

Great Commandment
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Dt 6:2-6; Lv 19:18; Mk 12:28-34;)

The Law of Moses, which is found in the first five books of the Bible, contains several hundred (400+) commandments and precepts, beginning with the 10 Commandments. A scribe asks Jesus which of them all is the greatest. Surprisingly, Jesus doesn't choose one of the 10 Commandments, but focuses on the commandment to love God which is found in the book of Deuteronomy: "*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*" (Dt 6:5).

The command is to love God totally, with every part of our being.

Love God "*with all your heart.*" The heart is the seat of passion and emotion: love and hate, desire, attraction and aversion, joy, sadness, and anger. To love God with all our heart means sacrificing this part of our nature to Him, bringing His order and harmony into our disordered passions and desires, loving and hating only what God loves and hates, rejoicing and being angry only for those things God approves or disapproves. This is the meaning of being single-hearted.

Love God "*with all your soul.*" The soul is the spiritual part of our nature, the seat of our freedom and will, our spiritual self. We must give our "selves" to God, and never hand over our soul to the world or anything else. We must avoid sin and not "sell our soul to the devil." Instead, our soul must be open to God that He might enter there, and by the Holy Spirit possess us fully. To love God with all our soul means to dwell in Him, and He in us.

Love God "*with all your mind.*" The mind is the seat of knowledge, intelligence. We love God with all mind by embracing the truth. God is truth, and God's Word is truth. There are many lies and false teachings out there and if we love God we will recognize and avoid them, seeking out the Scriptures, the Gospel, the teaching of the Church.

Love God "*with all your strength.*" From a strong heart, soul, and mind, we have strength in the body to be able to endure sufferings, and to serve. Strength means persevering and not giving up, and using all our energy and effort in the service of good, in the service of God. God does not define strength the way the world does. Someone who is very ill, or fatigued may not seem strong to the world, but when someone offers their sufferings to God, or works hard in His service, giving all their physical energy, they are spiritual conquerors. Jesus, falling under the weight of the Cross, was not weak but strong. "Blessed are the meek." Meekness is the name for spiritual strength.

Jesus' answer to the scribe does not end with the commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5. He also adds a commandment from Leviticus 19:18: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" The Scribe asked which was the *greatest commandment* (singular), but Jesus gives him *two*.

What does it mean to love your neighbor "as yourself"? Jesus explains it in the Sermon on the Mount, by rephrasing this commandment as the Golden Rule: "*whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them*" (Mt 7:12). Think of what you would want for yourself, and do that to others; i.e., love your neighbor as "you." If you want to be treated kindly and fairly, treat others that way. If you want to be told the truth, be honest to others, etc.

There is no guarantee in this commandment that others will in fact treat you correctly, and the commandment is not conditional: "do well by your neighbor *if or insofar* as they do well by you." Instead it is absolute: "Love your neighbor as yourself," period. Even if someone steals your things, you will still respect their property; even if they lie, you will still tell the truth.

Jesus puts two commandments together in order to answer the question about the greatest commandment. This itself is a great truth. It is impossible to love God without loving one's neighbor. "*If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen*" (1 Jn 4:20).

Love of God is expressed by means of love of neighbor. Likewise, to love one's neighbor *is* to love God: "*as you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me*" (Mt 25:40). The two commandments of love of God and love of neighbor form a single unit shaped as a cross. Upon the "vertical" commandment to love God hangs our "horizontal" obligation to love neighbor.

Thus Jesus the great teacher of Scripture gives us a summary and shortcut to the complicated world of the Mosaic Law. Rather than have to read through and study hundreds upon hundreds of precepts and regulations, Jesus says we can focus on these two. By putting them together as one, we will end up fulfilling all the rest. "*On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets*" (Mt 22:40).