



THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado — Sunday, August 4, 2024

Matthew 22:34-40: When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together. One of them, a legal expert, tested him. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.” (CEB)

Please pray with me,

God of Jesus Christ,

give us a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Christ,
so that the eyes of our hearts might be enlightened.

Help us to know the hope to which you have called us,

the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints,
and the immeasurable greatness of your power at work in us.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

—based on *Ephesians 1:17-19, NRSV*

In our text today, Jesus gives us lenses to read and interpret the Holy Scriptures. He says that all the law and the prophets hang on love of God and love of neighbor. That sounds pretty simple. But how do we apply these things to our daily living? Through the next few weeks, we will journey together, seeking to better understand how to express our love for others as we explore the wisdom of the Holy Scriptures. Today, we begin by looking at the greatest commandment, which is the words of Jesus to those who seek to follow him.

Some years ago, the phrase “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it” became really popular around our nation. This type of saying sounds good in theory, but in practice, it fails to acknowledge that while the Bible tells a simple story, it is a complex book with truths that are deep and challenging for our minds, hearts, and daily actions. These truths call us to examine our thoughts, actions, motives, and full lives. They call us to dedicate our entire being to the singular focus of pleasing the one who created us. The simple story of the Scriptures begins with the reminder that we have been created by a holy and loving Triune God, who desires to be in relationship with us—God’s good creation. But this simple truth is not easy to apply. We do not read the scriptures in a vacuum; we read in the context of our social, religious, economic, and theological situations.

We United Methodists believe that the Bible is our primary source of authority. Our Articles of Religion—which is a foundational document for our denomination, states that the Bible “reveals the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.” All that we need to know to be saved is indeed found in the Holy Bible. But good theology dictates that we must pay careful attention to how we interpret the Scriptures. Jesus also seems to believe this to be true. In our text next week, Jesus asks two very important questions, what is written and how do you read it? These questions should be central to all those who engage the Bible. For they invite us to acknowledge that understanding involves more than simply looking at words on paper.

Scripture is central to our lives because it informs our beliefs and the practice of our faith. We study the scriptures so that we may grow in our understanding of God and live lives pleasing to Him. Despite the movements that proclaim one can gain knowledge of God disconnected from the Scriptures and life in community, the study of the Holy Scriptures is a primary source because it reveals the story of God’s journey with God's people. The Holy Scriptures tell us of God's great love for humanity. It tells us of God’s entrance into the chaos of our existence, through Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches us that Jesus died for our sins and that through him, we have eternal life. Just about everything we can claim about God has come to us through the Bible. John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist movement, so valued the Holy Scriptures that he considered himself to be, "a man of one book"¹ and he held the Bible to be "the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion."² At the same time, Wesley clearly understood that Scripture was primary, but never alone. So, over the years Methodists developed a method of biblical interpretation based on Wesley’s life and work called “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” In essence the Quadrilateral says that we interpret Scripture in partnership with Christian tradition, our experience—meaning, the living witness of God's love manifested in our lives, and reason, that is, our intellect, which is a gift from God.³

So, how are we to interpret the Scriptures? In his encounter with the “lawyer,” who really was a professional theologian, Jesus responds to the question "which is the most important commandment" by telling him that the 613 commands counted by the rabbis and all of the prophets, can be summarized by “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We must understand that this is a radical thought, for while a teacher could summarize the Law, all the biblical commands were held to be equally important.

¹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, 10.12.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, 36.

The lawyer asked Jesus the question not because he was interested in Jesus' opinion, but because he was seeking a conflict or debate. But Jesus, in his answer, is not drawn into controversy. He draws the lawyer into an expanded understanding of what it means to love God. For Jesus, you cannot love God without loving others. He says the second command is LIKE the first. Jesus is not saying that there are similarities between the two, he is saying that these two commands are inseparable. You cannot love God if you fail to love your neighbor. One could say that to love God is to love one's neighbor, and vice versa.⁴ 1 John 4:20 speaks of this truth when the Apostle says, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." This is like Dr. King's words about the "inescapable network of mutuality." King said that all of us "are tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."⁵ Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we are bound together and we cannot love God without loving our neighbors.

Why does that matter for our interpretations of the Scriptures? It matters because when we see our love for God and neighbor as the primary lens through which we interpret the Bible, it transforms the way we interact with the Scriptures and the way we interact with others. This understanding frees us from the notion that our neighbors, our brothers or sisters should behave in a certain way, or grow in a specific pattern, or be perfected according to our own views and desires. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "God did not make this person as I would have made him [or her]. He did not give him [or her] to me as a brother [or sister] for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above [them] the Creator."⁶ Bonhoeffer argues that each person must exist as a completely free person so they may grow in becoming who God made them to be. This does not mean that our life in community is devoid of standards or accountability, but it means that I am not responsible for the transformation of others. Though we walk together and support one another, each person must walk their own journey. Our job is to work in partnership with what God is already doing, and create an environment where others can grow and thrive with us.

One of the challenges we face is that when we apply the lens of loving God and others to our lives, or when we read the scriptures using the Quadrilaterals as a framework, each of us can arrive at different conclusions. Often times I struggle with this because at the end of the day I want to maintain some control over those God has placed under my care. I imagine that it would be easier to live life with my

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 8:2XX

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 16 April 1963.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd. Kindle Edition. (Location 1080).

wife, children, or friends if they simply behaved in ways that make sense for me. There is a level of security that comes from knowing what will happen next or how people will react to certain things. But the realities of life dictate that when journeying together with others through life we face many unknowns, and that can be frightening. But I believe that if we open ourselves to the experience, beautiful and expected things can happen.

I am reminded of a story from the early 1950's. As television was becoming a popular communication medium, a young man who dreamed of becoming a minister had a transformative encounter that led to one of the most popular TV shows in American history. Mister Rogers, as he came to be known, described seeing something awful on TV and thought he could make a difference. Mister Rogers stated that he went into television because he hated it. He thought television could be a great instrument to nurture those who would watch it.

I was not introduced to Fred Rogers and Mister Rogers Neighborhood until I was an adult with kids of my own, but I feel like Mister Rogers has always been a part of my life. Though most of us may have only known Fred Rogers through a TV screen, there is something about the authentic way he portrays himself that invites you into a relationship. His humility, love, and care were so captivating, that he managed to be a staple of PBS Broadcasting for 33 years. It is hard to find somebody in television that has a universal appeal compared to Mister Rogers and beyond that somebody who has managed to genuinely demonstrate a deep love for God and neighbor.

I don't really know what exactly was on Mister Rogers mind when he decided to postpone his plans to become a minister. But I imagine that his faith and understanding of the Holy Scriptures propelled him to do something to change that which pained his heart. When he encountered the debasement of human dignity on television, he decided to act and work to create something better. In 1963, at a time when ministers were ordained to serve in local parishes, Fred Rogers was ordained a Presbyterian minister tasked with living out his calling by creating television content that helped young children to feel safe, loved, and cared for. Even before I knew of his theological training and religious background, when I saw Fred Rogers, I saw somebody who understood the words of Jesus well. I saw somebody who had internalized the command to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and love neighbors as one loves self.

The great commandment invites us to contextualize our faith. Each of us must work to grow into the people God has called us to be—and that growth will take on different forms because we are different

people. Though Fred Rogers was an awesome person, I do not believe we must begin wearing sweaters and singing pleasant songs in response to Christ's command to love God and neighbor. Bonhoeffer said, "I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation."⁷

Sometimes, we can become fixated in seeing God's image or work in another person's life in ways that seem pleasing to us. We forget that each of us is uniquely created in God's image, and that image takes different forms—some that could seem strange to us. But still we are all created in the image of God and called to grow in love with God and neighbor.

The Bible indeed contains all things necessary for our salvation. But we are invited to broaden our understanding of those truths so we can grow in our love for God and others. But even when we understand, believe, and apply it, things hardly ever get settled. For as we grow in understanding, we are transformed, and then we must seek to understand anew, and because we understand anew we are transformed again, and the cycle continues. Christ invites us into a transformational journey where we deepen our understanding and application of the scriptures daily. Each of us is invited to contextualize our faith because we do not serve a God who stands at a distance, a God's words only exist in ancient contexts, but they are made new to us, every day. God doesn't speak to us in general terms, God knows our name, our needs, and God desires to be in relationship with each of us. As we grow in our relationship with God, we will also feel a pull towards growing in relationship with others. We have created and called into community.

So, how might we express our love for God and others in a unique way this week?

Amen.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. Kindle Edition. (Location 1087).