

Proper 26 B
Mark 12:28-34
November 3, 2024

“Summing it Up”
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One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “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 mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.’ Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “God is one, and besides God there is no other”; and “to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five- and six-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," she asked "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."¹

¹ "Ten Commandments," Amazingjokes.com: https://amazingjokes.com/jokes/2003-05-06_ten-commandments.html#google_vignette.

It is said that there are 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible. That seems like a lot of rules, doesn't it? And yet, lest we think the ancient authors of scripture too legalistic, it's worth noting that there are approximately 300,000 laws in the United States today. Now, that's a lot!

Human beings began their obsession with written rules more than 4,000 years ago. The Sumerian Codes of Ur-Nammu and Lipit-Ishtar started a trend, if you will, one that culminated in the storied Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. A set of 282 rules, the Code of Hammurabi was enshrined on a seven-foot, 4-ton, stone pillar, covered in columns of cuneiform text. Known for its particularly brutal punishments, the Code was also ahead of its time in many ways, establishing a minimum wage for workers and presenting one of the earliest examples of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.²

While the Hebrew Law came into being a couple of centuries later, including the Ten Commandments, scholars point to similarities between the two sets of rules and the possibility that the Code of Hammurabi influenced Hebrew Law. Regardless, it's clear that human beings have loved laws for a long, long time. And there's a very good reason for it, too.

British behavioral scientist Nick Chater states that, "despite our protests to the contrary, rules seem hardwired into our DNA. In fact," he continues, "our species' ability to latch onto, and enforce, arbitrary rules is crucial to our success as a species." We really do love rules and having them is a part of what makes us human. But Chater cautions that "rules can develop their own momentum: people can become so fervent about arbitrary rules of dress, dietary restrictions or the proper treatment of the sacred that they may exact the most extreme punishments to maintain them. Political ideologues and religious fanatics often mete out such retribution . . . the

² Evan Andrews. "8 Things You May Not Know About Hammurabi's Code," History.com, August 26, 2024: <https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-hammurabis-code>.

rules must be obeyed, just because they are the rules.”³ This, I think, is what Jesus so often pushed back against: rules for the sake of rules.

In our text from Mark’s gospel, a scribe – an expert in Hebrew Law – approached Jesus and asked him which of the commandments (all 613 of them) was most important. Jesus responded by expanding and combing two passages from the Hebrew Bible, the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The resulting mandate is a threefold call to love: God, neighbor, and self. Perhaps even more surprising than Jesus’ answer was the scribe’s reply. “You are right, Teacher, he said, “this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.” In short order, Jesus summarized the entirety of the law. Love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. Could this really be the key to living rightly in the world?

I think it can. When taken as a Holy Trinity of rules, Jesus’ threefold call to love seems to be an excellent rubric for living rightly – a measuring stick against which all our choices can be considered. By this or that action, are we loving God, and neighbor, and self? If we can answer in the affirmative that all three conditions are met, likely our choice is sound. Do we really need 282, or 613, or 300,000 laws to get there?!

Human beings love rules. But summing them all up as Jesus did, we might find that living a good life is, at the very least, easier to imagine. There’s little question, though, they are three very difficult rules to keep, in practice. Even when we’re set on following these guidelines, what we determine to be an excellent show of loving God, could actually be quite disastrous for our neighbor. And what we determine as beneficial for our neighbor, could be downright detrimental to ourselves. The three serve as the checks and balances of government that are meant to save us from a

³ Nick Chater. “Could We Live in a World Without Rules?” Warwick.ac.uk, February 25, 2020: https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/knowledgecentre/science/psychology/world_without_rules/.

tyrannical subservience to one, at the expense of the other two. If what we're doing is *really* loving God, it will also be loving to neighbor and self. If what we're doing is *really* loving neighbor, it will also be loving to self and God. And if what we're doing is *really* loving self, it will also be loving to God and neighbor.

As we go into the week ahead, I suspect we will all be presented with opportunities to put Jesus' simple summary to the test. As we go to work, to school, to the polls, will we be able to hold these three loves in tandem? Guided by the witness of those saints who have gone before us, buoyed by the hope of those living now, and with dreams for those yet to come, may it be so. Amen.