

Matthew 22: 22-34

The Commandments we know as the 10 Commandments were given to Moses on Mt Sinai by God: given twice we are told. The first time as Moses came down the mountain and found the Israelites had abandoned their faith to worship a Golden Calf he hurled the tablets on which they were inscribed to the ground and smashed them. The second time, when those few who had remained faithful asked him to plead for a new covenant with God, Moses went back up the mountain and was through God's compassion, given them again. Thus we have 10 rules for being able to live our lives in a way that draws us close to God himself: almost as close as Moses was on that mountain.

The Ten Commandments formed the backbone of Jewish Law, Moses' Law, and of the Jewish Covenant with God, but in the centuries to come, as with any community, the laws were extended and adapted, so that by Jesus' time there were over 600 commandments. (613 we are told). You can see how an industry of specialist lawyers and teachers developed to interpret "The Law" and to work alongside the Priesthood in Jerusalem. Mosaic Law was intended to keep the people pure and to help them to remain close to the God who out of love for them had chosen them as the keepers of his Word in the world. You can also understand how for most people it would have become gradually impossible to keep all 600+ commandments and thus to stay within The Law, so they seem to have become increasingly 600 ways to exclude ordinary people and 600 ways to make an inclusive club for the few.

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel we hear again how those with that knowledge of the law used it exclusively to maintain their own status and were continuing to try to entrap Jesus, so that he could be removed from the people. The Pharisees, Sadducees and Lawyers constantly came to Jesus to bombard him with questions masquerading as theological discussions and here again today they come to ask him a simple sounding question. This is the last attempt to question him in front of the crowds before the final days of Jesus' arrest and so although the question is simple enough: **"Teacher, which is the greatest of the commandments?"** Jesus' answer points us to an absolute truth which they have failed to follow. The first of the 10 Commandments reminded the people that they worship one God only. We read this in the Old Testament in Exodus and Deuteronomy and again in the Book of Leviticus. In Leviticus Chapter 19:1 comes the commandment spoken by God to Moses: **"You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy"** and because human beings are made in the image of God, those who are called to emulate God's holiness are to do so by treating other people with justice and mercy. Therefore following this in verse 18 come the words: **"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"** (19:18). Despite the overbalanced weight of the many laws, the Jewish Authorities could not disagree with Jesus' answer to their question since both commandments formed the basis of the original law. **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'**

Matthew is at pains to show us that there is one interpreter of the Law and that it is not anyone from the Authorities, but Christ himself, the Son of God, who gave the Law and who restates it here.

These two commandments are all of the law and the prophets. The first of the two: it is such a

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glorious pronouncement: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all, your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul.”** Inspiring and wonderfully poetic, it offers us an ecstasy of being that we cannot create on our own. We cannot put it fully into words, but the knowledge of God with us is indeed a joyful thing, which makes us whole. Loving God with the whole of our being means that we make God the driver for every part of our lives. We do not restrict our love to particular places, nor particular times, but we absorb it into our whole being and thus we too are holy because God is the ultimate reference point for human life.

The two commandments follow each other inextricably and yet they are two distinct instructions and loving God **is** the first commandment. The second commandment instructs us to love our neighbours as ourselves, which we cannot do unless we follow the first instruction. It seems more precise than the first, but neither can be fulfilled without the other. I cannot say that I love God if I am not prepared to fight for justice for others, or if I am not prepared to identify with others so that my own identity becomes theirs. In loving them I am loving myself too. I need to be aware of the suffering of other people so that I am compassionate towards them and willing to share their pain by helping to carry it. Compassion is not simply a warm feeling in our hearts. A heart that is really moved by compassion cannot sit idly by while someone suffers a need. Loving your neighbour as yourself is being moved to help to the full extent of your ability and it is not always easy but loving ourselves is even harder. It is tricky because too many of us have been brought up not to be boastful, nor to put ourselves first (I'm not sure how the modern cult of celebrity quite fits with that of course). However, loving oneself does not equate with selfishness, but with recognising and loving the fact that we are all created by God. In his image we are integrated into his being and recognising the fact of our individual creation carries an obligation to recognise that characteristic for all those around us. It is often difficult. We may not always like the people we meet, nor trust them, nor wish to be their friends, but we must recognise their humanity. If we cannot honour those whom we can see, how can we honour the God we cannot see, unless we see him in their faces?

In Leviticus 19 the instruction from God to love your neighbour is extended to these words: **“When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”** It is therefore especially poignant to note, given the circumstances of the Middle East today that there is such a commandment.

It does not state that we can condone misdeed, nor ignore the bad deeds of others whom we see as alien, but it does say that our duty is to try to turn their lives around by showing them the love that God has for us all. If we love them perhaps their consciences will lead them to love us.

You have probably all seen the footage of 85year old Israeli grandmother, Yocheved Lifshitz, (ironically a lifelong Israeli peace activist) kidnapped from a kibbutz near the Gaza border. She was released over a week ago by Hamas and as the handover took place she grasped one Hamas member's hands and seemingly spoke the Hebrew word **“shalom,”** meaning peace. God's peace. How powerful is that?

Love your neighbour as yourself comes into real time in that encounter.

May God's peace enter us all and may we and all our neighbours know the power of loving God.

Amen.