

Easier Said Than Done
October 23, 2011
Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

"Won't you be my neighbor?" <sung>

"Was Mr. Rogers an evil man?" That was the teaser on FOX news one morning. When the story finally aired the anchors bantered about whether or not Mr. Rogers was to blame for a generation of individuals who consider themselves to be special and entitled. Fox's Brian Kilmeade said "that man unintentionally did a whole generation or two a disservice." Recent studies were cited, opinions were voiced, and more cracks were made. They concluded their piece by asking, "What do you think?"

I read some of the feedback and I think FOX learned a valuable lesson that day – you DON'T dis Mr. Rogers! He spent the whole of his life teaching us how to love our neighbor, which to him, was the same as loving God. When asked, "Who is your neighbor?" Fred Rogers replied, "whoever you happen to be with at the moment. So right there, there's no loophole-that means we have to love everybody." (Amy Hollingsworth, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Inspiration/2005/05/Mister-Rogers-Theology-Of-Neighbor.aspx>)

He went on to say, "Once you realize that everybody's your neighbor, you have a choice. You can either be an advocate or an accuser. An accuser is somebody who only sees what's awful about themselves so they look through those eyes and look for what's awful about their neighbor. An advocate is somebody who looks through the eyes of God at their neighbor and sees what's good about that person because they're created in God's likeness. That's a very simple, basic truth, but to live that out in our daily lives is tremendously difficult." (same article as above)

Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind; love your neighbor as yourself. That's the very simple, basic truth that Jesus said summed up all the law and the prophets. And look who called him evil...

Religious leaders, the Sadducees and Pharisees were not happy about Jesus' sudden appearance in Jerusalem. He rode into town like owned the place, branches waving and kids yelling. He disrupted business in the temple by throwing over tables and making a scene. He then stopped to heal the sick. In an attempt to trick Jesus into saying something treasonous or blasphemous they pummeled him with questions. But Jesus outwitted them, with clever answers and pointed parables. So the Pharisees and Sadducees push a "lawyer," one we assume is an expert in Jewish Law, to the front of the crowd to test Jesus with yet another question.

To us – it doesn't sound like much of a test. "Which commandment is the greatest?" he asked. "I know! I know! I know!" we want to burst in. What is the trap? The rabbis of the day had counted 613 commands in their Law. 248 of those commands were positive and correlated with the number of parts of one's body. 365 of the commands were negative (you know, "Thou shalt nots") and correspond to every day of the year. Rabbis were allowed to make summaries of the Law, but there was also the view that all the commandments were equal. It's possible that the lawyer was trying to get Jesus into a debate where he might speak despairingly about one part of the Law. Whatever the test, Jesus must have passed, because there was no debate.

In fact, Jesus went on to ask a strange question of his own – a riddle like question that would have the Pharisees and Sadducees scratching their heads for days. No one had an answer. And no one dared ask him more questions...

As you read the entire encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem it seems like they were on a completely different page from Jesus. They seemed to be obsessed with the letter of the law. I'm sure they could all recite all 613 of them from memory. They were more concerned about Jesus not washing his hands than they were about the suffering poor Jesus fed. They focused on minor infractions and placed heavy burdens on others, and then completely neglected the greater commands like caring for the widows and orphans. Jesus said it best when he said, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!" (Matthew 23:24)

If you look over the history of the Christian faith you can see that we have strained our share of gnats. The church has split and argued over gnats. Is the Bible the supernaturally inspired word of God? Is Jesus the ONLY means of salvation for the world? Can you use musical instruments in church? Can women cut their hair? Are filled with the Spirit if you don't speak in tongues? Is divorce an offense worthy of excommunication? Do you baptize babies or adults? Wars have been fought and churches have divided over gnats as whole camels were swallowed.

While churches bicker and fester about gnats – people are going hungry – creation is groaning – children are bullied – weapons threaten – the poor stay stuck and the unemployed cry out for work – human slavery continues...those are the camels.

Jesus gets us back to the simple, basic truth. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. And he says them in such a way that we

understand that these two commands are inseparable. You cannot love one and not the other. To love your neighbor is to love God. Social activist Dorothy Day said it this way, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

The thing about the whole "love your neighbor" thing is that it leaves room for interpretation. Trying to love a neighbor with addictions requires a love that initially causes pain. How do we love our neighbors starving to death in Africa? How do we love those who need jobs? Is love political action? Is love protesting injustice? Is love warm regard or concrete action? What does this neighbor love look like?

Maybe Jesus had Leviticus 19:9-18 in mind. It spells out what is involved in loving one's neighbor. According to Leviticus the person who loves his or her neighbor:

- will not reap the fields bare, but will leave some for the poor (vv. 9-10).
- will not steal (v. 11).
- will not deal falsely (v. 11).
- will not lie (v. 11).
- will not swear falsely by God's name (v. 12).
- will not defraud a neighbor (v. 13).
- will not keep a laborer's wages overnight (v. 13).
- will not "revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" (v. 14).
- will not render an unjust judgment (v. 15).
- will not be partial to the poor or defer to the great (v. 15).
- will judge the neighbor with justice (v. 15).
- will not engage in slander (v. 16).
- will not profit by the blood of the neighbor (v. 16).
- will not hate your neighbor (v. 17).
- will not take vengeance or bear a grudge (v. 18).

It also says "you shall reprove your neighbor" (v. 17), suggesting that love is tough where toughness is needed.

Leviticus may give us a list – but there is more. Just like Mr. Roger's said – it begins with how we LOOK at our neighbors – how we SEE our neighbors – do we see only the awful or do we look for God's likeness?

Mr. Rogers said it was hard. Yet he created a neighborhood where it all seemed possible.

It's crazy isn't it – that FOX news would have a conversation about whether Mr. Rogers is evil – and not say anything about the evil of violence, the evil of poverty, the evil of injustice, the evil of greed, the evil of idolatry. Not a word.

We shouldn't be surprised. The same thing happened to Jesus.