

The Greatest Commandments and the Greatest Offense

What Christian could dislike Billy Graham? I mean, here's a man who brought the simple message of the gospel to literally hundreds of millions of people around the world and saw millions give their lives to Jesus Christ. A reporter from *USA Today* recently wrote, "He was the evangelist who did not rip off millions or run with prostitutes or build a mega church or run for president or run a Christian political lobby." Billy Graham was truly a man of integrity.

Yet, throughout his years of ministry, Graham, now 95, was harshly criticized. Some said he was too inclusive by inviting churches of every stripe to participate in his crusades. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called him "simplistic." Fundamentalist Bob Jones said that Graham had done "more harm to the cause of Jesus Christ than any other living man." President Truman called him a "counterfeit." But when Billy went to London to hold one of his first international crusades, he met with C. S. Lewis who said to him, "You know Billy, you have many critics, but I have never met one of your critics who knows you personally." ⁱ

As we move now to the last third of the gospel of Mark, we see that the criticism of Jesus is getting more and more intense. But how many of His critics know Him personally? We all have detractors, people who for whatever reason, just don't like us very much. How do you deal with yours? If you had critics who tried to trip you up or make you look bad every day, wouldn't you try to avoid them? Strangely, Jesus didn't do that. Jesus conversed and debated with His critics almost every day. As we come to the last months of His life, the criticism is becoming even more intense but this also seems to lead to discussions that are less peripheral and more essential – less fluff, more meat. One such debate leads one of His critics to ask:

...Of all the commandments, which is the most important? (Mark 12:28)

Before we celebrate this table, we need to chew on Jesus':

I. Good Answer

Jesus' answer is such a familiar one that we are likely to miss some important points if we aren't careful. First, do you notice that the commandments He mentions are NOT any of the Ten Commandments? No, Jesus goes first to Deut. 6:4 which the Jews called the "shema," the Hebrew word for "hear," which is the first word of this verse. It is recited the first thing every morning and the last thing every night by pious Jews, even today:

...Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Mark 12:29)
(*Shema Israel, adonai eloheyinu adonai echad.*)

Now, please notice, this is not a prayer. As one commentator says, "This is the Jewish pledge of allegiance!" And what a pledge it is! The literal translation is: "...Jehovah (singular), our Elohim (plural), is our Jehovah." In one doctrinal phrase, we have two critical truths. First, it speaks the truth of God's oneness to the

polytheistic religions of the Canaanites. Secondly it speaks the truth of the Trinity to the atheistic philosophies and Unitarian religions of our day. One pledge, two truths. But there's more to this command. It also says:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

Have you ever noticed that of the Ten Commandments, eight of them are negative, they tell you what NOT to do? Only two are stated in the positive. But both of these commandments, the ones that Jesus says are the greatest, tell us what we OUGHT to do in the most positive terms.

And there's something else that's unique about them – they command us to love: first God, then our neighbor. The Hebrew word for 'love' does not appear in the Ten Commandments, but Jesus picks out two other significant commands of God, both from the Old Testament, both centered on the word "love," and He uses them to summarize all the rest. In fact, He says in Matt. 22:40:

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

What specifically do the Law and the Prophets hang on? They hang on the command to love. In Hebrew, both of these commands begin with the exact same word, *V'Ahavta* – "You must love..." This is not a suggestion, it's a command. You must love in two directions: God first, then your neighbor. How do we love God? With all of us: our heart, soul, mind and strength. In everything we think, everything we feel, everything we do, God's will MUST have authority. For God's will to have authority, God's Word must have authority. If you told your child to clean his room and you come back 20 minutes later and he hasn't put one thing away, what would you say? You'd say, "Why haven't you done what I told you to do?"

What if your child said, "Well, I heard what you said but I thought, 'I think what Dad meant was that I should play more'"? Would that work with you? But isn't that what we try with God? "God, I know you said that I shouldn't lie but I think what you meant was that I shouldn't lie unless lying is the less painful thing to say to someone." "No," He'll say, "I meant don't lie!" Loving God depends on your knowing God's Word and not editing it!

But how well do you even know God's Word? In a recent study, 88% of Americans say they own a Bible, 80% said they believe it is sacred, 66% said they wished they read it more and 33% said they think the moral decline in America is due to people not reading the Bible. But 57% said they only read the Bible four times a year or less. A mere 26% said they read their Bible four or more times a week. ⁱⁱ

Okay, so "Houston, we have a problem!" But we also have a solution! How many of you have read every word of the New Testament? Alright, we have a plan. Pastor Jerry and Heather James have teamed together to give us a Lenten opportunity to love God. Jesus said, "*If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love...*" (John 15:10) So, if we read His Word, we'll know His commands, and if we know His commands, then we can obey His commands and if we obey His commands we'll remain in His love. That's what Jesus said!

So, Pastor Jerry and Heather have put together a 40-day Bible reading plan that starts this Wednesday and ends the day before Resurrection Sunday. You'll read

about 5 or 6 pages per day and you'll read the entire New Testament in 40 days. I'm gonna do it! Will you join me?

Okay, so that's how we can love God. How about loving our neighbor? How do we do that? I think most of us know that when John told this story, he remembers the man asking the follow-up question, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the story of the Good Samaritan which defines a neighbor as someone who needs to receive our mercy. Remember that story? Okay, but I want to show you another part of the same answer.

The command to "Love your neighbor as yourself," is found in Lev. 19:18. But it is not just an isolated verse that gives this command. There's actually a whole series of commands about how to treat your neighbor. Listen to some of these:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD.

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

(Lev. 19:9-10, 13, 15, 16-18)

Now, do you get the larger picture? Yes, loving your neighbor includes being merciful (leave some of the harvest for the poor, don't rob, don't seek revenge...) But it also includes justice and sometimes "tough love" (don't show partiality either because someone is poor or because they are great and if you know that your neighbor has done something wrong, don't ignore it – speak up! Rebuke your neighbor frankly or else God will hold YOU as being guilty of his crime too!) When Jesus said you should "love your neighbor," He wasn't only talking about being merciful. He was also calling on us to be honest, to be frank, to uphold justice and to live in integrity with our neighbors as well.

Jesus takes the whole law and boils it down to two commands. And then, He takes those two commands and He boils them down to one word – love. As Bart Campolo once said, "It's love God and love people; nothing else matters." This is Jesus' answer to the question, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

But we can't ignore the fact that Jesus doesn't stop there. In the next paragraph He goes on to give...

II. A Good Warning.

Jesus now turns the tables and starts asking some questions of His own:

...How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

"The Lord said to my Lord:

"Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."

David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"

The large crowd listened to him with delight. (Mark 12:35-37)

I don't know about you, but I love listening to great Bible teaching! I love the old masters like Stanley and Graham and Swindoll but I also love the new young bucks like Greg Laurie and Mark Driscoll and James McDonald. Hearing someone who knows how to mine the gems of truth from God's Word is so refreshing! Paul says in Romans 11:33:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

Jesus is opening God's Word to the people and showing them the deeper truth of Ps. 110:1. What's His point? He's proving to them that the Messiah could NOT be just a human being, like the prophets. He had to be God Himself in human form (a descendant of David). If the Messiah wasn't God, how could David call Him Lord? And the people listened with delight because He opened the Scriptures to them.

Then, Jesus gives a stern warning:

...Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely. (Mark 12:38-40)

What's His point? Knowing the truth isn't good enough. You've also got to do the truth. The teachers of the law knew the truth, they taught the law. But they weren't doing the truth. They weren't living by the law of love. It was all about them – how they dressed, where they went, where they sat – everything was about them living in the spotlight. Their definition of greatness was how many people served them, not how many people they served. And they truly believed they deserved this. They deserved to be served because of what they knew!!

Jesus said, "Knowing the truth is not enough. You can't love WITHOUT knowing the truth, but knowledge alone is not love." Jesus said, "**Love... God with all your heart... Love your neighbor as yourself.**" (Mark 12:30, 31) All the other commands hang on these two.

But now, check this out – just before Jesus leaves earth, He says:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. (John 13:34)

Well, what's so "new" about this command? Is it different from the Lev. 19:18 command to "love your neighbor as yourself"? Yes, yes it is different. How is it different? Lev. 19:18 says we are to love others *as we love ourselves*. In this new command, Jesus says we are to love "*As I have loved you.*" What's different? Jesus' love is sacrificial not egalitarian. Lev. 19 calls on me to love others equally to how I love myself. Jesus' love is an unequal love. He loved us more than He loved Himself. He put our need above His desires. He didn't want to go to the cross, but He went because we needed Him to go for us. And why does Jesus give us this "new command"? Because this is the single strategy for how we can be identified as His disciples:

By this (loving others sacrificially) all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35)

This is a whole new level of love. And what will happen if we do this?

According to sociologist Rodney Stark, we'll lay the foundation for the radical transformation of our entire culture. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Dr. Stark describes how Christianity rose from being a small powerless group of believers living on the fringe of the mighty Roman Empire, to become the majority belief system of that culture. To accomplish this, it would have had to have grown at a 40% annual growth rate... for 300 years! How could that happen? Stark says it largely had to do with the radically different way Christians loved people.

In the first several centuries of Christianity, there were two great epidemics in the Roman Empire. Hundreds of thousands of people died. If the person who contracted a disease was cared for, he had a good chance of survival but the typical Roman response was to abandon an affected family member so that they themselves didn't get sick.

The Christians, however, did the opposite. Guided by Jesus' teaching that "*I am my brother's keeper*," and "*It is more blessed to give than to receive*," the early Christians not only cared personally for their own family members but they took in diseased family members left behind by others. Dr. Stark writes that the Christians believed that, "as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to "*all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*" (I Cor. 1:2) These were revolutionary ideas."

This was so widespread that the pagan emperor Julian wrote to his pagan high priest urging him to do something because "[the Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well. Everyone can see that our people lack aid from us." ⁱⁱⁱ

In John 17:21, Jesus prays:

...Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Did you hear that? How will people come to believe that Jesus was sent here by God the Father? They will believe when they see how we love one another. The Great Commandment is that we love – love God and love our neighbor. And what is the Great Offense? The Great Offense is that we TALK about loving but never actually do it.

How will we ever be able to convince 1.2 million people that Jesus was sent here by God the Father? The first Christians won over the entire Roman Empire by sacrificially loving their neighbors. Some of you have been asking, "How can I participate in offering Grace and Mercy to Hartford and Litchfield counties? Here's the answer, love God and love your neighbor – NOT as you love yourself, but as Christ loved you - sacrificially! Let's pray...

ⁱ Facts from “Billy Graham,” *The Biography Channel* website; and “Why Billy Graham?” a sermon by Mike Adams, Redlands Baptist Church, Rockville, MD., delivered July 24, 2011

ⁱⁱ Religious News Service, “Poll: Americans love the Bible but don’t read it much,” April 4, 2013

ⁱⁱⁱ Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), p. 91 and “The Rise of Christianity” by Rodney Stark, www.thejesusquestion.org