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First UMC

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Series: Big 10+

Message: The Greatest Commandment

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Mark 12:28-34

Over the last seven weeks of our Big 10+ series we have been looking at the Big 10 part of the series, looking in depth at the 10 Commandments. This week we will begin to look at the plus.

As we’ve looked at the ten, we have found that they are particularly relevant and challenging to our lives today. They are challenging enough that we might wonder about adding any more. Why the plus? Couldn’t we just leave it at 10?

We might ask the Big 10 Conference the same thing. If you are the Big 10, how can you add more than 10 teams? It doesn’t seem quite right.

So I did a little research on the history of the Big 10 Conference. It dates back to 1896 and is the oldest Division 1 collegiate athletic conference. But it didn’t start with 10 teams. It changed names and numbers a few times before Michigan joined in 1917 and it became known as the Big 10. From 1917 until 1990 there were 10 teams involved. In 1990 Penn State broke the 10 barrier. Nebraska-Lincoln joined in 2010 and then Maryland and Rutgers just last year. Now there are 14 teams, but it’s still the Big 10, plus a few.

If you’re a literalist and a legalist, this doesn’t make much sense. If you see these additions as threats to your team, you won’t like it.

But, if you look at it in terms of love, love of the game, love of competition against great teams, then you’ll welcome the newcomers. The better the competition, the higher the quality of the teams playing, the better it is.

And so it’s the same with our Big 10 Commandments. The plus is not a negative, more rules to be followed. The plus is about love of God and figuring out how to live that love out in even greater ways every day.

In Jesus time, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were sort of like the sports commentators today. They could spend hours debating the details of the Biblical law, what God intended, what Moses intended, how this particular law should be lived out in this particular situation. They did this out of love of God and love of the law.

And since it was before radio and tv and print media, the only way to listen in was to be there in person, so crowds would gather to listen to these teachers and lawyers debate. They had their teachers that they sided with. They had their friends they would discuss what they had heard with later.

This is the setting for our reading from Mark today. The religious leaders who are suspicious of how Jesus is interpreting and living out the law are going to engage Jesus in a controversial religious debate that crosses into politics to try to get Rome to take care of Jesus. It doesn’t work and in fact it backfires. But people get so excited to have Jesus there as part of these discussions on the law that they are all waiting their turn to ask him their questions. The Sadducees are next and then this very well respected teacher of the law.

He asks Jesus, “Which is the greatest commandment?”

Jesus replies with the answer we know so well, “You shall love the Lord with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength.”

Now at first it might seem that Jesus isn’t answering the question. After all, we have just studied the 10 Commandments and that wasn’t one of them. What is he doing here?

But what it reminds us of is that there are hundreds of commandments in the Old Testament. There are lots more than ten. But like the Big 10 teams, there are anchor teams and there are later additions, but they are all about the love of and playing great football. All of these laws are expressions of this one key law, the law of love. And so the number of commandments can be as infinite as the question of what love of God and neighbor requires of me in this situation.

The answer that Jesus gives isn’t something new. It is basic and foundational to the law and to the Jewish faith. It comes from Deuteronomy 6 and is called the Shema. It is another way of summarizing the first four commandments about keeping God first in your life.

The teacher is impressed. Often as he asks this question he gets many answers that are hung up on the legalities of a particular commandment rather than anything connected to love. Yes, he agrees, to do this, to love God with your all is more important than any burnt offering or sacrifice. To love God is more important than any particular rule.

Jesus then affirms his comments, saying, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Both of these teachers agree, it’s not about the legalities, about the rules and the rituals. It’s about love of God. And when we look at Jesus, we see that he is the law embodied. He lives it not because he is a strict follower of the rules, but because he loves God so deeply and faithfully, because he trusts God so fully.

And if we see the whole of the Old Testament lived out perfectly in Jesus, then we realize that the Old Testament is not just a book of rules, but a conversation about what it means to love God and live that love out in everything we do.

So the rules can change depending on the situation. The laws change as we grow in our love of God and practicing that love. The practical rules for crossing the street change as you grow up—first you have to be held, then you have to hold hands, then you have to go with someone, then you can cross by yourself, but the point of the rules does not change, getting you across the street safely. It’s like this with God. How we live out the rules may change, but they are always governed by the law of love.

Law at its best arises from love and helps us to love. Joan Chittister writes, “We grow in love. We change the way we need to love. We broaden our understanding of life and relationship and human community and justice. We learn that law is simply a guide to a greater good, a basic good, love as a fundamental of life, a demonstration of the love of God.”

So as we love God, as we grow in love of God, we will love the law in a deeper way. Like Jesus, it will begin to be a law of love written on our hearts and lived out in every fabric of our being.

So the challenge is to make living this greatest commandment a priority, loving God with all that we are.

So how are you doing in your love of God? Are you growing? Are you stagnant? What can we do to get out of rut?

How do we live out the actions of love of God? How do we grow in our feelings of love for God? We live out the commandments. Deuteronomy gives us a picture of what this looks like. It means we impress the commandments on our hearts. Learn them so well that they become a part of who you are and how you think about the world. Know that God gives you these for your good.

And then share then with others, particularly your children. Impress them upon your children and others who are turning to you to learn about faith. Let them know that we have found a way that leads to life. Love grows when you share it with others. It’s important to help our children know that we live these laws of God because they are about God’s love for us. Living them out shows our love for God. It’s not an easy process. Think of all the things you do to help your child love a sport and become good at it. It takes a lot of commitment and encouragement. To help our children to love God with all that they are takes this same kind of intentional commitment and encouragement. And it takes a great team to help inspire them.

We can all help by learning to talk more about God. These verses in Deuteronomy connect loving God with talking about God. Talk about God wherever you are, wherever you go, when you get up, when you go to bed, when you’re sitting at home, when you’re walking down the street—who God is, how God is moving in your life, where you see God in the world. We do it some when we are at church, especially in small groups and Bible Study. But how can we talk more about God in an unstructured way? The way we talk about sports and fashion and entertainment and politics and our aches and pains?

Then Deuteronomy tells us that to grow in love of God we should put the words of our love for God on our foreheads and our arms and our doorposts. At first this seemed a little strange. Some Jews still do this very literally with phylacteries on their foreheads and doors. But then I started looking around at all the things that people have on their foreheads—hats, jewelry, team names, tattoos, and on their doorframes, flags of every sort, Halloween decorations, sports things. And I thought, yes, we do like to surround ourselves and wear all sorts of signs and symbols of what we’re passionate about. It makes sense to wear signs of God’s love on us and to put them on our doors and walls.

All of these things, learning God’s ways, sharing our faith with our children and others, talking about God at all times, and surrounding ourselves with signs and symbols of God help us to grow in our love of God because they remind us that we are not alone, that God is real and is with us, moving in our midst. They remind us that we can trust God. They remind us to turn to God and draw on God’s love when ours is running out.

So this week I challenge you to consider your love for God and to commit to one of these ways of growing in God’s love: learning the commandments, teaching them to others, talking more about God in ordinary conversations, or surrounding yourself with signs and symbols of God’s love.

May we continue throughout our lives to be those who desire to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength.