

Here we have one of the great questions discussed by all pious Jewish families in Israel, but especially by the Jewish Bible scholars in Jesus' day: **Which is the first [greatest] commandment of all?** It is really a very important question, and we should not think less of it just because the scribe who asked the question was asking with the wrong motives. The question can be asked for the wrong reason and with wrong motives, but it is a good question which weighs heavily on the heart of every true child of God: *What does God want from me most of all? How can I do my very best in serving God?*

And there is no one better to take this question and answer it than Jesus, for He is the faithful Son of God whose heart was set on complete obedience to God. No one would have meditated 思考 on this question more than Jesus, for He came to **fulfill all righteousness**. (Matthew 3:15) When He came into this world, he said to His Father, **Behold, I have come to do your will, O God.** (Hebrews 10:9) He gave such a perfect answer that from then on no one dared question Him. In all their centuries of discussion over this question, they had never heard such a complete, God-glorifying answer!

Today let us learn from Jesus the true answer to this question: **Which is the greatest commandment of all?** Let us learn not only how to say the answer, but how to live the answer. For the answer, which can be summarized in one word – LOVE – is at the same time one of the most used words in our culture, and one of the least understood words.

The true and living answer to this great question is found in the Scriptures, in Jesus Christ, and in God's Kingdom.

The scribe who asked the question did not ask it with a right heart. It was part of a trap that Jesus' enemies were setting in an attempt to find Him guilty of false teaching so that they might kill him. This question was one of a series of questions the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians were asking him in the temple courts. It was Tuesday. They would arrest Him on Thursday, and then hang Him on a cross on Friday. This scribe was part of that conspiracy of hatred against Jesus. Matthew records that this scribe asked this question **to test Him**. (see Matthew 22)

Do you see the hypocrisy 虚伪 here? Through this scribe they ask Jesus a great question about obedience to God's Law while they are busy committing the greatest act of disobedience ever done: hating and killing the holy Son of God!

Not only is there hypocrisy but also massive self-deception 自欺. The scribes and Pharisees were always busy with interpreting the Law. The Law was very important to them. Obeying them (in a certain sense, at least) was the preoccupation of their lives. They counted the laws carefully. They counted 613 commandments in the Torah – the 5 books of Moses. They believed they were so close to God, and so deeply obedient to God. But Jesus' answer exposes the opposite – they were so far, far away from truly obeying God. As Jesus told them a little earlier: **This people worships me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship me...** (Mark 7:6) What was true then is also true today: Many who think that they are good and close to God, are deceiving themselves.

How can a person be so concerned about obedience to God's Law, and yet be so far away from obeying God's Law? By giving the wrong answer to the question: **Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?** The scribes viewed obedience as a checklist of duties to be performed. This is common to the natural, sinful man. We want obedience to be easy. We want a list of 5 pillars to perform, or 12 steps to follow, or 40 days to keep, and then we conclude we're good. We've done our job so we must be righteous. But this view of obedience bypasses the heart. It does not understand that God wants the whole person all the time, not just the outward observance of a list of things to do.

Jesus did not find the answer to this great question from the wisdom and opinions of men. He went to the Scriptures, to the Old Testament, and found there the first and greatest commandment of all. **The first of all the commandments is: Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment.** (Mark 12:29-30) These words are found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

Sometimes Christians think that Jesus threw away the strict Old Testament law and brought in a new law that was easier and kinder. They put Jesus against the Old Testament. But this is not true at all. If anything, Jesus brought us a law that was far more *difficult* to keep! He did not come to destroy the law, but to *fulfill* it. (Matthew 5:17). He did not come to *decrease* our obedience to God, but to *increase* it. To use the words of His apostle John, Jesus did not give **a new commandment, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning**. (see I John 1:7).

What is the meaning of this first of all the commandments? God must have my whole being – my heart, my soul, my mind, and my strength. That's every part of my life, body and soul. Not only that, but the hardest part is the word **all**: He wants all of every part of my life: all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, and all my strength. God is not satisfied with anything less than the full devotion 献身的 my whole life all the time in everything I do. All my energy, desires, thoughts, and feelings must be committed to His service.

*It does not take much of a man to be a believer, but it takes all there is of him.* (R. Kent Hughes)

When Jesus says this is the first commandment, He was not saying that this is just one of the many things on our list of duties. The word first also means beginning. This wholehearted, whole-souled, whole-minded, whole-strengthened giving of oneself to God devotion to God is the beginning of all obedience. Without this, we have made not even a beginning of obedience to God, even if we carefully and strictly keep all the other laws of God. By raising up this ignored Old Testament law out of the rubble and clutter of Jewish legalism, He was directing us to the very essence and nerve of all true obedience.

But He was not yet finished answering this important question. He added the second great commandment to the first: **And the second, like it, is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.** (Mark 12:31) This law is found in Leviticus 19:18. Why did Jesus add this one, when He was asked only for **the first commandment of all**? Because these two belong together; they can be distinguished, but they cannot be divided. The command to love our neighbor is like the command to love God. If you truly love God, you will love those who are made in His image. You will care for them, have compassion on them, take time for them, and desire their best interests. The apostle John also spoke about this: **he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.** (1 John 4:20-21)

This commandment also belongs to the essence 本质 of true obedience. Without love for my neighbor, **I am nothing.** (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-3). **You must love your neighbor as yourself.** No, I am not to love my neighbor with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind and with all my strength. Only God is worthy of our complete devotion. Does this mean I am to divide my love between God and my neighbor, so that God gets 90% of my love, and my neighbor gets the other 10% of my love? No, I am to love God with 100% of my heart, my life, my talents, and my time. And because I love God, I am also to love my neighbor. I am to love my neighbor as a way of showing my love to God. I am to love my wife to show my love for Christ. I am to love my husband to show my love for Christ. I must love and honour my parents **in the Lord** (see Ephesians 6:1), that is, to show my devotion to the Lord. These two commandments work together.

**There is no commandment greater than these.** (Mark 12:31) Keep these two, and you keep all of them. This is perfect obedience. Disobey these two and you're keeping none of the commandments. Without love for God and neighbor, there is no true obedience in God's eyes, no matter how much you keep the commandments outwardly.

- It is sort-of like doing your duty of going to church, but never really taking the word to heart and applying it to your life, or never inviting your brothers and sisters to become part of your life. Church then becomes a loveless, empty duty.
- It is like never committing adultery, and yet not loving your spouse, treating him or her without kindness or respect.
- It is like doing your duty of confessing God to be your God, and yet everybody at work knows that money matters most.
- It is like doing all the homework assignments you're told to do, but doing it with a grudging, complaining, and angry heart.

What do we learn from Jesus' answer? We learn the meaning of true obedience and righteousness from the Scriptures, from God's own word. Instead of creating our own lower standard of obedience which is convenient and comfortable for us, and makes us feel good about ourselves, the Lord Jesus places us under the true, divine standard. He puts us under the bright spotlight of God's Word!

And we must say with the apostle: **There is no one righteous, no not one.... There is none who does good, no not one.** (Romans 3:10, 12b). Do we love God with full and total devotion, all the time, and in everything? No! Do we always love our neighbor as ourselves? No! Sin has made us so radically self-centered and self-loving that we quickly put ourselves before God and our neighbor. Sin is a devotion to ourselves in which we ignore God, are half-hearted in our service to Him, and often desire to do the opposite of what He commands. The Bible calls this **hating God**.

Sin is a devotion to ourselves in which we shove 推 other people away from us in order to please ourselves. We ignore their needs, trample on their weaknesses, and take advantage of them in order to get ahead ourselves. We are far more ready to see the wrong somebody is doing to us, than the wrong we are doing to them. We quickly turn our back on someone because of how they hurt us, without stopping to think about how poorly we have treated them. These are all expressions of how deep down we hate our neighbor. Sometimes we can even be nice to others for selfish reasons. We can be nice to our spouse in order to get something from them. Or we can be nice to our children just because we don't feel like giving them proper, loving discipline. Often what looks like love to us is not true love at all in God's eyes!

How did the scribe respond to Jesus' perfect answer? He commended Jesus for His good answer. **Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God and there is no other than He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole-burnt offerings and sacrifices.** (Mark 12:32-33) He understood the meaning of true obedience, of the life that is truly pleasing to God. True obedience is not found in offerings and sacrifices but in love. Jesus saw that he had answered wisely.

But still, there was something missing. How did Jesus respond to this scribe? Now when Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to Him: **You are not far from the kingdom of God.** He did not say what he said to Zaccheus: **Today salvation has come to this house.** Or what he said to the paralytic 瘫痪病人: **Son, your sins are forgiven.** Or what He said to the Canaanite woman: **Great is your faith!** Instead, He said: **You are not far from the kingdom of God.**

He had heard and understood the truth about righteousness, but he did not take the next step of falling down before Jesus as an unrighteous sinner, saying: **God, be merciful to me a sinner.** He did not humble himself before Jesus like the thief on the cross who confessed that he deserved to be crucified for his unrighteous deeds, but Jesus had done nothing wrong. He did not confess that he was part of a wicked 邪恶的 conspiracy 阴谋 of hatred against Jesus; he did not turn around and say to all Jesus' enemies standing there in the temple courts: *We are far away from God! If we want to return to God we need to follow this Man!*

This is what we need to learn from this passage: not only did Jesus know the greatest commandments from Scripture, He fulfilled them! As Jesus answered this scribe perfectly, we must see that Jesus is the perfect and only true answer to the law of love. Jesus is the only answer to our loveless, disobedient lives. The reason God the Father sent His Son down to earth as a human being was to fulfill the law of God: **Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.** He lived this sinless life of love during the whole time He was on earth, and now He was 3 days away from offering the ultimate sacrifice of love in obedience to these great commandments. And He did this to save sinners like the scribe who need forgiveness for all their sins, and the gift of a new life of love. He came to earth to proclaim this Law and to live this law in a world of unrighteous sinners who are far away from God.

The great commandments are not only found in Scripture, but they are also found in Jesus. He came to save a world that doesn't know how to love God or neighbor, a world lost in idolatry 偶像崇拜, blasphemy 亵渎, self-love, pride, racism, bitterness, impatience, lust, harshness, abuse, and desire for revenge. He came not only to proclaim this law of love in word, but in deed. He loved God and His neighbor like no one ever has or ever will! He knew the true meaning of the Law, and he lived it to the uttermost.

He gave His heart and soul fully to God His Father. He said: **I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.** (John 6:38). Isaiah prophesied about Jesus long before He came that **the pleasure of the LORD would prosper in His hand.** (Isaiah 53:10) He gave all of His heart and all of His soul and all of His mind and all of His strength to God. He held nothing back His whole life long. He came to do the Father's will and He did it all the way to the end, not just as a duty, but as a sacrifice of loving devotion to His Father. He gave Himself over to God completely to serve God's plan of salvation.

And because of His absolute devotion to God, He also loved His neighbor to the end. We insulted Him, but He did not insult in return. We hated Him, but He did not return the hatred. He willingly gave Himself up to death on a cross in order to pay for all our crimes against the law of love. The wages of our sin is death, and He readily and wholeheartedly paid those wages in our place. Jesus said: **But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**" (Mark 10:43-45) Jesus is the ultimate Son, and the Ultimate Neighbour! The apostle Paul said of Jesus Christ: **Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached 责备 you fell on me."** (Romans 15:2-3)

**He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.** (1Peter 2:22-24)

Why did Jesus come to earth to proclaim and fulfill the Law of God? Not only to pay for all our crimes against God and against people, but also to heal us of our inability and unwillingness to love. That's the greatest kind of healing there is: that our sins might be taken away, and that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. After Jesus proclaimed the law of love, and the scribe echoed that law, He said to the scribe: **You are not far from the kingdom of God.** In other words, this is what the kingdom of God is all about: the Law of Love is the Law of the Kingdom. Jesus came to rescue us from the darkness of hatred and take us into the kingdom of love – the love of God and of our neighbour.

And if you see your unrighteousness, and your desperate 令人绝望的 need for forgiveness and for a heart of love, Jesus has a far better word for you than He had for the scribe: **You are not far from the kingdom of God.** He said: **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.** (Matthew 5:3) If you confess your sins to Jesus Christ, and plead for God's mercy upon your life, He will justify you and make you a new person. He will give you the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ and make it your own as if you had always loved God fully and loved your neighbor selflessly! And God will accept you as His righteous child in spite of all your sins.

That's good news for every day, for even if we have been Christians for 10, 30, or 50 years, we still sin continuously against the greatest commandments – and all the rest of them too – and every minute our only confidence is His sinless life of loving God and neighbor, and His sinless sacrifice of love to God and neighbor. That is what it means to be a Christian. We put all our confidence only in His love every day.

But He also makes us new creatures in Christ. The Holy Spirit plants Jesus in our lives, and along with Jesus, He writes God's perfect law upon our hearts and minds, so that loving God and our neighbour is given to us freely as our new way of life. This too is a very liberating gift – when our hearts are set free to fight hatred and put it to death, and to love instead.

What a blessed gift it is to know the life of love. Even though it is a daily struggle to live this life, and we sin often against God's commandments, and our love is in many ways still so little, yet by God's grace it is real. Everyone who believes in Jesus has been delivered over to this kingdom of God where the old law of love is made new in us. And there's no life like it!