

Some people have a talent for getting to the core of things. Julius Caesar wrote a good-sized book titled *Commentaries On the Gallic War*. It is still used as a textbook by students of Latin. However, Caesar was also able to cut through all the details and get to the nub of a matter. He wrote a sentence that has become a classic in condensation: “Veni, Vidi, Vici” — “I came, I saw, I conquered.” That sums it all up. In Jesus’ day there was a group of people who pored over the ancient writings of Moses to look for every law in the book. They were called Pharisees and they were very scrupulous about the observance of all the religious laws. They counted up all the commandments of Moses and found that there were 613 of them; 248 of these were positive, and 365 of them were negative (one for every day of the year, they said). Instead of condensing and simplifying the commandments, they expanded and complicated them, so that what had started as a sincere desire to please God had become a terrible burden of ever-increasing requirements. They needed someone who could cut through all the burdensome requirements of the law and focus on its essence.

One of the Pharisees, perhaps dissatisfied with his own search for a meaningful religious life, approached Jesus and asked him which was the great commandment, the one that would satisfy God and oneself. In responding to the man, Jesus cut through all the liturgical requirements, taking from the book of Deuteronomy the requirement to love God, from Leviticus the requirement to love one’s neighbour, and welding them together with an emphasis on love and not on the observance of a host of laws. For Jesus, meaningful religion was expressed in a triangle of love: love for God, love for others, and love for self. In that triangle of love is found the secret of a fulfilling life on earth and a foretaste of the life to come. Let’s look more closely at what he said.

Jesus said, we must love God. One of the ways we do this, he said, is with the heart. However, many of us who are sincere seekers after God are afraid to seek with the whole heart. We’ve met people who gave their hearts to Jesus, and the prospect frightens us. We want to keep cool, we want to keep our emotions in check, and we don’t want to do something in the heat of emotion. As a consequence, we do such a good job of holding our hearts in check that we don’t commit ourselves to anything, and we are poorer for it. I know a fellow who sincerely wants to get married. The only trouble is that he can’t find the right girl. One is too young, another too old, one talks too much, another is too quiet, one has too much education, another not enough. The fellow goes around with a lot of girls, but he is unable to make a commitment to any. He is afraid to give his heart to anyone, and as a consequence he is never going to know the intimacy and fulfilment of a committed relationship.

A lot of people go around with God for a long time. They go to church, they go through the motions, they date God on Sunday, but there is no commitment. Consequently, there isn’t much satisfaction in their religious life. They’re afraid that if they get excited about God, it may cause them to get involved in some time-consuming issue; they may come to feel so strongly about something that they will have to act; they may feel obliged to take their stewardship seriously and begin to give a significant proportion of their income with no strings attached (for without it is worthless) for the Lord’s work; they may get sufficiently excited about what God is doing in their lives that they would have to share it with others. In short, loving God with our whole heart can be costly, but it is the only way to make the relationship rewarding. And it is rewarding in proportion to how much of ourselves we put into it.

Jesus also urges us to love God with our minds. There are some people who are content to separate faith and reason. For them faith is blind obedience to a certain interpretation or a certain person. But faith that is not balanced by reason can lead to destructive excesses. Accepting that the two work together is the beginning of a mature understanding of our. To love God does not require us to give up the capacity to think. God gave us our minds as well as our emotions, and if we are to be integrated individuals, mind and heart working

together must lead us to a common goal. Sir James Jeans, the Cambridge astronomer and physicist, collaborator with Sir Arthur Eddington fellow astronomer found that his studies of the universe led him more and more toward God. “We are discovering,” he said, “that the universe gives evidence of being designed by a great mathematician.” God is mind. Mind as well as heart beckons us to love God.

“And love God with all your soul,” says Jesus. The soul is our most basic expression of who we are, and who we are is revealed by what we do. The proper response to the claims of God is not “true” or “false,” but “yes” or “no.” Instead of asking ourselves whether we believe or not, let us ask ourselves whether we have this day done one thing because God said “do it,” or abstained from one thing because God said “do not do it.” It is absolutely meaningless to say we believe in God if we don’t do anything he tells us to do.

Do not expect that this call to love God is going to be satisfied by one big act of sacrifice. There are times in our lives when we might make some glorious sacrifice and go out in a blaze of glory, but rather than a blaze, most of us are confronted with many small campfires. We may think that giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$100,000 cheque and laying it on the table saying, “Here’s my life, Lord. Take it. I’m giving it to you.” The reality is that the Lord sends us to the bank and has us cash the \$,100,000 cheque for dollars and cents. Then he asks us to go through life putting out \$50 here, \$10 there, 20c here. We would like to do it once and get it over with, but a life of loving God is spent a little at a time for as long as we live. This is truly loving God with all our soul.

Another side of this triangular relationship, Jesus says, is love of neighbour. One of the ways we diminish the force of these words is by restricting our understanding of who is our neighbour. When Robert Moffat LMS missionary went to Africa in the early 19th Century, he and his wife Mary who endured great hardship, discovered a similar attitude among the local *Batswana* people whom they loved deeply and who loved them. He found that to these people, the idea that one should be concerned for others had narrow limits. The people’s concern was first to their blood relations and then to the members of their tribe, who represent to them the larger family. Moffat tells of asking well patients whom he had helped to give assistance to those who were confined to bed. But if the bedridden patient did not belong to the same tribe, the able-bodied patient would answer with wide-eyed innocence, “This man is not a brother of mine.” Neither rewards nor threats could induce them to perform a service for a stranger.

Jesus calls us to a far more inclusive view of who is our neighbour. A neighbour is whoever needs our help. The way we show that love is by our actions. For example, we show love by helping where we can- through simple service we can deepen our faith and make his faith a living thing.

Our love for God cannot be separated from our love for God’s family. In one of his last appearances to his disciples, Jesus said to Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” (John 21:16). When Peter answered affirmatively, Jesus said, “Tend my sheep.” Those lambs, of course, were people; and they still are: friends, relatives, local people, but also refugees, homeless people, the friendless, the hungry, and people who are different from us. When we love, we give, and the measure of our giving is the measure of our loving.

Jesus mentions love of self. “You shall love your neighbour as (you love) yourself,” he said (v. 39). There is a kind of self-love that is negative because it is self-centred. An ancient Greek myth tells about Narcissus. He was a handsome young lad who rejected all who would love him. While gazing at his own reflection in a well, he fell in love with himself. He was so totally engaged with himself that he fell into the water and drowned. What the ancient storytellers were trying to get across is that total preoccupation with self leads to destruction.

However, there is another kind of self-love that is desirable. It is called self-esteem, self-respect, and acceptance that we are persons of worth because God is our Father and we belong to God's family. When we know to whose family we belong, we learn to esteem ourselves correctly. The Norwegians tell a tale of a boy who found an egg in a nest while walking in the woods. He took it home and placed it with the eggs under a goose. When it hatched, what a freakish creature it was: deformed feet — un webbed and claw-like — that made it stumble as it tried to follow the little goslings; a beak that was pointed and twisted instead of flat; its down was an ugly brown instead of light yellow; and to top it off, he made a terrible squawking sound. One day a giant eagle flew across the barnyard. The eagle swept lower and lower until the strange, awkward little bird on the ground lifted his head and pointed his crooked beak into the sky. The misfit creature then stretched his wings out and began to hobble across the yard. He flapped his wings harder and harder until the wind picked him up and carried him higher and higher. He began to soar through the clouds. He had discovered what he was: he was born an eagle! He had been trying to live like a goose. We were born to soar. We are children of God. When we know that, we learn to love ourselves because we love the God who made us.

Loving God, neighbour, and ourselves is not something that we perfect all at once. A friend tells of receiving a valentine card that said on the cover: "I love you terribly." Inside were the words "But I'll improve with practice." It is not an easy task to be loving persons. We are busy, we are frustrated, impatient, or too tired to try. Those we are called to love are often unlovable. Yet it is in that love triangle of God, others, and self that we find the secret of a fulfilling life on earth and a foretaste of the life to come.

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