

Third Time No Charm

Intro. Most parents or grandparents, when asked the silly question, which child/grandchild is their favorite, say, “All of them of course.” It is viewed either as a joke or someone looking to start trouble. When we are asked which is our favorite team, video game, movie or book, naming just one might be easy, but not without a lot of discussion. The question the scholar of the law asked is similar. He asked the Lord, out of the many commands and rules in the Israelite tradition, not which was his *favorite*, but which was the *greatest*.

I. Like the previous two discussions between himself and local leaders of Jerusalem, the Lord didn't directly answer the question and they couldn't spring the trap on him. He gave them a correct answer they couldn't argue with. The Lord quoted Deuteronomy 6:13, a passage well-known to Jews to the present day as the Shema, a prayer said several

times a day. He then quoted Leviticus 19:18, about the *fellow Israelite* being neighbor but expanded it to mean all other people including Samaritans or Gentiles; pagan or sinner. That was a huge shift in thought and action. One that we are still struggling with today. The Lord didn't pick any one of the 613 laws the lawyer assumed he would. By this the Lord did not mean the law and commandments could be disregarded, but knowing *which one is the most important is key to understanding all the rest*. We have a lot of laws, most of them we don't know, but we know the important ones. Maybe the most important is *not a law but a value* set forth in the preamble of our Constitution: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Compiling lists of the greatest teacher, singer, musician, athlete or writer of all time can be interesting and entertaining for hours on end. While there may be some agreement, they rarely yield a

unanimous result. Christians and people of all faiths (and even none) should be able to agree that love is an important value in our world. When love is missing, it has led to terrible events in our history like the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery, anti-Semitism, the internment of Japanese Americans, racism, anti-Christian persecution to name a few. What might be a common thread connecting them all is a failure to love our neighbor as we love God and ourselves.

Concl. The Lord put love of neighbor on the same level as love of God. He refused to separate the two. (See also Matthew 25.) We are fundamentally good people who periodically forget where we all come from: God. Love of God impels us to love, *especially* those different from us in language, culture, political persuasion or color. Most of the time it's easy to love God. Not so much the neighbor. One person at our bible study this week

suggested the Lord may not answer some questions directly because he wants us to think for ourselves. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan. The Lord asked which of the three men was neighbor to the man beaten up. Even the Pharisees had to admit it was the foreigner. Which of us could answer differently? We don't have to remember 613 laws, only two. Surely we can do that.

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