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Under rabbinic law, guess how many laws a faithful Jew is to follow. 613!! But these 613 laws were also divided into those that we would call “weighty” and those that were “light.” “Thou shalt not commit murder” was one of the “Big Ten.” So this commandment was obviously weighty. Making a fire on the Sabbath, or striking up some firelight, that was definitely “light,” and in an emergency, absolutely expendable. The Pharisees’ question to Jesus was trying to get him to name which of the most “weighty” commandments were the really important ones. What commandment was #1, the big boss, the most important.

Instead of citing one of the “Big Ten” or what we call “The Ten Commandments,” Jesus chooses the words from Deuteronomy 6:5, the words prayed by observant Jews four times a day, words as familiar and close to the hearts of the people of Israel as the names of their own children.

The Shema, recited everyday by the faithful, declared, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The “greatest commandment” Jesus chose was not a commandment “against” anything. It was a commandment “for” something. It was a commandment that commended an attitude of faith and love directed towards God.

Yet Jesus did not stop there. Jesus could not uncouple the love of God from God’s love for this world. So in response to the Pharisee’s question Jesus added an “and a second is like it:” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

This quote from Leviticus 19:18 extends a love for God into a love for all those whom God loves — which is to say all of the world, all creatures, all people, who inhabit this earth that God made. That is Large Love. That is Weighty Love. That is the greatest commandment, the greatest mission that any of us will ever encounter throughout the course of our lives. Jesus reframed the Hebrew conception of Shema with perceptions of “Love your neighbors,” “Love your enemies,” “Go the second mile,” “Return good for evil,” “Forgive 70x7.”

So instead of choosing any of the “thou shalt not” commandments, Jesus chooses one thing: love. To love God is to fulfill the greatest and yet most basic commandment. And in the committed living of that commandment those who love God will also “love your neighbor.”

One of the problems facing us in this commandment is that we often think of love as having certain emotions, feelings and affection toward other people. However Jesus didn’t have emotions, feelings and affections in mind when he said to love God and love neighbor. What he was commanding them and us is not to FEEL a certain way about others, but TO ACT a certain way toward others no matter how we feel about them at a particular moment.

Frederick Buechner in one of his meditations in *Listening to Your Life* says this about love:

When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end, even if it means sometimes just leaving them alone. Thus in Jesus’ terms we can love our neighbors without necessarily liking

them. So Jesus is telling us that love is action on behalf of the neighbors greatest good. It's not the emotion that matters. It's the action.

To love with action forces us out of our own neighborhood so that we may see with Jesus' eyes the hope-starved inhabitants of our worst city slums. "To love with action and all our soul forces us out of our particular race or gender, so that we [may] experience the injustice of oppression. To love with action and with all our soul forces us out of our species — so that we feel the earth speaking to us, the rivers, the skies, the creatures of God's creation as they all struggle against the pollution, abuse, and exploitation humanity has heaped upon them."

But what does that mean on a practical level? How do we put God's love into action? There's an old rabbinic story in which the rabbi was asked whether it's better to give out of a sense of obligation or to give from the heart. The apparently obvious answer, of course, is to give from the heart, but the obvious answer is hardly ever considered to be right in any of these rabbinic stories or in many biblical stories where our expectations are upside down from what God would have us do.

So in this story, the rabbi said that it is better to give out of a sense of obligation rather than to give from the heart. And his reason for saying that is interesting. Giving gladly and from the heart is a wonderful feeling, so it's something we like to do. We take personal satisfaction out of giving from our own free will.

And it's precisely in that core of self-congratulation that things can go wrong. When you give out of obligation, you do it even when you don't like it. You don't give until it hurts, you give even when it hurts. You aren't doing it to please yourself, but to honor someone else. Obligation leads us out of ourselves and into others' lives. When we're left to do merely what we want to do, we quickly settle into what pleases us.

If we insist on loving God and our neighbors from the heart, then we're likely to end up loving God only in our own way — in the way that pleases us most because that's what we do freely and gladly — and so we will end up only loving or acting for those neighbors who are the easiest to love. We will only put our action into work for those we want too instead of who God commands us.

The rabbi ends by saying that happiness as a motive and happiness as a result are two very different things. The paradox is that while we may or may not be happy to live as God wants us too, when we do live as God wants us, we will be happy.

In other words there is a whole message in Jesus commandment and not just a summary. That message reminds us that there are things like duty, responsibility, justice, accountability, prayer, power, peace and reconciliation. And we need to constantly ask ourselves do I love as I ought? Am I on the right course?

The answer is found in the answer to questions like: Do I have respect for others? Do I allow others to have their dignity? Do I in fact give myself to others out of love - or offer them only a sham of courtesy concealing some other agenda that I want to be about?

There are a lot of questions we can ask ourselves to help us decide if we are loving God and one another in the way we are called to love God and one another. And it is good to ask these questions - for they do keep us honest; and if sincerely asked - and prayerfully thought about, their answers can lead us and our world to a greater wholeness; that is - if we want them to.

And ultimately that is what our love is all about, it is about our wanting to be, and trying to be, faithful to God. It is about praying to God - Lord help me do what is right, Lord help me love as I ought to love, make me more like Jesus. May all of us be refined by the example of Christ self-sacrificing love, for the greatest commandment is to love. Amen.