

I like the way Jesus would often silence those who tried publicly to stump him or trap Him in His own words, to silence Him. The Pharisees often tried to do this and in the Gospel reading for today they do it again. And once again Jesus silences *them*.

The Pharisees heard about how Jesus silenced the Sadducees and so they thought they would take a shot at him. One of the Pharisees who was a lawyer asks Jesus which law is greatest. As you may recall, the Jews lived under the tremendous burden of trying uphold the Law. The burden was so great partly because there were so many laws, more than 600 in fact. There were laws for everything you could imagine: laws for how to spread seed in the fields, laws for what you could eat, what you could wear, what you could say. Hundreds of laws. This Pharisee lawyer was trying see if Jesus would admit there was a hierarchy to the laws, with one being greater than the others.

In response, Jesus quotes two verses from the Hebrew Scriptures that would be very familiar to any Jewish person. The first is from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which reads, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The second one is from Leviticus 19:18 which says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your won people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

Jesus' answer to the Pharisee lawyer is a summary or condensing of the Law so that its very essence is made clear. All of the Law is really one Law: to love God with all you've got.

The problem is, how do we do that? *How* does we love God with every fiber of our being? We can't put our arms around Him and give Him a hug. We can't buy Him a present – God *literally* already has everything.

In other Gospels, Jesus seems to make loving God even harder to achieve. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Whoever has my commandments, and keeps them, he it is that loves me: and he that loves me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him." So now it seems that to love God means to keep His commandments. But what exactly are His commandments? Aren't these the same as the Law? And if the Law is summed up by the commandment that we are to love God with everything we've got, then aren't we caught in some kind of circular argument? If we love the Lord, we'll keep His commandments and his commandment is that we love Him. How are we to understand?

It is the second commandment of Jesus' commandments that provides the key. We show our love for God by loving each other. Again in John's Gospel Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for

one another.” By loving our neighbors as our selves, we are keeping God’s commandments and the law. Paul echoes this in his letter to the Romans when he says, “Owe no man anything, save to love one another: for he that loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.”

So there is our answer, to love God and keep His commandments all we need to do is to love our neighbors as ourselves. What could be more clear and simple than that?

Except that we seem continuously to fail to do it. We fail to do so every day. We know that we are to love God with all we’ve got and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. And we know that we fail on both counts. Is it even possible for us to keep these two commandments perfectly? What is to become of us? What would the Lord have us do under these circumstances?

For one thing, we are to believe in Jesus Christ. In John’s Gospel the disciples ask Jesus what they must do in order to be doing the work of God and Jesus tells them, “this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” A great part of keeping the Lord’s commandments and loving him with all we’ve got and loving our neighbors as ourselves begins with believing in Jesus Christ. If we’re not doing that, the rest surely isn’t going to follow. If we believe that Jesus is God’s Son, and that He came to save us from our sins through His atoning death on the Cross, and that God raised Him from the dead on the third day, we are

doing the work God would have us do. When we do that, we are set or poised to keep His commandments.

Secondly, earlier in Matthew's Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that he has not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. It is Jesus himself who has fulfilled the Law. And that, according to Paul, means that it is Jesus who has loved God with His whole heart and loved his neighbors as Himself. We fail to keep the Lord's commandments. But Jesus has kept them perfectly.

And so when we do the work of God and believe in His Son whom he sent, who has fulfilled the Law by keeping God's commandments perfectly, when we pick up our cross and follow Him, and die and rise with Him, we share in His fulfillment of the law, in His loving God with everything He's got and in His loving neighbor as self. We are enabled to love God and our neighbor because we believe in Christ and because He first loved us.

And yet it is these two commandments, upon which hang all the Law and the Prophets that the Lord calls us to obey and keep every day and every moment of our lives.

One of the most influential books I've read in my life is a book called "What Color Is Your Parachute?" by a man named Richard Bolles. Maybe you've heard of it. The book is for job seekers and offers ways of getting the best results. But the book is also about finding your mission in life. Bolles says that everyone has a mission in life that has three parts.

Part one is to establish or reestablish our relationship with God. The third part is to discern our particular gifts and talents and use them in a career that brings joy to ourselves, to others and to God. It's the second part of our mission as Bolles sees it that applies to keeping the second great commandment.

We can begin to love our neighbors as ourselves first by recognizing them as creatures and children of God, just like we are. Both we and our neighbors are created in the image and likeness of God. If we see others that way, we are on our way to loving them as the Lord commands.

Secondly, being created in the image and likeness of God means that we are free to make choices, choices about all sorts of things, but especially about how we will behave and how we relate to others. Richard Bolles says we have many such moments of decision every day. When someone hurts us, or cuts us off on the highway, or interrupts us at our work, when we've sinned against someone, or when someone is kind to us – all of these are moments of decision about which way we will go. It's as if we are standing at a crossroads. There are two ways before us. One way will lead to less gratitude, less kindness, less forgiveness, less honesty and generally less love in the world. And the other will lead to more gratitude, more forgiveness, more honesty, and generally more love in the world. Our mission, according to Bolles, which I believe is probably not much more than a rewording of Jesus' second great commandment, is that we choose the latter rather than the former *every time*.

If we can make that choice every time, and believe in Jesus Christ, then we will know that we are loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. If we can't make that choice every time, then we must make it as often as we can. What we are adding to the world by our choices is the same world we live in. Jesus' heart's desire is that we fill the world with as much love as possible. Amen.