

Faithful Jewish people tried to live by the *Torah*, the laws of Moses. But try to remember and follow 613 precepts, 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions. Whew! In Jesus's time, the scribes, the legal scholars, were trying to find a guiding principle that Jewish people could follow that would help them keep all of these laws. So the scribe's question to Jesus in the Gospel about what's the greatest commandment wasn't that unusual. But Jesus's answer sure was.

Jesus is the only one who weaved together love of God and love of neighbor, and said that linked together, it's the greatest commandment, the essence of the *Torah*. Two significant consequences result from this greatest commandment.

The first is that this greatest commandment Jesus gives us has nothing to do with external religious practices; it's based on what's in our heart. He summarizes the laws of Moses in our internal drive to love, our internal disposition – not on ritual observances. And the scribe who asked Jesus the question agrees: the genuineness of someone's faith isn't determined by outward religious practices and rituals; it's the love in our hearts that's most important.

Love is the key to obeying all of the laws. Jesus knew that God is love and the source of all of our love, and God's dream for us is that we share the love God put in us. And Jesus recognized that love is behind every religious law; every religious law is an expression of our love for God.

The second significant consequence of this teaching is that we can't say we love God apart from loving our neighbor. If someone claims to love God, that can be verified in the visible way they treat their neighbor. How much we love our neighbor is the image, the picture, of how much we love God.

The proof of how much we love God is how much we act like God: showing kindness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness to others; treating others with respect and honor; being generous and selfless in charity.

Having said all this, truth be told, most of us do not love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, or love our neighbor as ourselves. It's like G.K. Chesterton wrote: "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people."

We have some love for God and neighbor, but not the depth Jesus is discussing. Our only hope isn't our willpower – it's Jesus. Jesus is our Savior who came to rescue us from our failures to obey this most important commandment.

Jesus wants to rescue us, but we have to ask for it. We have to humbly acknowledge our shortcomings in love in prayer; to own up that we love God and neighbor, but need to deepen our love.

Ask God to accept our imperfect love and to deepen it with Jesus's help and grace so we can be better Christian lovers. Ask for God's grace: to help us love people who don't belong to our political party; to love people who have let us down or hurt us; to love the know-it-alls we have to deal with; to love the complainers we'd rather avoid; to love some of the family members we didn't choose.

And God will help us. We just celebrated All Saints Day and All Souls Day, with their message

that we are God's prized creation; that God really wants us to be with him for eternity. We need God's grace, Jesus's help, to increase our capacity to love.

God created us to love and be loved, to participate in his life, and with him to love all other people. Apply this greatest commandment Jesus gives us to the gifts God has given each of us, no matter how many or how few. That's the blueprint for us to build up the kingdom of God. You don't have to look very far for a way to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Fr. John Ozella, Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 4, 2018