

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

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Many Bible scholars are in agreement that there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament, 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. The 248 positive commandments represent positive things that should be done such as "honor thy mother and thy father," whereas the 365 negative commandments represent the "shalt nots" such as, "Thou shalt not lie."

The lawyers and legalists in the days of Jesus wished to trick Jesus into politically incorrect expressions regarding the most important commandment.

In the typical Jewish home, it was normal for the "Shema" (which means hear) to be repeated in a prayer twice per day, in the morning and in the evening. The Shema was taken from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (also known as the Shema), "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*" (ESV).

The reason the Shema was repeated in the Jewish home twice per day was because of what was written in verse 7.

"You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7, ESV).

The lawyers of Jesus' day wished to trick Jesus into stating something to the crowd that none could agree with completely. Keep in mind, there were 613 commands in the Old Testament that they were required to keep (though it was impossible). What command could Jesus possibly state that would cover all of these commandments? How could Jesus possibly state one command of greater importance

than all of the others. It appeared that there was no good answer that the Lord could give.

Matthew Henry in his commentary states, "It was a question disputed among the critics in the Law. Some would have the Law of Circumcision to be the Great Commandment, others the law of the Sabbath, others the Law of Sacrifices, according as they severally stood affected, and spent their zeal; now they would try what Christ said to this question, hoping to incense the people against him, if he should not answer according to the vulgar opinion; and if he should magnify one commandment, they would reflect on him as vilifying the rest."

Jesus' brilliant answer left the scribes, the lawyers, and the legalists of the day speechless. In a short statement, Jesus quoted the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) that they were all familiar with. But in addition to the Shema he also stated Leviticus 19:18 in one single statement on the law that none could argue with.

All four gospels record this expression with different wording:

The Gospel of Matthew

"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And 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 great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets'" (Matthew 22:35-40).

The Gospel of Mark (in which the Shema is included)

"And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, 'Which

commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these'" (Mark 12:28-31).

The Gospel of Luke

"And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. And he said to him, 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live'" (Luke 10:25-28).

Gospel of John

"When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, Where I am going you cannot come. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another'" (John 13:31-35).

You should love the Lord your God with all of your Heart.

What does it mean to say, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul?"* Well, it means exactly what it says.

In the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:1-17, we find that the first four of the ten laws are related to our love, respect, fear, and devotion to God above all else.

Here is a condensed, simplified version of the Ten Commandments. An interesting fact is that many nations of the world have built their civil laws around these commandments.

The Ten Commandments

1. You shall have no other Gods but me.
2. You shall not make for yourself any idol, nor bow down to it or worship it.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. Respect your father and mother.
6. You must not commit murder.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not give false evidence against your neighbour.
10. You must not be envious of your neighbour's goods. You shall not be envious of his house nor his wife, nor anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Christianity Today, published a short article in April 2016 addressing the subject of modern day idols. I have copied below a portion of that article with a few changes.

"Idolatry looks completely different today from what it once was. Whereas there was a time when idols were inanimate figures and statues, today they can come in various forms. Idolatry is an issue of the heart and can thus be only broken by a transformation of the heart.

God promises that through the power of the cross, we are now set free from sinful desires and can find meaning and joy in Jesus Christ alone. Other things will only fail in trying to provide that for us.

Idols are anything that takes God's place in giving us fulfillment, satisfaction, security or significance. Many of the things that people have idolized - both past and present - are not necessarily bad things, but good things that take bad positions on our priority tree.

We are taught by the Bible to always put God first in our hearts. Colossians 3:5 says, *"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."*

Here are modern-day things that we find it hard to admit are actually taking over our lives.

Success. God wants us to be successful, but He does not desire success to take His place in our hearts. When we pursue success outside of God's will, we will find no satisfaction, but when we choose to surrender to God and His ways, Joshua 1:8 promises that we *"...will be prosperous and successful."* It's particularly easy to make success an idol when we follow other people's definitions, rather than God's.

Phones. Or tablets or whatever shiny piece of kit you carry around with you and can't stop checking every five minutes. If you're giving your electronic device more time and attention than your loved ones, something's wrong.

Image. In the age of Facebook and Instagram, we can be obsessed with projecting the image of the perfect life, perfect relationship, perfect kids, perfect holidays, perfect friendship group. Just choose your filter and in one click, your life can look like everybody else's dream come true. But the Christian faith is about the joy found in God, more than in ourselves or the things of this world. Let's make sure we're projecting this image to others more than anything else. In amongst all those pictures of yourself and all the great things in your life, are there any pictures of your church or anything that would speak to the world of your faith in God?

Materialism. This is a prevalent problem most especially with younger generations with all the peer pressure. But that's not to say that older generations are free from it. Today's consumerism, not to mention the billion-dollar advertising industry, drives us to believe that we need certain objects, possessions and substances to feel happy and content. With internet shopping and today's global market, there's no end to the things we could buy. Now more than ever we need that fruit of the Spirit, self-control.

Sex. Although sex was designed and created by God, man has maligned and distorted its value and purpose. We can be easily driven by the flesh instead of the word of God, especially in an age when nudity is celebrated over modesty, sexual exploits are boasted over, and our visual culture is awash with provocative images. In this day and age, sex has become an idol that drives us to make small and big decisions that will lead us away from Christ if we're not careful.

Money. Ok so it's not exactly just a modern-day temptation, but the lesson remains the same. There is much value in money, but it is not the most valuable thing. That's why Jesus teaches in Matthew 6:24, *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"* (Patrick Mabilog, Christianity Today, April 2016).

An idol can be many things. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary an idol is “an object of extreme devotion.” Therefore, anything that we give “extreme devotion” to outside of God can become an idol. Please understand that there are many things that are still very good, but if we have an unbalanced devotion to them, they become idols. Let us search our hearts and remove from His temple (our bodies) all idols!

And Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself

Remember, Jesus had quoted the well known Jewish Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4 but had taken the liberty of adding to it Leviticus 19:18, which is the second half of Jesus’s command that fulfills all of the law.

“And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’” (Luke 10:27, ESV).

“But he (the lawyer), desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 10:29, ESV). To answer the question of who is our neighbor, Jesus told the well known and often repeated story of the *Good Samaritan*. Keep in mind, to the Jews, the name Samaritan, was a despicable name.

Who were the Samaritans?

The Samaritans were people who lived in what had been the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Samaria, the name of that kingdom’s capital, was located between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The Samaritans were a racially mixed society with Jewish and pagan ancestry.

Although they worshiped *Yahweh*, as did the Jews, their religion was not mainstream Judaism. They accepted only the first five books of the Bible as canonical, and their temple was on Mount Gerizim instead of on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (John 4:20).

Because of their imperfect adherence to Judaism and their partly pagan ancestry, the Samaritans were despised by ordinary Jews. Rather than contaminate themselves by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who were traveling from Judea to Galilee or vice versa would cross over the river Jordan, bypass Samaria by going through the Transjordan (the East Bank), and cross over the river again as they neared their destination.

The Samaritans also harbored antipathy toward the Jews (Luke 9:52-53). That the Samaritans were separated from and looked down upon by the Jews makes them important in the New Testament.

Jesus indicated a new attitude must be taken toward the Samaritans when he passed through their towns instead of crossing the Jordan to avoid them (John 4:4-5). This was emphasized when he spoke with a Samaritan woman, contrary to Jewish custom (John 4:9), and when he said a time would come when worshiping in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim would not be important (John 4:21-24).

Jesus gave an example of how we, as Christians, should demonstrate love and grace (unmerited favor) to our neighbors. Once again, he gives this parable using the lowly and despised name at that time, Samaritan.

To paraphrase the beginning of the parable, a certain man fell among thieves. He was beaten, robbed, and left half dead. A priest passed by the half-dead stranger and only looks upon him, with no act of compassion. A Levite soon passed the same way and also ignored the plight of this stranger. He looked straight

ahead. He had other things more important than to show “grace” to a stranger. Soon, a Samaritan passed by. The Samaritan offered what the priest and the Levite should have offered but refused to: grace, love, compassion.

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’ So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves? And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise’” (Luke 10:33-37, NKJV).

An interesting side note is the implication today of the word *Samaritan*. In Jesus’ day, it was not a good term to use. There was great jealousy, resistance, hatred and tensions between the Jews and the Samaritans. If a Jew used the word *Samaritan*, it was most frequently in a derogatory, racial way.

Now, think of the hour in which we live today. When you hear the word *Samaritan* it is almost always associated with mercy, kindness, compassion, and grace, e.g., The Good Samaritan Hospital, The Samaritan’s Purse (Franklin Graham), and many more examples.

The apostles recognized that in the church Samaritans must be accepted as equal to Jews. Peter and John conducted a special mission to Samaria to confirm Samaritans who had already been baptized by Phillip (Acts 8:14-17).

This initiation of the Samaritans was a middle stage between the preaching of the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2) and the preaching of the gospel to full-blooded Gentiles (Acts 10).

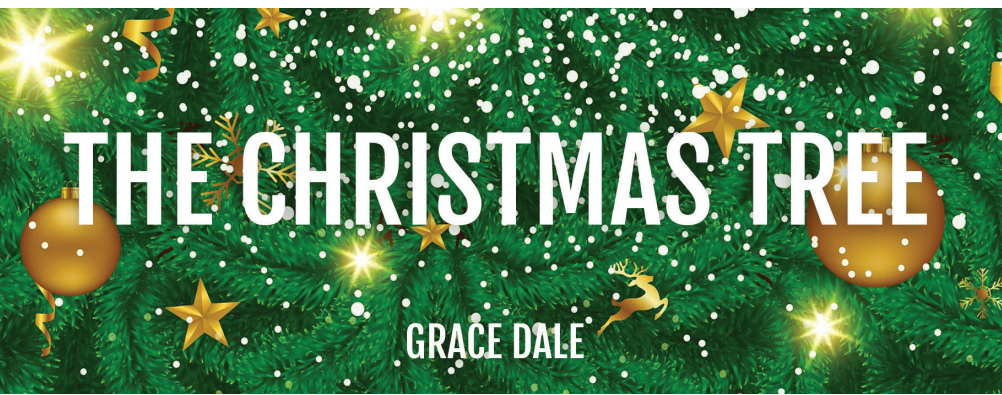
This was a long story to present an example of the type of love, compassion, and grace we as believers must show to everyone around us. We are all neighbors to *Samaritans*. We are all neighbors to someone who does not know our God and His love. We all have the responsibility to let the love and grace of God shine in our lives in such a way that others take notice.

The Bible says: *“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect”* (1 Peter 3:15, ESV).

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16, ESV).

When it comes to showing the love of God to others, I am always reminded of a little poem about the gospel according to you. It goes something like this:

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By deeds that you do, by words that you say.
Men read what you write, whether distorted or true.
What is the Gospel according to you? ✚



As Christmas gets nearer I'm sure all you children want to know when you can put up the Christmas tree.

Let's plan ahead and list some of the things we are going to put on the tree. Of course, we need to either go out and cut a real evergreen tree or purchase a real or artificial one. When we get it home, what shall we decorate it with? Lights for sure, maybe a star or an angel on top, some round balls, some bows, hearts, doves, snowflakes, candy canes, and hopefully some presents underneath!

The word Christmas starts with Christ and Christmas is all about celebrating the birth of Christ. So let's see what this Christmas tree means to us.

The Tree

This tree is an evergreen tree, never changing color. It represents life, eternal, and never changing. John 3:15, *"Anyone who believes in Me will have eternal Life."*

Lights

The lights represent us. If we have asked Christ into our hearts and lives, then we are the lights in a world of sin and darkness that shine to tell others about His great love. Matthew 5:16 tells us to *"let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in Heaven."* Matthew 5:14 says, *"You are the light of the world."* That light is the love of God within you.

Star

At the time of Jesus' birth, an extra bright star was placed in the sky to lead the shepherds and wise men to the place where Jesus lay. Matthew 2:2 (TLB) says, *"Where is the newborn King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him."*

Angel

The night of Jesus' birth, an angel appeared to the shepherds and told them of Jesus' birth. Luke 2:13 (TLB), *"Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the armies of heaven - praising God: Glory to God in the highest, they sang, and peace on earth, goodwill toward men."*

Ornaments

Most of our trees have many bright-colored ornaments on them. I like to think of these as representing our world, as they are shaped like a globe. As was mentioned before in Matthew 5:14, *"Ye are the light of the world."* As the lights shine on the ornaments, they reflect the light and twinkle and shine. So we are to let the love of Christ shine out from us to men, women, and children of the world.

Hearts

Hearts remind us of Matthew 22:37 (TLB), *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind."*

Doves

Doves represent peace. Before Jesus returned to heaven, He promised to send the Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit, to teach us all things. He also promised in John 14:27, *"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you."*

Snowflakes

In Psalm 51, David talks about his sin and how he wants to be clean, thoroughly washed from his sin. In verse 7 he says, *"...wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."*

Candy Canes

The red and white striped candy cane reminds us again of Christ's blood that was shed for us and when we believe in the blood of Christ, it washes away our sin and leaves us as clean and white as the fresh-fallen snow.

Bows and Presents

Bows and presents wrapped with bows are the most exciting thing about Christmas. We anxiously wait, hope, peek and try to guess what might be under that tree. I'm sure we'll be excited whatever it is. God gave us the greatest gift of all time. He gave us His son, Jesus. John 3:16, *"God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

Have fun decorating that tree and remember to have a Spirit-filled Christmas. God bless you. ✝

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