

Jesus had been debating the religious teachers, who weren't happy with Him. The question over what commandment is the most important may have been intended to embarrass Jesus. It seems impossible to answer. Or perhaps this was an honest question. It's the kind of question we might ask someone with great spiritual authority and wisdom.

The religious teachers of Jesus' day approached the Scriptures in one of two ways: one was to draw from God's law many more rules and regulations. The other approach was the opposite, to summarize teachings in a brief sentence or two. And that's what Jesus was asked to do.

In recent weeks we have been helping Josh complete his UCAS form for University places and he's been given a limited word count to play with. Essentially what he's being asked to do is near on impossible because he has to summarise everything that is good about him, his suitability, his interests in the subjects in such a small number of words. And here Jesus is being asked to sum up all the Law in a few words.

You know the reality is this - the Old Testament contains 613 commandments. That's a lot to follow. There was a man called A.J Jacobs who wrote a book entitled, 'The Year of Living Biblically'. Jacobs tells how he spent a year trying to live according to all those commands. He admits he wasn't able to successfully obey them all, plus he left out animal sacrifice, but the experiment left him with an appreciation for God's rulebook. He admits in an interview: "I sin about 30% less but I'm still a sinner."

Jesus sums up God's laws in a brief statement that says it all: love God, love your neighbour - our duty to God and others. This is law of love.

Love is the big motivator. Love for God makes us want to please Him. Love makes all the difference. Once God has our love, He'll have the rest. And yet love is very hard to define. For example I can say that I love curries, alongside me saying I love playing golf, and then somehow expect people to understand the difference between these and loving Alison.

Love is hard to define in English. But actually in ancient Japan there was no Japanese word for love. The very idea was regarded as a foolish, western concept. For the ancient Japanese, loyalty was the highest attainment. But loyalty isn't enough. The ancient Japanese had no word for love, but the ancient Greeks had five words. Jesus picked the strongest one, agapé, which describes our deepest devotion and unconditional commitment.

We're to love God and others with our heart, soul, mind, and strength... let's consider each of these briefly

The heart is the centre of our being; in the Bible it means the same as our thoughts, words, and deeds. When we say "I love you with all of my heart" we mean a love that is full, complete, sincere and true – there's nothing being held back. To give God our lives is to give Him our hearts.

The soul is the immortal part of our inner person, that which sets us apart from the rest of creation. It is regarded as the source of our emotions. It is the package that continues to live on well past this body fades. We love God and others with deep feelings, with enthusiasm and this says much about our soul. We put some life into our love!

The mind refers to knowledge and perception. Faith does not require us giving up our intelligence. We love God because we've considered and accepted the truth of Scripture. Ours is a reasonable faith, not a leap into the dark. Without our mind, we would not have the freewill to make those decisions around how committed we really are in our pursuit of a relationship with God and our neighbour.

Our strength suggests that faith isn't passive. Love for God and others is actively expressed. Love is something we do. We cannot sit around. I heard a wonderful story this week of Margaret McDowell who died recently. She was a great lover in recent years of QVC shopping channel. And often Margaret would purchase what seemed like random items. She amassed quite a wealth of items over the years, but with no intention of who they were being purchased for. Anyway as time would go on she would listen to people around her with different issues and needs. Sure as anything, Margaret had purchased something that would help along the way, and through her active love for the person she would bless them. That is a great example of strength – it takes effort.

Notice that God expects the fullness of our love: "all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength." It's not part of this, it's all. And so the question today for all of us is this - Is our love half-hearted, or does God have our "all"?

This may start to sound like working our way to Heaven, as if it's just down to our actions and not faith. If that's the case, none of us will make it. Nobody can love completely/perfectly. We don't love to make it to Heaven; we love because he first loved us. It was God's initiative, and it's in that recognition of Love that it compels us. If we really love God, we can't help but love others.

Not all love is sincere...A young woman wrote a note to her former fiancé: "Dearest Tom, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Jane. P.S., And congratulations on winning the lottery.

In verse 32, how does this student of Scripture respond to Jesus? He is delighted! He gives his wholehearted agreement. Our translations don't do justice to his response. In the original language he begins with a shout we could translate as "Right!", "Excellent!", or "Beautiful!" It's pretty clear Jesus made a big impression on him, and he's honest enough to admit it.

So how do we respond to this summing up of God's law? I think the answer is that He wants our conversations during the week, our ethical behaviour, our work, our recreation, our relationships to all be immersed in his love, to guide all we do. Love comes first. Nothing else must be the motivation or reason. If we love Jesus, we will desire to keep His commandments.

Notice Jesus' reply in verse 34: "You aren't far from the Kingdom of God." What did He mean by that? In Israel, a person "far off" was far from God, which usually referred to Gentiles or to exiled Jews unable to participate in Temple rituals because they were geographically too far away.

But this man wasn't far from the Temple! Jesus is saying that our geographical location doesn't matter. We can spend a great deal of time doing the things of Church and still be spiritually lost, "far off". Church and the programmes around it help us find the way to God, and helps grow our faith, but these can only point the way. Jesus is saying that the distance to the Kingdom isn't measured in miles, nor by ceremonial standards, but by the condition of the heart.

I was with a gentleman in hospital this week, who kept saying to me, "I don't go around church, but I do pray in regularly". I didn't think it was fair in his hospital bed to have a theological discussion about his answer. But for all of us we have got to ensure we are pursuing after the right thing. I think coming out of COVID that has to be our mission as a church – to get back to basics again. It's not a time to build more programmes – it's a time to ask the question 'Do I love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and do I love my neighbour in the same way?'

The reality is that none of us loves as we ought. "We really don't know much about loving until we're in touch with love Himself," said C.S. Lewis. We gain the power to love by first receiving and then resonating God's love. We need to pray daily: "Lord, thank you for your love for me. Show me who You want to love through me this day."