

To misquote Ian Flemming, “Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence. The third time is God trying to get through” (or enemy action if you are Auric Goldfinger).

Today, for the third time I have been supplied passages that focus on love. The first time I looked how we should show love and who we should show love to. The second time we looked at how love can motivate us. Today I would like to look at Jesus' response to the question of what is the most important commandment.

We are told that the Pharisees, when asking this question, were trying to trap Jesus. We have to remember that, in general, the Pharisees were the religious authority of the day and spent a lot of their time debating exactly this sort of question. I suspect they would have spent days considering “Was the requirement for Sabbath rest more important than the requirement to honour your father and mother?” or “How did you ensure you didn't work on the Sabbath?”.

This was not just idle discussion to them though. The Jewish nation had spent years in exile due to ignoring God's commandments and they wanted to ensure that it never happened again. By working out how to avoid breaking the commandments they could prevent another exile.

Jesus' response actually goes beyond what they asked in that he gave 2 commandments that were at the top of the list. Let's look at them.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the most important commandment.” (37-38)

Jesus here was quoting from Deuteronomy 6 which was, and remains, a fundamental of Jewish faith. It starts a verse earlier with “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” and continues with this verse. This was one of the first verses that Jewish children learned by heart and was traditionally the last thing that would be said before someone died. This was a backbone of Judaism, in much the same way that the creed and Lord's Prayer are for Christianity.

In this response, Jesus is basically saying that their theory was right, God has to come first.

He doesn't stop there though, he continues “The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (39-40)

Jesus, again is quoting the scriptures, Leviticus this time, and saying that after God, love of others has to come next. We have a couple of other passages that relate to this that I think need to be mentioned. The most well known being the story of the Good Samaritan which was given by Jesus, in Luke's telling of this incident, to clarify that “Neighbour” in this case should not be limited to “those we like” but should extend to all. The second is another passage earlier in Matthew where Jesus expands on this. “You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you Love your enemies ...” (5:43-44).

One slight aside I would like to make about this is that we are called to “love your neighbour as you love yourself”. Some people find it hard to love themselves, but the reverse of this is that we are also to love ourselves in the same way that we are to love our neighbours.

So, “Love God” and “Love Others”. That seems quite comprehensive to me.

I guess the next thing to think about is “What is love?”. A quick Google (where would preachers be without it?) brings up the following definition. “When we love someone we experience the same

positive thoughts and experiences as when we like a person. But we also experience a deep sense of care and commitment towards that person.”(<https://theconversation.com/what-is-love-139212#:~:text=When%20we%20love%20someone%20we,of%20sexual%20arousal%20and%20attraction.>)

That's a fairly general definition of love, but when I looked up the definition of Agape love, the word used in our reading, Wikipedia says it refers to “The love of God for man and of man for God. ... It goes beyond just the emotions to the extent of seeking the best for others.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agape>). Probably the most famous use of that word in our bibles would have to be John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

This is the type of love we are called on to express to God and to our neighbours. We are to have care and commitment to them and be seeking the best for them, whatever the cost to ourselves. When you think about that, and everything that it entails, it really does cover just about everything.

I've got a vague memory of hearing a story about this, but even with the power of Google I can't find it so I'll have to give a summary. Once upon a time, a King came to the throne of his country. He looked at all the laws and found that the first law in the law books was “Love each other”. He decided to look at the other laws and found that in fact if the first law was being obeyed then they were not needed. He gradually started removing the later laws, explaining that if you were loving each other then they were not needed until eventually the country was left with only the single law.

Can we look at the 10 commandments in the same way? In doing this, I am going to use the version that is on the walls at Newsholme.

I am the Lord, your God. You shall have no other God but me. You shall not make idols to worship. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord. Keep the Sabbath holy to the Lord.

These first 4 commandments are all concerned with how we relate to God. If we honestly love God, with care and commitment and seeking the best for God, are there any of these that are on top of that? The first two are saying no alternatives, physical or emotional. The third is about not seeing his name, and so his nature and person, dragged through the mud. Finally, the fourth is about making sure that we have time to spend shared with him.

Honour your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony against your neighbour. Do not covet.

If the first 4 were to do with our relationship with God, these 6 are all to do with how we relate to our neighbours, those around us. Again, most of these would be covered if we were honestly seeking the best for our neighbours. For example, if we were focused on the good of a neighbour, how could we consider stealing from them?

I can't actually suggest that we should do away with all our laws and replace them with “Love one another”, but just this quick look does explain why Jesus could say that these 2 commandments are the basis of all the scriptural laws.

The honest fact is that we, as humans, are incredibly poor at actually recognising what is best for our fellow humans. It's partly this that requires all the extra laws that we live under. However, just because it's not easy doesn't mean that we shouldn't be trying.

So, to summarise. Love is care, commitment and wanting what is best for the one we love. We are

called to love God primarily. We are called to love our neighbours, all those around us, only secondarily to loving God. Included in this, we are to love ourselves.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father. Thank you for the love you showed for us in sending Jesus so that we could be forgiven and brought into a relationship with you. Please help us to respond to that love with our own love shown to you and to all those around us. Amen.