

## What is the Greatest Commandment? Matthew 22:37-40, 12/31/17

Mountaineering guide Tapp Richards- Greatest commandment of mountaineering- **check your equipment!** He said often, "It doesn't matter how in shape you are, how far you've gone, how much experience you have or how you feel- if your equipment isn't functioning properly you will not make it and it can put you and others in danger. Each day before a hike he would yell out to us, what's the greatest commandment? Check your equipment! Each rest stop, he'd yell out to us, check your equipment. Sure enough one of the guys on our summit climb had a problem with his goggles, didn't check his equipment thoroughly and he actually ended up with a frozen eyeball and temporary blindness, didn't summit because of it.

Jesus was asked a similar question, much different context.

**Matthew 22:36-38** who asked him:

*"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and most important command."*

This commandment is was not new, Jesus is making a reference back to an ancient mantra that every Israelite new by heart, called the great Shema. This was the central teaching of the Law given by Moses.

**Deuteronomy 6:4-5**

*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.*

Now the way we hear this command today is different than how the people heard this in Moses' day. To understand the significance of this text we need to set it in its original religious **context**-that of **religious polytheism**. All the surrounding neighbors of Israel were polytheists (remember the Canaanites, Ammorites, Jebusites...). People living in the ancient Near East were a deeply spiritual people- they weren't atheists! They recognized that life was filled with the spiritual realm. But they did not believe in one God but many gods. There were numerous gods who were seen as ruling over different spheres of life. There were deities that ruled over every possible sphere of life: water, sky, mountains... but also politics, family, war, fertility, etc. Spirituality was a complicated system of appeasement of different gods that were sometimes in conflict with one another.

Into this sea of religious plurality enters Deuteronomy 6. Have the image in your mind of Moses preaching this passage before the Israelite congregation who were surrounded to the North,

South, East and West by polytheists. The Israelites were to love the One and Only True God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who led them out of slavery in Egypt. Moses speaks on behalf of Yahweh, God to the people and resoundingly denounces the polytheism of all their neighbors:

In it's context a better translation would be: **Deut. 6:4-5 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is Lord alone!**

Therefore- what is the response to this statement that there is One God and he alone is Lord? **Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.**

Love here isn't really talking about having warm fuzzy feelings about God, it's good to have warm fuzzies about God... but that's not central in this command- **This is a statement of unreserved, whole life loyalty to God alone.** All Heart, Soul, Strength- Some have tried to break these down and have them refer to various areas of our being, but it is better to think of these terms as synonyms to heighten the emphasis on total loyalty. Moses is saying that there should be no competing loyalties in any area of your lives.

How do the people of Israel do throughout biblical history at fulfilling the greatest command? I would give them a "Below Standard" since our kids don't use the A-F scale... They fail! Until the Greater Israel- Jesus comes. And Jesus not only perfectly obeys the greatest commandment with unreserved loyalty to the Father, but fulfills all the law of God, as the God-man. And because of this- Look what The Father does

**Ephesians 1:20-23 "God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.**

**And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."**

He becomes our Lord, Jesus becomes the focal point of the greatest command for his followers. So the way we understand the greatest commandment for us today?

**Loving God= loyalty to Christ as Lord alone in every area of our lives.**

There are countless numbers of ways to talk about how this meaningfully impacts our lives. But I'd like to share some thoughts with you that I've been contemplating and the Spirit has been pressing me on as we head into the New Year. In the northeast, and other parts of the country, we are largely living in a post-Christian culture. Christian beliefs, ethics, values, philosophy and worldview is increasingly marginalized and secularized. Now don't hear this as a political

statement. I don't believe either party has the corner on Christian worldview. In fact, you may find yourself more and more feeling like a political refugee.

It seems to me that the dominant worldview and philosophy of our day has been replaced by pragmatism. **Richard Rorty** probably the most influential American philosopher, now passed. But he was a philosophical pragmatist. **Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.**

Pragmatism says whatever works for me and allowed in my society is right. This is summed up in our modern saying, "Just follow your heart." In other words- whatever seems to work for you, what you feel like, that fits you, and you can get away with. We live in a day that says, I find truth in here, not out there. That is true for you vs. what is true for me. In other words the mantra- "Do what's right." has been replaced by, "Do what works." Illustrate this- Increasingly the question is not will I go to heaven, it's will this work for my life?

You say, OK what does this have to do with Loyalty to Christ as Lord alone? This worldview is in direct conflict with loyalty to Jesus as Lord. Jesus said- I am the TRUTH. For the Christian, The question must always be "What is right according to Jesus." Not what works. He defines truth, he defines what is right, not your likes and dislikes, not what seems efficient, not your sensibilities, not what will get people to like you, not your cultural biases.

Now in many ways, thinking pragmatically, Jesus' way does work. More peace, leads us to forgive others, find fulfillment, the values of humility and trustworthiness make good marriages, friendships and workers. But it doesn't ALWAYS work.

**Tim Keller- "Will Christianity work for me? In the very long run, following Jesus will work and bring you to glory, and abandoning Jesus will not work and bring you to ruin. But in the short run it may lead to ostracism, persecution or other kinds of suffering."**

The Early Church completely understood this. Missiologist **Alan Hirsch** says, **"Lordship of Christ was a deeply subversive claim that effectively undermined the rule of Caesar. The Christians wanted to bring all of life under the lordship of Jesus, and that meant subverting the lordship of Caesar. The emperors understood this all too clearly; hence, the terrible persecutions that followed."**

See, what got Christians in trouble was their loyalty to Jesus as Lord alone in every area of their lives.

Loyalty to Christ as Lord is going to get increasingly difficult as years go on. It will increasingly cause conflict in your workplace, in your neighborhood, school...Something may come along

that following Christ may cost you dearly. Doing things that seem weird, old school, or prudish...committing to purity- not just physically but on your instagram, not participating in the party scene, not participating in the gossip... may invite ridicule, make you feel left out or bring you down a few pegs on the social ladder. Having biblically traditional values of sexuality, identity, life purpose may stigmatize you or keep you from a place of influence among your peers, or feeling stuck in a boring or unfulfilling marriage, if you manage your business in a way that makes the most money but it means treating people poorly, a major professional setback... Three evaluation questions to ask yourself as you go into the New Year.

-Am I willing to follow Jesus even if it costs me something?

-Am I willing to believe whatever God says, regardless how I feel about it?

-Am I willing to put what is right above what works.

Loving Jesus= loyalty to Christ as Lord alone in every area of our lives. This is truly the greatest commandment. Contemplate what you want 2018 to look like, now is the time to ask these evaluation questions.

Why be loyal to Jesus, seems very difficult?

#1 We have a perfect, empowering Savior

#2 The Longview

Elizabeth Elliot story- Beggar has his bowl, king comes up on a horse. King says- will you please give me your money? 2 copper coins. He then sticks two diamonds... beggar says, why didn't I give him everything? Jesus says give me everything... well, why not just these two. End of our life, say, "Why didn't I give him everything?"