

The Great Commandment

Richard F. Melka, Ph.D.

*"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"
He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind.
This is the greatest and the first commandment.
The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."¹*

These two commandments bring to light the critical three way love relationship that brings us new life in the Spirit: love of God, love of neighbor, love of ourselves. It also suggests the image of the cross since we can visualize our relationship with God as vertical and our relationships with each other as horizontal (+). The Great Commandment can certainly be most difficult to follow at times; however, the image of the cross in this instance is a symbol of great blessings for the person that lives it. If either of the directions is missing the blessing dissolves. *If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*² It is important, then, to first get our relationship with God on the right track and then the other relationships, those with ourselves and with our neighbors will be put in right perspective. If I am the temple of the Holy Spirit then so is my neighbor and I need to see Jesus in others. *You should know what God wants in general: that we should serve him by loving him above all things and our neighbor as ourself.*³

Usually the cross brings to mind sacrifice and hardship as *Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*⁴ Thomas of Kempis notes:

¹ Matt 22:36-40, Mark 12:29-31, Deut 6:4-5

² 1John 4:20

³ Saint Francis de Sales (1622)

⁴ Matt 16:24-25

This may be a difficult saying to accept but consider how shattering it would be to hear, Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus has gone before us carrying his cross, and he died for us upon that cross, so that each of us will be able to bear our own cross. Go anywhere and anyplace and you shall not find a higher way above or a safer way below than the way of the holy cross. Be the most efficient and orderly person and order your life as best you can, yet willingly or unwillingly the cross will find you. In some mysterious way God wills us to carry the cross and learn from it. Why then do you fear to take up your cross that leads to the Kingdom of Heaven? In the cross is eternal life and protection from those who would harm you.

No matter how well you can order your life something will occur that makes you suffer, either willingly or unwillingly, and a cross will always attach itself to you. Carry it willingly and it will carry you and eventually bring you to the place where suffering is no more. If you carry it unwillingly it will only become more of a burden, and it will remain with you. If you cast the cross away then most likely a heavier one will find its way to you.⁵

If you have a difficult relationship with neighbors consider these attitudes:

- If they are irate, respond with calmness.
- If they are arrogant, let your humility show.
- If they are profane, keep them in your prayers.
- If they are mistaken, keep steadfast in conviction.
- If they act roughly, be gentle.
- If they are hypocritical, be sincere.
- If they are judgmental, exemplify understanding.
- If they are rude, be kind and considerate.
- If they are in need, extend a helping hand.

Compared to God's charity ours is so much shallower that we often find that smallest of annoyances are the hardest to forgive. If we focus our thoughts on the all-forgiving Father we will be able to let go of such displeasures and become more like the Son. *O Lord, you are good and forgiving full of love to all who call.*⁶ In a similar way let us ask the Lord to preserve us from the temptation to trap others in their shortcomings by passing on small-minded gossip. "Let your mouth be constant in blessings and no one's abuse will ever fall upon you. Insult generates insult and blessing, blessing". (St, Isaac of Nineveh).

⁵ Adapted from Thomas of Kempis, Book 2, Chapt12

⁶ Psalm 86:5

Zacchaeus understood he had issues with his neighbors and said to the Lord, *"Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over."* And Jesus said to him, *"Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. Jesus called Zacchaeus to a change of heart and conversion of life and even though the worldly price was high, a lifetime's monetary gain, he understood the reward was beyond imagining. The woman at the well had a problem with loving herself: she answered and said to him, "I do not have a husband." Jesus answered her, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true."* She also had difficulty in understanding God: *You people worship what you do not understand.*⁷ Living the great commandment fully requires reconciliation and healing in order to bring us to a whole relationship with God, neighbor, and ourselves, and the Gospel stories often bring this to our attention. A step in reconciliation with God is our deep desire for change; with ourselves by a true spirit of contrition; with neighbor when we abandon prejudice, anger against one another, injustice, and disrespect, and cultivate the humility to freely bestow pardon.

Our love of God will consistently help us to love ourselves for we do need healing in this aspect, and the more we truly love ourselves the more we will be able to reach out to neighbor. St. Bernard of Clairvaux states that highest form of love is "to learn to love myself for God's sake." Many people are lonely, frustrated and unhappy because they really do not love themselves. They mimic the shallow culture of our times and put on a false self that others may readily accept. Perhaps many fear of what they will find inside themselves forgetting it is God's love that can heal all things. Whatever we find within that is repulsive is already taken care of if we just open ourselves up to the Father's love.

In the passage, 1Corinthians 13, the word *love* emphasizes this key concept in relationship with our neighbor; it deals with what love is directly and we surmise our relationship with neighbors needs to be kind, not jealous, pompous, or inflated; not rude or self-seeking; not rejoicing over their shortcomings but bearing with them patiently, and doing our best not to fail

⁷ John 4:7-23

them when they need our help. *Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.*⁸

The quickest way to fall away from love is to look to things that are self-serving. Love is cautious but upright; it is not limp or erratic; it knows no measure. There used to be a TV series called the "Gong Show" where judges would ring gongs when the performers showed no talent at all. When your love is insincere it too will be recognized and Paul says: *if you do not have love, you are a resounding gong.*⁹ Let our love of God, neighbor and ourselves be a flame that ignites our prayers into a pleasing fragrance that rises to God.

Since the cross can symbolize both suffering and blessing it creates tension, a kind of polarity between the two aspects and the resulting spiritual tension between both creates a healing stream of the Holy Spirit's love. One afternoon on retreat I noticed how some clouds took on the form of a cross and then slowly changed into the shape of a dove. On the next retreat I came across the writings of the tenth century theologian, St. Simeon, who discussed how carrying your daily cross brings about a transformation that evolves into Baptism in the Holy Spirit. Whenever you bless yourself let it be a reminder to live out the *Great Commandment*; a cross to carry and a blessing to receive.



⁸ Romans 13:10

⁹ 1 Cor 13:1

Our relationship with God is vertical,
With neighbor, horizontal.
The two combine in perfect unity.

The Spirit of the Whole cannot set one part
In antagonism with the other,
Both are duly proportioned.

Taken together they image the sign of a cross,
More than an ornament from heaven
It conveys Wisdom from ages past.

The tension between the two directions
Must be centered else it causes separation,
One direction acting alone can be fatal.

Create God in our own image,
According to our personal needs,
And the horizontal fades away.

Mix selfish interests
Into our relationships with neighbor
And the vertical dissipates.

Harmony is lost when antagonism
Conflicts the fundamental principle
Of the two acting as one.

This principle is the basis for the Law
And brings upon the doers
The greatest of blessings.

*If we love one another, God remains in us,
and his love is brought to perfection in us. (1John4:12)*