

“Which Commandment...?”

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 • Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17 • 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 • Matthew 22:34-46

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Today’s sermon is likely to raise more questions than it answers. I love it when I can stand up here and explain things in a way that hopefully makes sense and gives you deeper insight into the Christian faith. But there are times when I look at the scriptures, and I scratch my head and wonder: “How does *this* fit with *that*?” What do you do when it feels like different parts of the Bible point in very different directions? What do you do when you read a piece of scripture and think to yourself, “I’m not sure I can *accept* that?” What do you do when it raises deep questions for you about *God*?

Let me back up. First, let me remind you that the scriptures you hear here most weeks are the same passages that are being read in hundreds of thousands of different churches across the United States, and far beyond. Last Sunday afternoon, for example, my son Andrew called from Oregon. He was walking home from the church he’s been going to out there, and the pastor there had just preached on the same passages that I did. We compared notes! So the passages that you heard this morning were not chosen by me. They are the appointed passages that are being read in countless Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Roman Catholic, and other churches far and wide.

The Gospel passage is, of course, very familiar. An expert in the Jewish law asks Jesus a question – not because he’s curious, but to test him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” There are, as I’ve said before, 613 commandments in the Torah, the five books of Moses; Jesus answers by quoting two of them. The first, from Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And the second, from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” An excellent response on Jesus’ part, that effectively silences his questioner, and also provides all of us a very strong guide for our daily living. Jesus emphasizes the central importance of the two dimensions of faith: first, the *vertical* relationship – our relationship with God – and second, the *horizontal* relationship, our relationship with other people. As Jesus says, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” – which means, *everything* in the Law of Moses *and also* all the books that are categorized as “the Prophets” (which includes not only the books named for the prophets, but also other historical books in which prophets appear) – *all of that* can be summed up in those two commandments. They are the central, guiding stars by which we know the basic principles of what it means to follow Jesus. Love God, with the *entirety* of your emotions and your spirituality and your intellect; and also, *love all other people* and treat them the very same way you would want them to treat you. It’s beautiful and straightforward, although admittedly hard to put into practice some of the time. These are our *core values*.

All of that is great. If only the rest of the Bible could be that simple and straightforward! The difficulty comes when we turn to the Deuteronomy passage that you heard earlier. Now this is the

exact same book of the Bible that Jesus was just quoting from, when he said “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” That passage comes from chapter 6; our passage this morning comes from chapter 34, the final chapter of the book. This story happens at the very end of the Israelites’ long 40-year sojourn through the wilderness. It shouldn’t have taken them 40 years to get there – a couple *weeks* should have done the job – but they had a lot of problems along the way. But finally, here they are, having reached the edge of the land that God had promised to their ancestors. Moses is going to die here; he had disobeyed God back in the book of Numbers, and God decreed that Moses would lead the people to the Promised Land, but not enter it.

Now, where are they exactly? They have come around the far side of the Dead Sea, and are approaching the Jordan River from the east. They are in what is now the country of Jordan. There is a mountain there, Mount Nebo, stretching 2,300 feet above sea level. There is a *very* old Christian church at the top of Mount Nebo that has been extensively restored in the last several decades. It was originally built by Christians in the fourth century at or near the spot where Moses died. On the side of the mountain facing Israel, there is a large overlook, over which stands a serpentine cross sculpture, created by an Italian artist, that represents both the bronze serpent that Moses had made in the wilderness (that story is in Numbers 21) and also the cross upon which Jesus was crucified.

Beyond that overlook and the serpentine cross you can see – depending on the day – a substantial part of the land of Israel. There’s a plaque up there telling you where to look: *Hebron*, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah were buried, now a large Palestinian city in the southern part of the West Bank; the *Dead Sea*, that very large salty lake that the Jordan River flows into; *Herodium*, a palace fortress that was built by Herod the Great, also in the West Bank; *Bethlehem*, the city where Jesus was born, now a city of about 25,000 people in the West Bank, about 16% of whom are Christians; *Qumran*, the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered between 1946 and 1956; *Jerusalem*, that magnificent city, and the *Mount of Olives*, which is where Jesus ascended into heaven, and is now partly in Israel and partly in the West Bank; *Ramallah*, a large Palestinian city north of Jerusalem in the West Bank, about 25% of whose residents are Christians; *Jericho*, a significant oasis in the desert, called “the city of palm trees,” where Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem; *Nablus*, another Palestinian city in the West Bank, built near the ruins of ancient Shechem, the first city that Abraham visited when he arrived in the land of Canaan, the place where Jacob built a well and where Joseph was buried, and where Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman at the well; and, finally, *Lake Tiberias*, which is another name for the Sea of Galilee, where our Lord called his first disciples, calmed the storm, and walked on water. *All of that* can be seen from the top of Mount Nebo on a clear day!

Here’s what part of that view looks like. Take away the road, and this is pretty much what Moses saw when he surveyed the land more than three thousand years ago. He looks south and west and north and beholds – *for the first time in his life* – the land that he has been leading his people to for *forty years*. This is it! They have arrived! This is the land that will become the Israelites’ new home!

This is where things get difficult. There were already people living in that land. Deuteronomy says there were *seven strong nations* living in that land when the Israelites arrived: “the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you.” (Deut. 7:1) Does God tell the Israelites to make friends with these people, the way their ancestor Abraham had? No. Does God encourage them to live together in peace? No. What does God tell them? “When the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for

your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods.” (Deut. 7:2-4) In short: *kill them all*. Why? *Because they worship the wrong gods*. “As for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. Indeed, you shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods and you thus sin against the Lord your God.” (Deut. 20:16-18) *Annihilate* them. Kill them all. Men, women, and children. Even babies. That is what the Lord our God commanded them to do.

So you see the problem. Jesus told us to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Is going into a foreign land, slaughtering all its inhabitants, and seizing that territory for your own an act of *loving your neighbor as yourself*? Jesus tells us that by “neighbor,” he doesn’t just mean our friends, our relatives, or the people who live down the street from us; our “neighbor” includes those people who aren’t like us, *including people who worship a different god*. His example was a Samaritan – someone who worshiped in a different temple, with different religious customs, and served a different god.

Jesus also told us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” One aspect of loving God involves *doing the things God wants you to do*. In the case of the Israelites, God wanted them to slaughter all those men, women, and children, every last one of them. How are these commandments compatible with each other? “Love your neighbor”; “utterly destroy them”; “show them no mercy”? How can we worship a God who advocated the *slaughter* of innocent civilians? God didn’t even give them a chance! They were worshiping the wrong gods – so therefore they had to die? No effort was made to even *try* to teach them the Israelite religion!

And we often complain about violent extremists in other religions. It’s in *our* tradition too.

These questions have bothered me for a long time. Maybe they bother you too. When I was in seminary they felt like academic questions. They don’t feel like academic question anymore. *Who has the right to live in that land?* The people who were living there first, in relative peace, for hundreds of years? Or the people who arrived later on, claiming that the land was theirs by divine right, and occupied it by force? Is that where we still are now? Is there *no other way*? Can’t we figure out how to *share*? These are not easy questions and there are not easy answers. On the one hand, there’s the practical question: *how do we achieve a just and lasting peace in the Holy Land today?* On the other hand, there’s the theological question: *how do we worship a God who advocated for wholesale slaughter of all the people living in seven different nations?* This is *our* God. The God we know in Jesus is the *same* God as the God of Abraham and Moses. We *have* to find a way to make sense of this.

I was in standing in my office earlier in the week, looking around at my shelves full of books. Any of you who have been in my office know that I have a *lot* of books in there. I was looking around, asking myself, in all this massive collection, do I have *anything* that can help me with these questions? I realized I had one – and *only* one – book that really dealt with this issue in a focused way. A book called *The Land*, written by the distinguished Old Testament scholar and Christian theologian Walter Brueggemann, nearly half a century ago. Unfortunately, I no longer own it. I got rid of it years ago, thinking it was outdated and I wouldn’t need it again. That was a mistake! So I went looking online – and discovered that he has a much more recent book on the subject. It’s called *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. I’ve ordered a copy. It’s on the way. If any book can help me make some sense of these really hard questions, *maybe* it’s that one. I’ll let you know....

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