“What matters most?”

A scribe came to Jesus with a valid question. Jesus had just fielded a question about the place of marriage in the time of the resurrection and this scribe thought Jesus had given a good answer.

The scribes of Jesus’ day, by the way, were the official interpreters of the Mosaic law. They were usually a member of the Pharisee sect, which meant that they took very seriously their commitment to abide by every point of the law as best they could.

The question posed to Jesus was actually a common question among rabbinical students of that day. Since by tradition there were 633 laws in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, students often debated how they could sum up the entire law in a single sentence.

So Jesus was ready for this scribe’s question. He actually summed up the entire law into two commandments:

First, love God.

Second, love others as you love yourself.

No commandment surpasses these two, Jesus said.
The first commandment mentioned by Jesus is taken directly from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4 and 5:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

This passage from Deuteronomy is known as the “Shema” (sha-MAH), a Hebrew word meaning “hear”. It is even today a basic confession of faith in Jewish worship, a basic tenet of their faith.

And here is Jesus, quoting this as one of the two greatest commandments.

The second is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18: Love your neighbor as yourself.

There are no greater commandments, Jesus said. That’s what matters most.

What if a high school student asks a guidance counselor what matters most? What answer would be given? Or what if a couple in a troubled marriage asks a marriage counselor what matters most? What answer would they be given? Or what if a child asks a parent the same question?

Would any of these pick up on Jesus’ words and say that what matters most is that we completely love God and at the same time love all of God’s people? Probably not, for our culture is not tuned that way. Get ahead, our culture says. Go to the best schools, get the best job, marry the right person, put away plenty of money for retirement.

Love God and love others? That’s for church, not for life in the real world, some might say.

Not so with Jesus. These two commandments are the real world to Jesus.

Let’s look a little closer at the Shema in Deuteronomy chapter 6. Listen
to what the writer says about how important this is:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

What matters most? Love God and love God’s people.

Let me pause for a moment to make sure we have a common understanding of this matter of love.

Jesus did not say we are required to “like” God’s people. “Love” and “like” are two different things. “Love” is agape\(^3\) (uh-GAH-pay), meaning that we have unconditional love and seek only the highest good for the other person. “Like” means that we want to spend time with that person, go fishing, have them over for dinner. “Love” for others does not require that we “like” them.

Love God and love God’s people, that’s what matters most.

Such love for others begins at home, of course. How do you treat those closest to you? Are you kind and thoughtful? Are you helpful to them? Do you give them encouragement and affection? If not, then why not? Isn’t that what agape means, that we have only their highest good as our aim?

But that is only the beginning, right? We leave our house to go out into the world. Who will we meet in a typical day? A clerk at the local convenience store who can’t speak English very well? How do we treat that person?

Or the driver ahead of us, with a cell phone glued to their ear, driving erratically? How do we treat that one? Or your server at the restaurant? Or the repairman who comes to fix something? And we could go on and on. These are the ones Jesus had in mind, aren’t they?
If we take a few moments to slow down and really look at those around us, we may find that we are holding stereotypical views that may not be fair. We learned this during our recent ministry with Night Stay. Former views of “the homeless” are no longer valid, we learned. We offered a warm and safe place to stay, and our guests offered us a glimpse into the very face of God.

Victor Hugo said, in Les Miserables, “To love another person is to see the face of God.”

What matters most? Loving God with our whole being and loving God’s people at least as much as we love ourselves.

The story is told of a woman who came to a great teacher and asked him, “Teacher, how do I know which religion is the right one?”

The teacher replied with a story of a great and wise king with three sons. This king had a precious gift – a magic ring that gave him great compassion, generosity, and a spirit of kindness. As he was dying, each of his sons went to him and asked the father for the ring after his death. And he promised to each of the sons that he would give him the ring. Now how could he possibly do that for all three sons?

Here’s what he did. Before he died, he called in the finest jewelry maker of the land and asked him to make two identical copies of the ring. After his death, each of his sons was presented with a ring.

Well, it wasn’t long before each of the sons figured out that his brothers also had a ring and therefore two of them had to be fakes. Only one of them could be the genuine article. And so they went before a judge and asked the judge to help them determine which was the authentic ring.

The judge, however, could not distinguish among the three rings, and so he said, “We shall watch and see which son behaves in the most gracious,
generous, and kind manner. Then we will know which possesses the original ring.”

And from that day on, each son lived as if he was the one with the magic ring, and no one could tell which was the most gracious, generous, and kind.

Then the teacher, having told this story, said to the woman, “If you wish to know which religion is true, watch and see which reveals God’s love for the world.”

And thereby you will have answered the question, What matters most?

Love God. Love God with your whole heart, your whole mind, and your whole strength. Make your God a priority each day. Find out all you can about this God, who he is, what he thinks, what he wants from you. Find out how to praise him, how to lift up his name in praise and thanksgiving. Discover his attributes from the pages of the Bible.

And then look around you at the world your God has created, all the people of every walk and culture and language. Very few of God’s people will be like you. There will be different races, different languages, different cultures, different lifestyles, different beliefs, different morals, different politics. But that’s fine, because we are not called to change them; we are called to love them, to hold them in high regard and to seek only their highest good.

That’s what matters most: love God and love God’s people.

Love is the key word. Love is the key to a life well-lived. It was love that compelled Jesus to be faithful to his calling and to go and suffer for you and for me. Love is what raised Jesus from the dead and it is love that gives us eternal life in the Son of God.

Won’t you love God today? Won’t you give God all that you have and all that you are? Won’t you make loving God and loving God’s people your
number one priority? That’s what matters most.

Let us pray:

O God, we fall so far short in fulfilling these two commandments, to love You and to love Your people. Help us, O Lord, to know You. Help us to follow You in every way, especially when it comes to all the people in the world whom You created and whom You love. We thank you, O God, for your grace, love, and mercy shown in the sacrificial death of our Saviour, Christ the Lord, in whose name we pray,

Amen.


I am indebted to the Holy Spirit, using the clergy staff of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brainerd, Minnesota, to inspire me to pursue this Lenten sermon series. Their website is www.trinitybrainerd.org.
1. The Pharisees comprised the largest and most important group of Jews in the time of Jesus. Holman Bible Dictionary says this, “The name ‘Pharisee’ means ‘the separated ones’. It may mean that they separated themselves from the masses of the people or that they separated themselves to the study and interpretation of the law. . . . They were the developers of the oral tradition, the teachers of the two-fold law: written and oral. They saw the way to God as being through obedience to the law. They were the progressives of the day, willing to adopt new ideas and adapt the law to new situations.” See “Jewish Parties in the New Testament”, by Clayton Harrop, Holman Bible Dictionary, Edited by Trent C. Butler, www.studylight.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?n=3420, c. 1991.

2. Dr. William Barclay (Daily Study Bible) gives this helpful summary of how the Law has been summarized in the Bible:

   Moses received 613 precepts on Mount Sinai, 365 according to the days of the sun year, and 248 according to the generations of men.

   David reduced the 613 to 11 in Ps 15: Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent? who shall dwell on thy holy hill?
   1. He who walks blamelessly.
   2. And does what is right.
   3. And speaks truth from his heart.
   4. Who does not slander with his tongue.
   5. And does no evil to his friend.
   6. Nor takes up a reproach against his neighbour.
   7. In whose eyes a reprobate is despised.
   8. But who honours those who fear the Lord.
   9. Who swears to his own heart and does not change.
   10. Who does not put out his money at interest.
   11. And does not take a bribe against the innocent.

   Isaiah reduced them to 6 (Isa 33:15):
   1. He who walks righteously.
   2. And speaks uprightly.
   3. Who despises the gain of oppressions.
   4. Who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe.
   5. Who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed.
   6. And shuts his eyes from looking upon evil.
   He shall dwell on high.

   Micah reduced the 6 to 3 (Mic 6:8):
   He hath showed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee?
   1. To do justice.
2. To love kindness.
3. To walk humbly with your God.

Once again Isaiah brought the 3 down to 2 (Isa 56:1):
1. Keep justice.
2. Do righteousness.

Finally, Habakkuk reduced them all to one (Hab 2:4):
The righteous shall live by his faith.

3. “Agape” is selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love, the highest of the four types of love in the Bible (the others are “eros”, “philia”, and “storge”).


5. This story, in at least one version, is attributed to Moses Mendlessohn, a German Jewish philosopher, 1729 – 1786.