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## ***The Greatest Commandments!***

***Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio***



They are at it again. In this Sunday's gospel Jesus' opponents enlist a lawyer to do what lawyers do best- ask a question that puts a person on the hot seat. "Which commandment of the law is the greatest?" (Matthew 22:34-40). If the law consisted in only the Ten Commandments, this would be tough enough. But the written "Torah" included many more moral, ceremonial, and dietary prescriptions.

Jesus, of course, is a radical. A "radical" is one who goes to the "radix" or root of the issue. The root problem was that these Pharisees majored in the minors. They loved to strain out gnats and swallow camels. They missed the forest for the trees, going to great lengths to observe the letter of the law while totally missing its spirit.

So Jesus fires a broadside. Splicing together two passages from the Torah, he sinks them. "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind" (Deuteronomy 6:5). "This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Leviticus 19:18).

This sinks them for a couple of reasons. First it brilliantly sums up the entire law because every single precept is an expression of these two commandments. Read the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) and you'll see that the first three are about loving God and the other seven are about loving your neighbor. If you read every line of the Bible, you'd be able to put each command in column A (love God) or column B (love your neighbor). So these two commandments are indeed the root of them all.



But the other reason his answer sinks them is that these two root commandments are precisely the ones the Pharisees keep breaking. Observance of the law for them is not an act of divine worship but rather of self-promotion. Rather than their observance of the law leading to love of neighbor, it leads to scorn of neighbors who fail to live up to their standards (see how they treat the blind man in John 9:24-34). Note what Paul, the converted Pharisee, says: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not

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love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1).” Paul knew this from experience—he spent years as a gong. On the positive side, St. Augustine says “love and do what you will.”



Yet Jesus did not say just to love. He said we must love the Lord with our WHOLE heart and soul and with ALL our mind and strength. I made a discernment retreat at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani when, at age 21, I felt torn between a desire for religious life and marriage. As I walked into the retreat house, I shuddered to see this phrase inscribed in the stone over the entryway: “God Alone.”

Does wholehearted love of God leave no room in your heart for a spouse or children?

If that were the case, there would be no second great commandment in this story. In fact Jesus says the second commandment is like the first. That’s because the kind of wholehearted love Jesus is talking about is charity (**agape**), which means loving God for his own sake and all others for his sake, and doing so not by human strength, but with the divine love that is poured into our heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). When we love others with charity, we love God through them. Our every loving act towards them becomes an expression of our love for God.



So at bottom, the two great commandments are just two sides of the same coin. Jesus says to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and render to God what is God’s. The two-sided coin of charity is the only legal tender we can use to pay the obligation that’s even more important than taxes—the one owed to the Creator.

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***This was originally published in Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection upon the readings for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, liturgical cycle A (Ex 22:1, 20-26), Ps 18, 1 Thes 1:5-10; Mt 22:34-40).***

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