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# THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Contributed by Jim Jordal  
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By Jim Jordal

One of the scribes came, and heard them questioning together. Knowing that he had answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" Jesus answered, "The greatest is, 'Hear, 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. This is the first commandment. The second is like this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.' " The scribe said to him, "Truly, teacher, you have said well that he is one, and there is none other but he, and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is 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." No one dared ask him any question after that.

Mark 12:28-34 (WEB)

During New Testament times scribes, sometimes called lawyers, were highly revered students, interpreters, and teachers of the law. As such they possessed great influence over public religious and political life. They also exercised considerable legislative and judicial power as they decided controversies arising under the law. So when a scribe questioned Jesus it was a matter of some importance.

Without doubt the question, "Which commandment is greatest of all?" was inspired by God, even though the nameless scribe probably intended it only to snare Jesus in contradiction or controversy. But the answer offered by Jesus dealt with much more than mere religious orthodoxy, since it cut deeply to the heart of faith by allying faith with love for God and obedience to His commands.

So how can we today revere the first commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and yet pay so little attention to the second admonition commanding selfless love for our neighbors? Obviously the lawyer/scribe understood the necessity of both, since he not only repeated the two commandments, but added that they were more important to God than either burnt offerings or sacrifices.

So if loving God and our neighbors is more important in God's eyes than sacrifices and burnt offerings (ancient atonements for sin and forms of worship), how can we continue to emphasize sacrifice and worship to the exclusion of obedience to the most vital of God's commandments? It's crystal clear in a score of biblical references that God values sacrifice and worship only when accompanied by obedience to His word. Worship without intent to obey is anathema to

God! And grace does not free us from this obligation.

So now we must ask the critical question: "Who is our neighbor, and what actions or behaviors constitute loving our neighbor?"

Common secular understanding considers all humans to be "brothers." The general religious understanding is not much different. But Scripture questions this view somewhat when Jesus tells His disciples: "...whoever shall do the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:50, NASB). Evidently Jesus considered believers and doers of God's will to be His brothers, and by implication all other persons to be only potential brothers until they come to know and obey Him. And the apostle Paul considered all Gentile Christians to be "Israelites by adoption" (Gal. 3:9, 26, 29), reinforcing the same view as to what constitutes brotherhood.

But this somewhat exclusive view is countered by Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), which identifies the robbed, wounded traveler as a Samaritan--a generally shunned and marginalized people of mixed Jewish-Gentile origin--who should be helped when in need even though they may not be Christians. Couple this with Mosaic Law which admonishes God's people to treat strangers, immigrants, and visitors with decency and respect, and you have a contrasting view that seemingly considers all humans in need to be brothers and hence worthy recipients of Christian charity and justice.

Whatever your view as to who is your brother, I think it clear that God expects us at the very least to actively love neighbors in our churches, communities, and nation. If you wish to also include all people wherever they are found and whatever their beliefs, that's fine. The point is to do what is right for somebody! Don't quibble so much over who they are or whether they deserve it--just do it!

Without question economic justice is included in what God means by loving your neighbor as yourself. There are too many scriptures incorporating this concept for it to be denied. So when Jesus admonishes us to love our neighbors as ourselves, He means for us to practice economic justice, not only toward the poor among us, but toward every person in need of compassion, mercy, understanding, and every other form of justice.