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Matthew 22:23–40, NRSVue.

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²⁹ But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

The two commandments of Jesus.

613 is the number most often cited as the number of laws or commandments embedded in the Old Testament. This is a calculation performed by humans, not a number stated or directly implied anywhere in the Bible. Apparently, while this

precise number can't be traced to any true source, at least as long ago as the 3rd century A.D., people have been trying to count the rules in the Old Testament.

There certainly are hundreds by any reasonable count. For example, here is Genesis 1:28:

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Here is Genesis 32:32:

³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

Here is Exodus 12:8:

⁸ They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it.

I think you get the idea. The Old Testament, especially, the first five books, the Pentateuch, spends a lot of time on law, on rules that the Chosen People followed in order to live according to God's will. One way to simplify all this was offered in Exodus, Chapter 20, when God passed the ten great commandments to Moses, who then went down the mountain and quoted God:

20 *And God spoke all these words, saying,*

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ "You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁷ “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. The seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³ “You shall not murder.

¹⁴ “You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ “You shall not steal.

¹⁶ “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

One way to look at this is that if you follow the 613 detailed laws of the Old Testament, you, as an ancient member of the Chosen People are trying to live in a way that God will approve of. You’re trying to honor God and honor all that God has created. But if you go up one level of abstraction and generalize the spirit behind these detailed, ancient rules which controlled the lives of the Chosen People and thereby gave them moral order and reminded them of God’s presence every day, you might get the ten commandments. Another perspective is that the ten commandments are suitable for all people, not just the people who were freed from slavery in Egypt and made their way to the Promised Land.

But here is something intriguing. Jesus came along and he did God and Moses one better. Jesus melted it all down to two commandments, as specified in the Gospel of Matthew:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Here is the context: The Sadducees, the high priests, lived by the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, what we call the Pentateuch. Nothing else could supersede the teachings in these books and no other teachings contained anything not covered by the Torah, from a moral perspective – in their opinion. The Pharisees, who were mostly businesspeople and were the leaders of the synagogues, lived according to the accumulated oral traditions and much of what was in the Torah. The Sadducees did not believe in general resurrection, but the Pharisees did. Thus, we get this passage, where the Sadducees try to trip up Jesus and thereby challenge his spiritual authority. It comes from the Gospel of Matthew.

²³ The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, ²⁴ saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.’ ²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother. ²⁶ So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ After them all, the woman died. ²⁸ In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.”

Jesus, rather than being dumfounded, has an answer:

²⁹ But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ³² ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

Jesus shows that their question is irrelevant. Further, he makes a powerful point: while they dwell on moral intricacies, he focuses on God as the God of the living, not the dead. He uses his sense of humor to make them look foolish. But here is the important part for us today:

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

He's not going to start debating the details of the complexities of Jewish law. He takes the 613 or whatever laws of Jewish Scripture, along with the 10 commandments, and boils it down to two commandments. What's true is that if you look at Jesus' two commandments, they certainly imply the big 10. But they do so in a positive way, instead of a negative way. Jesus is doing something huge here. To us, we don't notice it when we read this passage. But in the moment, as

Jesus said these words to these people, he was challenging the deepest roots of their spiritual tradition. He was saying that faith could be uplifting, not punitive. He was saying that God wants us to live in an uplifting way, not a defensive, fearful way. Jesus is saying that he can take those 613 rules and he can capture the spirit of them in two commandments. He said that he could take the ten great commandments of Moses, the ones handed to him by God on the mountain and boil them down to two – two that are expressed in a joyful way. That is the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant – faith is simpler now and positive. God has concluded that it's time to spread the rich spiritual history of the Chosen People and hand that heritage off to the world. Anyone can believe now in the one, true God. And it's time for the world to rejoice in faith.

Jesus' two commandments do indeed imply the big 10. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* That, Jesus said, is the first and the biggest commandment. Love God. And *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* Love all people. If you love God and you love all people, you will follow no other god. You won't make any carved images to worship. You won't worship the things of this world over the things of God's world. You won't curse using the name of God. You will indeed honor the Sabbath, and you won't do it because you are ordered to. That's because the Sabbath will be

your opportunity to be lifted up by your faith. You will honor your parents or whoever raised you, and again, not because you were forced to. Your parents will be people – and since you love all people, even if one of your parents was an alcoholic or ran off or gambled away the family's assets, you will love them. You won't murder if you love people. You won't commit adultery. You certainly won't steal from people whom you love. You won't lie about them either or desire their belongings. All the rest does follow from those two very positive commandments, from those two rules by which Jesus summed up the whole of our faith.

If everyone walked through the world each day with those two rules in their minds, to love their Creator and to love their brothers and sisters made in the image of God, we wouldn't need police or prisons. There would be no lawsuits, no long-term conflicts – because we would resolve everything in a sense of love. We would quite willingly forgive each other and move on. Paul traveled around his known world, living off donations, sleeping wherever he had to, getting arrested and beaten and imprisoned. He wrote letters back to the churches he founded. Let's consider a few quotes of his. He always put something loving in his letters.

¹⁶*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers,*
¹⁷*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom.* He wrote that to the believers in Ephesus.

Consider this: ³*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.* He wrote that to the congregation of the church he had founded in Philippi.

Here's another: ³*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints.* Paul wrote that to the believers in Colosse. And when he refers there to the love that the Colossians have for the "saints", he doesn't mean dead people who have been appointed to sainthood. That practice didn't start for many hundreds of years after he wrote. He's referring to all believers as "saints".

Paul wrote this to Philemon, in a personal letter: ⁴*I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.*

I could go on and on and on with quotes from his letters. My point is this: this is one of those things that's easy to miss when we read Scripture. Paul wasn't just a man of deep faith who founded churches and wrote letters back to them offering instruction and support. Paul lived by those two commandments. He loved God, of course, that's why he was a serial church founder. But he also loved all people. No matter what was going on in his life, whether he was in prison, on

the road, or spending a little time in a city building a church, he was always praying for all those people who had passed through his life. Because Paul's letters are full of admonishments for people who are listening to false teachers or living by a corrupt or twisted theology, we tend to think of him as being a heavy-duty guy, a disciplinarian. It's easy to envision him as inherently unhappy. But in truth, those two commandments of Jesus allowed him to always think of God and of people with love. Just imagine everyone in the world living the way he did.

Keep in mind that although the Bible is indeed a big, complex thing, and there is much that we can learn by studying it, the day-to-day truth of our faith can be boiled down to those two simple commandments of Jesus. Think about them every day: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* After offering these two commandments, Jesus said this: *"⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."* He meant that all other laws derive from these two. It really is true. And this is truly a blessing. Please pray briefly with me:

God, let us always love you and love all people. Let us hold this in our minds every day. Let us remember them when we grow angry, frustrated, or vengeful. Let these two commandments literally control everything we do. Amen.