

## **In a Nutshell**

**(Text: Matthew 22:34-40)**

"Give it to me in a nutshell" Tell me what I need to know, but keep it short. Don't bother me with unnecessary detail. Don't bore me with a long, technical explanation. Just get to the bottom line.

We like things short and sweet. Network television news has time only to hit the high spots and to show us a few pictures, but it gives us the big picture in a few minutes. We like that. Give it to me in a nutshell!

That's what the lawyer said to Jesus -- Give it to me in a nutshell. At least that is what he meant. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

This man was not a lawyer as we know lawyers today -- he was a religious scholar. The law was Jewish Torah law -- Old Testament commandments. There were 613 such laws. You are familiar with some of them. Thou shalt not steal. They shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Others are less familiar. One law, for example, forbade boiling a calf in its mother's milk. Observant Jews today still take care not to mix meat and milk. Many observant families have one set of dishes for meat and another set for dairy products.

So when the lawyer asked Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" he was asking about Torah law -- religious commandments.

And Jesus gave it to him in a nutshell.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love God! Love your neighbor as yourself! In giving it to him in a nutshell Jesus is bringing together two verses from the Pentateuch, (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) The first verse is from Deuteronomy

6:5 " You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The second is from Leviticus 19:18 "you shall love your neighbor as yourself".

So the question is: How can anyone do that -- love God -- love your neighbor as you love yourself ?

**First of all "Loving God":** To help us think about loving God I want to tell you about Brother Lawrence. He was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French Camelite lay monk who was described as a "great awkward fellow who broke everything". He worked in the kitchen of his order. Supposedly he disliked kitchen work a great deal. But this is where he found himself day after day. In his book *Practicing the Presence of God* he stresses the need to do everything, even kitchen work, for the love of God. He maintained that if we consciously do this we will achieve a condition in which the presence of God is as real in work as in prayer. Here is an excerpt from his book:

"It is not necessary for being with God to be always in church; we may make an oratory of our heart, wherein to retire from time to time, to converse with Him in meekness, humility, and love. Everyone is capable of such familiar conversation with God, some more, some less: He knows what we can do.... Use yourself then by degrees thus to worship Him, to beg His grace, to offer Him your heart from time to time, in the midst of your business, even every moment if you can. Do not always confine yourselves to particular forms of devotion; but act with a general confidence in God, with love and humility."  
*(Practicing the Presence of God)*

What a lovely image when he says we are to make an oratory of our heart. In other words our heart, soul is to be a kind of shrine where we take the time to exalt God. The use of a simple phrase like one of the phrases from the adoration prayer we used at the beginning of the service can assist you in this. In that prayer St. Francis names over twenty attributes of God. You could choose one for the day and repeat it at different times throughout the day. (The Prayer in its totality is found at the end of the sermon)

**Secondly; Love your neighbor!** Now we get to the hard part. That depends on who our neighbor happens to be. It is easy enough to love a

neighbor who is doing the right things, but what about the neighbor who is not? How can we love such a person?

It might help to know that the love about which Jesus was speaking is not the warm fuzzy feeling that we think of as love. The commandment about loving your neighbor comes from Leviticus 19. That chapter gives us a picture of neighborly love. It says

- We won't render an unjust judgment
- We won't let a person's money - or lack of it - affect our relationship
- We will judge a neighbour with justice
- We won't engage in slander, or misrepresentation
- We won't profit by the blood of the neighbour

Then at verse 17 we read: "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. <sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Note that there isn't anything in there about warm fuzzy feelings. There is nothing about enjoying the neighbor's company. Love, in that context, is more about how we act than how we feel -- although it does prohibit hate and grudge bearing.

Notice that to love our neighbour means that we will not hate in our heart those who are related to us nor will we bear grudges. But how will we do this?

That is a good question! How can we go through life avoiding the bad things that Jesus wants us to avoid -- and doing the good things that he wants us to do? How can we keep from saying bad things about our neighbor -- especially when our neighbor deserves it? How can we avoid hating family? If you only knew them you would too! How can we control our feelings?

The answer is that we can't -- at least not on our own. I can tell myself every day not to hate my neighbor, and end up hating myself for hating my

neighbor. I can try really hard not to engage in grudge bearing, but it probably isn't going to work.

If I am going to love my neighbor, I must first love God -- and then be willing to let God help me to love my neighbor. The lawyer asked Jesus for one great commandment, but Jesus gave him two -- love God -- love your neighbor as you love yourself. The two go together. Each leans on the other and helps to support it.

It is hard to show our love for God, because God isn't really needy -- so God gave us a neighbor. The idea is that, when we help our neighbor, it is as if we are helping God.

Mother Theresa put it like this: "Because we cannot see Christ, we cannot express our love to him; but our neighbors we can always see, and we can do to them what, if we saw him, we would like to do to Christ."

We might find it impossible to love our neighbor, but it becomes possible when we first love God. God not only tells us to love our neighbor -- God re-shapes our hearts to make it possible.

So these two loves go together -- love of God and love of neighbor. We can't really love our neighbour unless we first love God, and we can't really demonstrate our love for God without our neighbour.

One last thought! As I said, the love of which Jesus speaks here is more about what we do than how we feel. Jesus isn't calling for us to feel warm feelings for God or neighbour. He is calling us to show our love for God by our obedience to God -- and he is calling us to love our neighbour by acting in loving ways -- by acts of kindness -- by loving service -- by gentle words and generous deeds. What we will find, if we do this -- if we obey God and do good deeds for our neighbour -- is that feelings follow actions. Our loving actions will help us, in God's time, to feel the warmth and affection that we could never feel otherwise.

Of course to live this way is risky. As C.S. Lewis put it: "Love anything, care for anyone, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no

one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket -- safe, drab, motionless, airless -- your heart will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."

Love God! Love your neighbor! Here it is in a nutshell.

### **Prayer of Adoration**

You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful.

You are strong,

You are great.

You are the most high,

You are almighty.

You, holy Father, are King of heaven and earth.

You are three and one, Lord God, all good.

You are Good, all Good, supreme Good,

Lord God, living and true.

You are love. You are wisdom.

You are humility. You are endurance.

You are rest, You are peace.

You are joy and gladness.

You are justice and moderation.

You are all our riches, and you suffice for us.

You are beauty.

You are gentleness.

You are our protector.

You are our guardian and defender.

You are our courage. You are our haven and our hope.

You are our faith, our great consolation.

You are our eternal life, great and wonderful Lord,

God almighty, merciful Saviour.

(Francis of Assisi).