

<sup>28</sup>One of the experts in the law approached after he heard their discussion. When he saw that Jesus had answered them well, he asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the greatest of all?”

<sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The most important is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

<sup>31</sup>The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup>The expert in the law said to him, “Well said, teacher. You have spoken correctly on the basis of the truth that he is one, and there is no other besides him. <sup>33</sup>To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

A little kindergarten girl in aftercare sat at the craft table with a pile of markers in front of her. Most of the other kids were outside playing on this beautiful spring day. But she was intensely focused on what she was doing. She took her time as she copied the letters her teacher had written down onto her own art project. This was the message she wanted to write, but she didn’t yet know how to spell. She paid attention to keeping the straight lines straight and curving the turns and loops at the exact right angle. But her focus turned to frustration, anger, and eventually tears. She had missed one of the turns she was supposed to make. Her project was ruined. And with tears streaming down her face, she revealed what was causing her such heartache: “I messed it up. I ruined my mom’s birthday.”

Kids care about making their parents proud. In fact, we never really get rid of that pressure to achieve and be successful. But just like that kindergarten girl and her mom, our relationship with God is not based on how hard we work for him. In fact, our relationship with him frees us to live and love him without the pressure of failure.

In the Gospel this morning, the Jewish religious leaders are hurling questions at Jesus. Their goal is not to find the truth. It’s to trip him up. But one of those leaders sees that Jesus is giving good answers. Instead of attacking Jesus, he asks him a genuine question: “Which commandment is the greatest of all?”

Jesus responds to the man, and he summarizes the Ten Commandments in two simplified commands. The first one covers the first three commandments, the ones dealing with a person’s relationship with God: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second one covers the last seven commandments, the ones dealing with a person’s relationship with his neighbor: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus then puts a stamp on it by saying, “There is no other commandment greater than these.”

These words are not all that controversial to the man. He doesn’t argue with Jesus. He knows that Jesus is simply quoting the scriptures. So, he compliments Jesus: “Well said, teacher. You have spoken correctly on the basis of the truth that he is one, and there is no other besides him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Loving God, the one true God, and loving neighbor is the most important thing people can do. It is more important than all the sacrifices made in the Old Testament. It’s more important

because God didn't just create us to live alone and burn animals all day. He created us to have a relationship with him and with the other people he's made and loves. Certainly, the sacrifices and burnt offerings had to do with their relationship with God, but to so many, the sacrifices had just become a box to mindlessly and heartlessly check.

But what's the next question that comes after "which commandment is the greatest of all"? Well, maybe we ask, "How well have I done when it comes to keeping these greatest commandments?" So, let's search our hearts and lives for an answer.

Have we loved God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and all our strength? Well, let's work through the first three commandments. Have we ever cared more about the false gods of life than you have the true God? Have we ever used God's name in an improper manner? Have we ever forsaken his word or gotten angry at it when it shows us something we've done wrong? The answer to all of these is certainly "yes." But how have we loved our neighbors? Have we always shown respect for our authorities, from our parents all the way up to our presidents? Have we always put others first, keeping hate and unjust anger out of our hearts? Have we kept our eyes from lust? Have we done all that we can to help our neighbor keep his property? Have we protected our neighbor's reputation, never giving into gossip to harm their good name, whether the rumors are true or untrue? Have our hearts kept from coveting what is not ours to have, keeping jealousy at bay at all times? Again, we come to the conclusion that we have failed in all of these.

But then you say, "Sure, I'm not perfect, Pastor. Nobody is. But I'm much better than my friend. She's lived a really nasty life. She's not shy about the fact that she hates God and cares more about what she can get for herself in life. She is mean to people, constantly tearing them down and rabid with jealousy when anyone has something she doesn't. Yeah, I've messed up, but at least I'm trying more than she does." Let's not pretend that we don't feel this way toward people in our lives. But what does Jesus say? What does the law of God say? We are not just to love God with a piece of our heart, or some of our soul, or half of our mind, or even most of our strength. We are not to love our neighbor as a distant relation. We are to love God with "all." We are to love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves.

Friends, I'm looking at a lot of people who have failed to keep the greatest commandment. And before you think I'm hanging you out to dry, I saw another person who couldn't keep this commandment in the mirror this morning. So, let's be honest about it. By our lack of adherence to God's commandments, we are outside the kingdom of God. And it's not close. You and I have not done what God expects of us, and he's not making any exceptions for us. We do not measure up. But then why does Jesus tell this man he's close to the kingdom of God? Had he actually kept the commandments perfectly? Had he loved God wholly and treated his neighbor with complete self-sacrifice? No, this man's a sinner. But he's close because he recognizes that God's law is not about checking the right boxes and going through the motions, but about what's going on in the heart. But doesn't that leave us standing outside the kingdom looking in? It's good to know we are sinners who cannot love God and our neighbor in the way we ought to. But then how are we brought in? If we can't be perfect, who can?

This is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is on his way to the cross, a cross he would hang from three days later. But what has he done up to this point? He's fulfilled the will of God. He's loved God with his whole self. And he's cared more deeply for his neighbor than for himself. And neither of those are about to change. He is about to lay down his life and suffer the punishment of all sins of all time for his deeply flawed brothers and sisters. He is about to fulfill God's plan to rescue the sinful world from its self-imposed destruction. Our lives have been redeemed by the life of another.

This is what the Christian faith is all about. It is not about shaping and fashioning people into the mold of Jesus so they can earn heaven for themselves. It's not about bringing our children to church so the congregation can moralize these naughty little ones. Our faith is all about Jesus and what he has done for us. It's all about his sacrifice for the world. It's all about his heart for his heavenly Father and for the world full of rebels. Your faith is not based on how well you can keep the commandments. It's based on the fact that Christ kept them all, then hung on the cross for you.

But then, should we continue to live in sin? If Jesus has redeemed our lives with his and our pathway to heaven is faith in him instead of obedience to the law, why care about loving God or loving our neighbor at all? Well, being rescued does something to you. When Jews in concentration camps during World War II were liberated, many of them came to the U.S. Many of them in a variety of ways were more patriotic than many people who were born and raised here. Why? They appreciated their rescuers. Every year on September 11, there are people who were delivered from the Twin Towers who go to lay flowers at the graves of the firefighters who rushed into the crumbling skyscrapers to save as many people as they could. Some of these people have even been inspired to become firefighters. When someone rescues you, you're appreciative. You show gratitude. And it's not something you plan out. You just have that feeling of thankfulness.

Jesus gave up more than the firefighters in New York in 2001 or the men who dodged bullets as they stormed across Europe during World War II, so how do those set free by him respond? They are grateful. They respond by honoring the one who set them free with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength. Because you have been released from the prison of death and hell, how do you feel about God? You love him, right? You want to give him thanks with everything that he's given you. And it's not to earn anything. It's because everything has already been earned in Jesus.

Being set free by your Savior, you learn that God has created you to be his child. He has given you the freedom to serve him with everything you are. He has given you the freedom to serve and love the people in your life. Again, you won't be perfect. But you won't be doing it to earn perfection. Instead, you'll be doing it because God has been so gracious to you. So, go, live your life in the kingdom of God. Amen.