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## Clear and Helpful, but Certainly Not Easy

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

“When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked Jesus a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ Jesus said to him, ‘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’” (Matthew 22:34-40).

We can all empathize with that lawyer, the one who asked Jesus what all of his teaching really boiled down to, and how one might comprehend it. We don't know, of course, what made the lawyer ask Jesus that probing question. Was it curiosity? Was this Pharisee an erudite teacher who was testing Jesus' academic mettle? Had he been following Jesus from afar? Was the lawyer going through some period of challenge or growth in his life? Was he seeking a new start?

We have no answers to these questions, but it might be helpful on occasion to picture ourselves in this Pharisee's sandals, to project our challenges, frustrations, or general yearnings onto him so that, with him, we are asking Our Lord how to live the Christian faith.

Jesus answers this man's question with a readily applicable standard. It is a guidepost we can, and should, carry with us as Christians into *any* situation.

When we are confronted with an ethical decision, or when Jesus' ideals and standards seem impossibly difficult and out of reach, this guidepost comes into play. When we are looking critically, perhaps for the first time, at something we have casually done or thought about for years and how our faith might inform that action or belief, this standard is essential. When some child of God has hurt or offended us and we just don't know how to respond, this rule of life applies. We know this great guiding principle, this greatest Commandment, as the Summary of the Law.

As we approach some new challenge, or when we are being pulled well beyond our comfort zone and we just don't know if we can, or even should, do what is being asked of us, part of our birthright as Christians is to consult this Commandment. We can use this Summary of the Law to help form our response: how does a proposed action show love for God or neighbor, or both?

Now, is living by this clear, concise standard always easy? We know it is not. Throughout life we see many shades of gray. We see conflicting "goods" – the classic definition of an ethical dilemma. Sometimes it seems as if there really is no answer, while in other situations it can seem we see no good outcome regardless of the course we take.

We can be deeply grateful for this Summary of the Law from Our Lord. Yet, clear as it is, it can be horribly difficult to live. We fall short. We realize that the way we have treated someone is less than loving. We are reminded that we haven't really prayed deeply for a while, and we must wonder how such failings show our love for God.

This is where God comes to help us. St. Paul tells us about relating to God, and I believe we could expand these words to loving our neighbors, as well:

“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:26-27).

We are all works in progress. We are veritable construction sites! But the great good news is that we are not striving on our own to become the people God dreams (and we, ourselves, often dream!). The Holy and Undivided Trinity is right there working with us. Thanks be to God. We are practicing and living in light of God’s great love for us together, in Christian community, as the Holy Spirit guides us.