

The Right Measure

sermon digest

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl gave an eyewitness account of the Nazi death camps for Jews during World War II. Frankl was a psychiatrist. Evidently he was neither a large nor a strong man. He was warned by one of the inmates early in his experience in the camp that his appearance would put him in danger of being selected for the gas chamber. Frankl was almost amused that the scientist and physician in him would not stop functioning. He found himself in the camp acting not only as a starving, pathetic inmate in constant agony and fear of death, but as an observer of a scientific experiment pressed to learn from his experience and his companions in suffering. Frankl survived to tell his story and to devise an entirely new approach to his work that he called *Logotherapy*. He quoted Nietzsche: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*." The key to survival was a sense of meaning in life. He was surprised to observe that often robust men accustomed to hard physical labor gave up on life, while people with a large inner-world could push through the pain and keep on going.

Frankl told of his arrival at Auschwitz with one treasure from his former life (p. 119). Carefully stuffed into his coat was his most precious possession, the manuscript of his book. Based on exact statistics, Frankl estimated his chance of survival at no more than one in twenty-eight, and the loss of his "mental child" was devastating. Stripped of his clothing, dignity, and his life's work, he was issued the clothing of an inmate who had been sent to the gas chamber. In a coat pocket he found a page torn from a Hebrew prayer book containing the *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone." Frankl recognized the spiritual treasure from his Jewish heritage that long had provided meaning for his people, and he faced a new challenge, something more important than his manuscript, more important even than survival—the spiritual values that reach beyond ourselves.

What is essential in the life of faith? The subject was a standard issue for debate among the rabbis: Which is the great commandment? They were actually dealing with more than the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. The Torah was the entire content of the first five books of our Bible. In addition, the rabbis taught that Moses received 613 precepts on Sinai. The Pharisees were not as evil as they appear in the Gospels. In fact, Jesus was closer in belief to the Pharisees than any other Jewish group at the time. His opposition to the Pharisees was the monstrous religious system they had conceived. They had added volumes of rules and regulations interpreting the Law. They presented a confusing tangle of demands and prohibitions, and anyone who was sincere about pleasing God was confused about where to begin. Regardless of intent, the question is legitimate: Where do I begin? What is the law about? Is there a kernel of truth that provides a key to understanding?

Rabbis were teachers of the Torah. They challenged one another over knowledge of the Torah, the teaching. They competed in the game of wisdom to provide the smart, simple answer to the complex question. The famous Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, was said to have been challenged to expound the Law while standing on one foot. The rabbi responded: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. This is all of the Torah; the rest is the explanation—go and learn."

Contrary to what you might have been taught, Jesus' answer was neither unusual nor particularly smart. Any good Jew would know that the essential concern of the Torah was reflected in the *Shema*. Every Jew was commanded to repeat the *Shema* when waking in the morning and going to sleep at night and the final words spoken before death. The *Shema*, which means "listen up," lies at the center of Jewish faith. The only unusual element was linking the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 with the Golden Rule of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus uncovered the core of the Torah in loving God and loving neighbor. The statement is repeated in each of the Synoptic Gospels with three distinct approaches. In Luke, it is the scribe's response to Jesus' question that evokes the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Is there anything wrong with assessing the fundamentals of faith? The Fundamentalist movement emerged in the early 1900's to defend the faith against a perceived threat of rising liberalism and modern science. In 1910, the Presbyterian Church attempted to limit the challenge to biblical tradition. They listed five essential beliefs: the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the

substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the miracle-working power of Christ. These have been called the “five points of fundamentalism,” but the movement has been as prolific in creating new fundamentals as the Pharisees in the Gospels. In my view of history, Fundamentalism failed from the outset at getting to the core of the gospel. Fundamentalism was never fundamental enough.

For the first time in my ministry I have found an opportunity to carry on conversations with people who are diametrically opposed to my faith. The mission of the church is to take the gospel, good news, to the world; but I found my life in ministry to be insulated from the world. A serious flaw in the concrete expressions of Christian faith in the church is that we tend to talk only with ourselves. In Oak Ridge I have had an opportunity for conversation in our Forum on Religion and Science with folks who have a radically different view of the world from mine. What has surprised me about secular folks is their estimate that all religion is fundamentalism. Invariably their definition of what I believe seldom gets close to what I believe, and their perception of what is essential to my faith is 180 degrees off target.

Don't you find it interesting that Jesus said nothing about the classic five fundamentals in responding to the scribe's question about the great commandment? There is nothing wrong with wanting to get to the core of faith. The scribe's question is a worthy quest for core values, the defining principle of faith. Old Testament scholar Ralph Elliot referred to the Ten Commandments as “ten principles of religion.” He insisted that the heart of the Law was not about counting commandments or regulations. Behind the Commandments were principles guiding Jewish faith, the bond that ties people to God. Lay out the Ten Commandments beside the Sermon on the Mount, and you begin to see that Jesus was concerned with the spirit, not the letter, of the Law, the guiding principle in relation with God that comes to reside at the core of your being. Besides, Torah is better understood as “the teaching” rather than “the Law.”

What is the measure of a valid faith? The story is recurrent in the Gospels. It not only is repeated by Matthew and Luke, it is the essential message in every encounter of Jesus in the Gospels, from the woman at the Samaritan well to the rich young ruler. Although they use different words, the inquirers who come to Jesus are hungry to know the God of grace, the loving God visible in the face of Jesus. Jesus offered no anathemas or warnings, no prohibitions. In a word, the great commandment is not about legal duty, the bare minimum requirement to meet the demand of God. It seems to me that Jesus was trying to get across a totally different message than the search for the Great Commandment implies. It is not about following orders, obeying commandments, keeping the law. Our relationship with God revolves around the essential nature of God. John said it best, “God is love.”

Victor Frankl made a similar discovery: “The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which [we] can aspire. . . .” *The salvation of man is through love and in love.* (P. 49) Frankl, like everyone else who makes this discovery, had to make a distinction between some superficial idea of love as romance or sentimentality to the core issue of giving self to and for another. Paul Scherer called it the love that God defines. Luther may have overstated the contrast, but he, too, made the discovery: we know God through grace rather than law.

For Jesus, God is the purest love we can possibly experience. All that God requires of us is that we respond in kind. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.” John is certainly on track that we cannot love God and hate one another. If you love God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength, you will love your spouse, your family, and friends. Who knows, in time you may even learn to love your enemy.