

THE TOP TWO LIST

Let us pray: Lord, let your Word take us where we need to go. Let your love be the lens that lets us see, the power that gives us life, the light that points to your path, and the very grace that saves us. Amen.

As 2019 draws to a close, “Top Ten” lists are starting to show up in newspapers, magazines, and online. You can find a “Top Ten” list for just about anything and everything. Here’s a small sampling from a brief Google search:

- * Ben Pearson’s Top 10 Movies of 2019 So Far
- * Top 10 Hotels for 2019
- * Top 10 cornerbacks, safeties in NFL
- * Top 10 (Law) Firms for Gender Equity and Family Friendliness
- * The Nielsen Ratings Company has Top 10 lists for TV, Music, Video Games, and Social Content
- * Top 10 Countries in the World in 2019
- * Teens’ Top 10 Nominees from the American Library Association
- * And here’s one that kind of stumped me: Top 10 of Everything 2019. The thing is, the book was published on September 6, 2018!

For some reason, we seem to enjoy ranking all sorts of things in “Top Ten” lists. We watch the highlight shows on ESPN or retrospectives on New Year’s Eve and anxiously wait to find out which person, game, athletic achievement, song, movie, or invention was rated #1 for the previous year. Then the discussions begin . . . “I don’t know why *that* song got picked. . . I hated that movie . . . He’s overrated.”

That interest in narrowing the field down to #1 obviously dates back at least 2,000 years. One of the scribes asked Jesus a question one day, after hearing Jesus arguing with the religious leaders in the Temple and giving good answers. The scribe asked Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28)

That was an appropriate question for someone to ask a rabbi. An old Jewish story tells about the great scholar of the Jewish law, a man named Hillel, who lived in the first century B.C. According to one source, he favored a more lenient interpretation of the law in most cases. Hillel taught his disciples to follow the example of Aaron the High Priest to “love peace and pursue peace, love all God’s creations and bring them close to the Torah.”

According to the story, a Gentile who was interested in converting to Judaism came to the learned rabbi and told him he would embrace Judaism on one condition — only if a rabbi could teach him the entire Torah while he, the Gentile, stood on one foot. Hillel humbly replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this — go and study it!”¹

Hillel's answer must have surprised the Gentile convert. It is said that in Jesus' day, God's Torah had been expanded to 613 different laws that regulated all of Jewish daily, religious, and ritual life. The 613 laws included the Ten Commandments, but also laws that seem nit-picky and even strange to us in the 21st century, such as:

- * Not to leave the fat of the slaughtered Passover lamb overnight
- * Not to ignore a lost object
- * Not to muzzle an ox while plowing
- * Not to appoint a foreigner as king
- * To wipe out the memory of Amalek
- * Not to destroy food trees during a wartime siege
- * Not to eat non-kosher maggots
- * Not to slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day

It took seven pages, single-spaced, printed front-and-back to list all 613 laws. But, before we shake our heads too much, consider that:

- * The NCAA College Football Rules Book is 220 pages long.
- * The United States Golf Association Rules of Golf for 2019 is 162 pages long.
- * The National Football League rulebook is 135 pages long.
- * No one really knows how many federal laws we have in the United States! According to one source, in 1980, Congress gave the General Accounting Office the task of determining how many Federal laws there were. After four years with no report submitted, the GAO explained they were still counting and were up to about 3,000. At that time, based on the number of laws Congress was passing annually, the estimate was that by 2000, there would be more than 20,000 laws. Here we are, twenty years beyond *that* estimate, so who knows how many Federal laws we have in the United States?²

* And in our own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we have our *Book of Order*. In this particular congregation, we have our policies and our Manual of Operations, not to mention the many unwritten, assumed, and sometimes unspoken rules and ways of doing things.

So, that day in the Temple, the scribe asked Jesus to summarize, to condense, to get to the very heart of God's law — what it means to be God's people. Jesus' answer was nothing new or unfamiliar. Moses gave the same instruction to God's people in his farewell address: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Then, to fill out his Top Two List, Jesus added a second one like the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Once again, Jesus didn't make up a new law on the spot. He was reminding the scribe of what God had expected from his people all along: "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." (Leviticus 19:18)

As you can see in today's margin notes, the connection between loving God and loving our neighbors is the heart of our Christian life:

* "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14)

* “The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:21)

* “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

Impossible, you might say! Oh, maybe I can love God as best I can, but Lord, what about that person who drives me up the wall? What about that co-worker who undercuts me at every turn? What about that family member who refuses to be reconciled no matter what I do? Oh, Lord, what about . . . ?

Well, the New Testament has something to say about that:

* “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20)

It’s a mystery . . . it’s a challenge . . . it may even be an affront to our sense of fairness . . . it certainly goes against the grain of the culture we currently live in . . . Love God. Love neighbor. As the preacher at the Montreat Youth Conference a couple of years ago said in his benediction at the end of each night’s worship service:

*Go forth into the world
With compassion and justice in your heart
Give strength to the weak
Give voice to the silent
See one another
Hear one another
Care for one another
And love one another
It's all that easy
And it's all that hard*

In his book of sermons called *Secrets in the Dark*, Frederick Buechner writes about loving God being first and foremost in our lives. He reminds us that God’s people first heard the words, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God,” “in the wilderness, where they were wandering lost, afraid, hungry, dispirited, not knowing what was to become of them, with no resources left, afraid they were going to die — no food, water — nothing left except whatever they had in their hearts. And so it came as a promise as well as a commandment. Love and you will live.”

Buechner goes on to say, “Love God. We have heard the words so often that we no longer hear them. They are too loud to hear, too big to take in. We know the words so much by heart that we scarcely know them any longer as words spoken to the heart out of a mystery beyond all knowing . . . We hardly stop to wonder where they are taking us. Above all else, the words say, you shall love — not first your neighbor . . . That comes later. On the contrary, it is God you shall love first before you love anything else,

and you shall love him with all that you are and all that you have it in you to become, whatever that means. The words don't explain. They just proclaim and command."³

Oh, but it's so hard! To love God . . . *with everything we have and everything we are!* much less to love our neighbors! That's the truth! How do we love the unlovable? (Of course, that's our subjective judgment on other people! Are they unlovable in God's eyes?) God might have asked himself that very question — in fact, maybe God asks that question about us every day!!! But hear these words of promise and hope from the apostle Paul: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6,8)

God loved us so much, he did something to show his love — he sent his only Son for us. God loves us so much, he does something to show his love — he is generous with his blessings and his promises still today. God loves us so much, he wants us to have life — so he tells us, he commands us, he promises us that the way to have life is to "love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and to "love your neighbor as yourself."

You might be thinking to yourself, "Preacher, you're just too naive! How are we supposed to do what God has commanded, especially when it comes to loving our neighbor?" Well, all I can say is, I'm preaching to myself as much as anybody this morning. And what I know is this: the God who loved us so much that he did something to save us from our sins is the same God who calls us to love him with everything — **everything** — we've got and everything we are . . . and to love our neighbors in his name and with the love of Jesus Christ, whose is God's love in the flesh.

If we commit ourselves to Jesus' Top Two List, what difference might it make in our lives? In our church? In our community? In our world? In our giving? In our service?

There's another ancient Jewish story in the Talmud. The subject is the question "When does the dawn begin?" Here's how the story goes:

"How do we know," the rabbi asks, "when the night is over and the day has arrived?"

One student replies: "Rabbi, night is over and day arrives, when you can see a house in the distance and determine if that's your house or the house of your neighbor."

Another student responds, "Night is over and day arrives when you can see an animal in the field and determine if it belongs to you or to your neighbor."

Yet a third student says, "Night is over and day has arrived when you can see a flower in the garden and distinguish its color."

"No, no, no," thunders the rabbi. "Why must you see only in separations, only in distinctions, and disjunctions? No. Night is over and day arrives when you can look into the face of the person beside you and you can see that he is your brother, she is your sister. Night is over when you can see that you belong to each other. That you are one. Night has ended and day has arrived when you can see God in the face of the other."⁴

It's all that easy and it's all that hard!

As you think about how you will respond to God’s grace and love in your life — setting your priorities, your service in this church, your relationships in the community, your valuation of other people in this time of division, your financial commitment to the mission and ministries of our congregation — hear these words of a poem by Thomas Troeger, a well-known hymn composer, musician, poet, and teacher of music. In your life, how will you love God, love neighbor? The poem . . .

*If all you want, Lord, is my heart,
my heart is yours alone —
providing I may set apart
my mind to be my own.*

*If all you want, Lord, is my mind,
my mind belongs to you,
but let my heart remain inclined
to do what it would do.*

*If heart and mind would both suffice,
while I kept strength and soul,
at least I would not sacrifice
completely my control.*

*But since, O God, you want them all
to shape with your own hand,
I pray for grace to heed your call
to live your first command.⁵*

Let us pray: Generous God, through your Son, Jesus Christ, you have shown us what it means to love. You call us to follow your example and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Continue to write your law of love on our hearts. Give us an unwavering passion for justice, and a tenacious faith that will not rest until the hungry are fed, the oppressed find relief, and the outsider finds a welcome. Amen.

NOTES

¹Shoshannah Brombacher, “On One Foot,” at www.chabad.org.

² “How many federal laws are there in the US?” at www.quora.com.

³Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007). These references found in a sermon by John Buchanan, “For the Love of God,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, November 5, 2006 at www.fourthchurch.org.

⁴Rabbi Daniel M. Cohen, Erev Rosh Hashannah Sermon 2014 at www.tsti.org.

⁵Poem found in sermon by Dr. Keith Wagner, "No Holding Back," Mark 12:28-34 at www.sermonwriter.com.