combatants. "Help me," the man cried, but his unit had withdrawn. Lt. Lengfeld ordered his men not to shoot if Americans came to rescue the wounded soldier, but none came. His weakening voice was heard for hours. At about 10:30 that morning, Lengfeld could bear the cries no longer, so he formed a rescue squad, complete with Red Cross vests and flags, and led his men toward the wounded American. He never made it. Approaching the soldier, Lt. Lengfeld stepped on a land mine, and the exploding metal fragments tore deep into his body. Eight hours later the German officer died. A monument in his honor is believed to be the only one placed by Americans in a German military cemetery. In German and English, the plaque reads: Here in the Hürtgen Forest, on November 12, 1944, Lt. Friedrich Lengfeld, a German officer, gave his life while trying to save the life of an American soldier. The inscription reads: "No man hath greater love than he who layeth down his life for his enemy."

In this verse from John 15:13, Jesus does not use the word, enemy, but "friends," yet, Christ did lay down His life for friend and foe alike, just as the German officer did for the wounded American. God's mandate is for us to love like this, but how do we do so? The answer can be found in 1 John 4:7-21, where God is described as love (vv. 8, 16). We cannot give what we do not have; therefore, we must receive God's love in order to give God's love. This is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. 1 John 4:19 states, "We love because He first loved us," which means that God's love must fill us before it can flow from us back to Him and into the lives of others. So, God's mandate to love begins when we allow God to first love us.