

The Greatest Commands

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Last week, I watched a college basketball game between the University of Miami and Duke University. The announcers were discussing an interview they had with Miami's coach. The coach had given the team "10 Commandments for Beating Duke." The interviewer asked the coach which of the commandments was the most important. The coach said that question would be like asking the Lord which command was the most important. They all were important. Of course, the irony of the coach's comments was that someone did once ask the Lord which of the Commandments was most important.

Q & A

In Matthew chapter twenty-two, Jesus came to the Temple for the final time. He would shortly be crucified. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians conspired against Jesus. Each group asked Jesus a question trying to discredit and humiliate Him. One of the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:36).

The question left Jesus with many options. While we typically think of the Ten Commandments, the Law of Moses contained roughly six hundred and thirteen laws. This fact made Jesus' answer all the more striking. He said the greatest command was, "...You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40).

The greatest command identified by Jesus was the Hebrew "Shema," meaning "hear." This command was given by God to Moses as Israel was pioneering a new society. The Shema was recited multiple times throughout the day by the Israelites. The command captured the essence of being an Israelite: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4-5).

Interestingly, the Shema coincided with the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 20:2-6).

The first and greatest command teaches three principles. First, it is a declaration of the existence and rule of Jehovah. Second, it is a prohibition against idolatry. Third, it is an

instruction to love Jehovah with all of our being. Understanding and obeying the greatest command is basic and fundamental to being human, made in the image of God.

As was common to Jesus' style of teaching, He gave more of an answer to the question than this Pharisee was expecting. Jesus identified the second greatest command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Unless and until we obey the first command, we will never get to the second. Love for our neighbor is the consequence of love for our God. Love was absent from the Pharisees' attempt to serve God and lead Israel.

There may have been six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Law of Moses, but the two identified by Jesus were the greatest. Jesus said that these two commands were the foundation for all the rest. Without love for God and our neighbor, all other commands do not have anything upon which to stand, and neither do we.

The Greatest Commands & Us

The greatest commandments received nuanced meanings following the death of Jesus. Jesus showed the application of the greatest commands when He gave His life as a self-giving atonement for our sins. Paul, a self-serving Pharisee transformed by the sacrifice of Jesus, would later interpret the greatest commandments in light of the cross of Jesus. Notice the following statements:

1 Corinthians 8:5-6: "For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

2 Corinthians 5:14-15: "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

As Paul wrote in the first passage, God has shown His existence and rule through His Son and our Lord, Jesus Christ. We cannot serve God without obeying Jesus. Secondly, Paul indicates in these passages the method God uses to bring us into submission.

God lulls us into obedience through the self-giving love of Jesus' cross. Like Jesus once said, He would draw all people to Himself when He was lifted up on the cross (John 12:32). The love of God shown in Jesus' death transforms our self-awareness. The realization that someone else took the punishment for our sins is humbling. Jesus' love causes us to look beyond ourselves and towards others. The love of Jesus persuades us to lay aside self-interest.

Conclusion

While the Pharisee's question to Jesus was disingenuous, Jesus' answer gives us vital information. The commands Jesus identified are still the greatest. If we fail to obey the greatest commands, we will fail in everything else.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

1 Corinthians 13:1-3