

The Great Commandment

Jesus teaches that the moral life can be summed up in terms of love of God, self, and neighbor. The New Testament understanding of love is based on the Old Testament understanding of covenant love, which is that God's steadfast love will never waver. The Christian who cooperates with the Holy Spirit will not waver in his or her love for God. This is a love of commitment and action to a better personal relationship with God. It shows a true appreciation of how much God loves the person as an individual—as well as the person's willingness to serve the neighbor.

Gospel Commentary: The Greatest Commandment

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The familiar Gospel story of the greatest commandment cuts to the central core of our relationship with God. In response to a question about the greatest of all the commandments, Jesus replies with what appears to be two simple answers. What is important to notice is that the questioner asks for the greatest commandment, trying to justify himself and cause Jesus to blunder. Jesus' two-fold response challenges people whose words and actions are deceptive. His words were, "You must love the Lord your God... and your neighbor as yourself." At first reading, the response seems simple and direct, but upon prayerful reflection the tremendous impact and meaning of Jesus answer can be challenging. Genuine love of God and neighbor is very demanding, if not difficult because Jesus qualifies how a person must love, "with your whole heart, with your whole soul and with your whole mind."

Notice the order Jesus uses: heart, soul and mind. Ponder its complexity. It is a tall order. It is easy to conclude that a person can love God and do what appears correct. Loving one's neighbor also seems simple. Jesus, however, probes below the surface and challenges words and actions that are inconsistent, minimal, and non-genuine. Jesus challenges people who make an appearance of holiness and devotion. Recall the Pharisee and the sinner in the temple. He confronts the attitudes of legalism when He encounters the teachers and leaders of the law. Remember the strong words Jesus uses for Pharisees who follow the letter of the law while ignoring the law of charity.

In plain words Jesus demands more than mere lip service and illusive behavior. Jesus wants consistency in thought, word, and deed. In this short but simple admonition, Jesus teaches that love of God without love of neighbor is an absurdity and love of neighbor without love of God is pointless and self-serving. Very often our motive for love is self-centered and pride-filled. It is a love based

upon what we receive and not what we give, it is about how we feel to the exclusion of others feelings. Some people spend an inordinate amount of energy trying to appear good and impress those around them with eloquent words while harboring hatred, resentment, discrimination, anger and other negative attitudes deep within their hearts. Consider the number of times in one day that negative thoughts or attitudes pervade our minds and hearts after an argument with someone we supposedly love. Nothing is spoken, but our mood changes and a self-righteous attitude creeps in.

It is easy to get lost in the pursuit of holiness to the extent that we miss the necessary ingredients of it. Some people speak of the importance of eliminating injustice and inequality, but indulge themselves in the luxuries of living and self-righteous attitudes at the same time. Others quote the letter of the Church and Civil law, but rationalize their misinterpretation of it to justify their wrong behavior. Jesus challenges us explicitly. Our love of God must be the motivating force in how we think, speak, and act. Our attitudes and motives, our outlook on life, must be reflective of a genuine love for God and others, and not ourselves. Any effort to love God and/or our neighbor that is not supernaturally motivated is not pleasing to God.

We cannot be selective of the people we love or how we love. Loving another person without seeking God through and in that person is self-serving and wrong. Loving God while ignoring those who are in need is not authentic love. We cannot merely love those who love us and avoid those who persecute us. We must recognize that genuine love in our hearts must be expressed by our love in action. Love of God and love of neighbor are not measured by externals of piety or impressive words. We truly love only through our selfless thoughts, words and actions, by our imitation of Christ. How can we transform our love? We can pray simply and humbly before God, acknowledge our weakness and sin and ask the Lord to open our eyes to see His presence in every person and situation. ***Fr. Verrecchia is pastor of All Saints Parish in Manassas.***