

Congratulations! By this point in the service, you probably know what I'm going to talk about! If not, I'll ask you a question: what is one thing that you have already heard three times in about the last twenty minutes? I'll give you a hint: you heard it in the Summary of the Law, you heard it in the Old Testament Lesson, and you heard it again in the Gospel. "*Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.*" As we know, Jesus says "this is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." We hear it every week, but how often have we stopped to think about what it is asking us to do?

As you may or may not know, this *summary of the law* is core to the Jewish faith as it, of course, *summarizes* the law of Moses: in all that you do, you shall love God with everything you can offer. Sure, there are many more particulars, but this is the jist of it. In the Jewish faith, this summary is something like a creed that gets recited frequently, and is called the *Shema*, after the first word in the Hebrew. You've heard it lots in English already today, so I will pronounce the first line in a poor Hebrew accent so you can hear it a bit differently: "*Sh'ma Yisraeil, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*" – *Hear, Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.*

You see, this was an important distinction to make in the time of the early Israelites. There were many "gods" – the "gods" of the Egyptians, the "gods" of the Canaanites, and the "gods" of the Babylonians, to list but a few. But the Israelites challenged this polytheism with the idea that there is only one god, and that was Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, their fathers. The God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians, who led them through the desert, the God who when challenged by the priests and magicians of other gods caused them to fall to their knees with the knowledge that Yahweh was supreme. And, of course, we know that, later, God gave us his only Son who by *his* death destroyed death and the bondage of sin. That's something, isn't it. But, as I alluded to, this was something *different*. Having one God over everything was a rather ludicrous idea for many ancient civilizations, and there was *always* the challenge of other gods and idols pulling at the loyalty of the people of Israel to *their* one God. So, of course, reciting the *Shema* as part of worship was really important as a reminder about how their religion worked – that they worshipped one God, despite all the distractions, and that that one God was Yahweh.

When Jesus was asked "Which is the first commandment of all?", he was teetering on the edge of a potentially dangerous trap set for him to see if he was a heretic. But he answered in the appropriately Jewish way: by reciting the *Shema*. But he added a piece onto it, from the Book of Leviticus, "*thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*". Ultimately, this line comes from Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18, but truly the sentiment extends to a whole section from verse 9 through 18. This section addresses honesty, greed, matters of justice, slander, and hatred. Specifically, the section containing the verse says this: "*You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. <sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord*" (Lev. 19:17-18). Even through this section, there are reminders that the Lord is one, and that the law is coming from Him. As I have said before, one of the main purposes of the Law was the preservation of the sacredness of life. Events tied to life and death were regulated closely by the Law of Moses, and anything that put you in risk of harming your kinsfolk was sinful, including wishing any ill upon them. The Israelites were to love their neighbours as themselves because each of them was one of God's people, and anything committed against any one of them was committed against God himself.

This is not contrary to the discussion that Jesus had with his disciples and the crowd gathered to hear him speak – the scribe affirmed this when he said that all what Jesus said was indeed "better than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." Burnt offerings and sacrifices were usually to make up for a failing in either of these two categories: loving God or loving your neighbour, so by holding up these two great commandments, you would be superseding the need to make these offerings. St. Paul tells us that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and so this old system is put away.

Where does this leave us, then, today with this message? Well, these two great commandments, Love God and Love your Neighbour, are two of the great demands on the Christian life, says Fr. Robert

Crouse. These are practical, every day demands that come part and parcel with being a Christian. They are simple words, in concept, but difficult words in practice. Crouse says, *“The problem is that they demand a transformation of our lives in every aspect - a transformation of our attitudes and standards, a transformation of our hopes and expectations, a transformation of the way we live our lives. [Ultimately,] They demand the practical conversion of our lives.”*<sup>1</sup> And this practical conversion is laid out by the collect for today:

*“Lord, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee the only God;”*

So, says Fr. Crouse, the practical conversion of our lives has two parts: “a turning away from temptations, and a turning towards God”. We must turn our backs on the world, the flesh, and the devil even though we live in the world, are made of flesh, and are surrounded by the whispers of the devil. In every instance of every day, we will be faced with difficult choices to make, even if we may not realize they are difficult choices. And these choices often make the difference between whether we are serving God, or serving ourselves. Whether you break down the idea of loving God in terms of ten commandments, or five books of law, the fact remains that every juncture we are faced with is an opportunity to either embrace God more, or turn away from him.

If we are to have a conversion in our lives towards God, then we must embrace these two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbour. But how do we do that, truly embrace them? As hard as we try, we are almost guaranteed to fail in this endeavour – that is part of our human nature. When the scribe recounted his understanding of the Law to Jesus, our Lord said “Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God.” The scribe knew the law, and that was part of it, but he was still lacking the ability to do it. That distance, still implied by Jesus saying “not far”, applies to all of us. We can know what we have to do in theory but still be so far from reaching our goal. This is really just like anything we do. Think of any skilled work: you know the end goal, and you have the materials, but you might lack the experience to do the job. I think of something like embroidery work: maybe I have all the material, all the needles and floss, and I can picture the final product, but I’ve never learned any of the stitches or techniques, and there are no teachers available to learn from. There is a gap in my ability to achieve the final goal. The same is true for all of us in our distance from the Kingdom of God. Luckily, we have a master embroiderer who wants to teach us everything we need to learn even if we don’t deserve to learn from him. God gives us his free gift of Grace through his Son, Jesus. So, how do we love God and love our neighbour? By first acknowledging and recognizing that Jesus Christ is our Lord and the key to the Kingdom of God.

In our Bible study this past Friday, we finished up the story arc of Joseph, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers. Through God’s grace, he became one of the most powerful men in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. When a great famine strikes the middle-eastern world, Joseph’s family comes to Egypt to plead for food and mercy, not realizing that Joseph is holding all the power. Before revealing himself to them, he tests their loyalty to see if they are the same as when they casted him away many years before. They passed the test, and he revealed his identity to them and rewarded them greatly. In his explanation, Fr. Kevin told us that while this story points to the Jesus story, one fundamental difference is that through Jesus, we no longer need to pass this kind of test since God’s grace is freely given. God’s grace, given to us through Jesus, is what helps us bridge the gap between knowledge of the kingdom of God, and the ability to *do* – and the ability to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. So, how do we love God, and love our neighbour? We need to believe in Jesus, and commit ourselves to him so we may be filled with the Spirit. That’s how we get the knowledge of the stitches we need to complete our design.

Let us continue to give thanks for God’s grace, and commit ourselves to follow him with pure hearts and minds that we may withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Let us strive to love God with all our being, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. And let us ask God to increase in us the witness of Christ who is confirmed in us, as we wait for his final revelation.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Crouse, “The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity” (Sermon, 1985).