

Over 500 years ago, Martin Luther started a movement that now surrounds the world. When Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, Luther started an academic conversation. No one showed up. However, thanks to the printing press, his words spread, first to all of Germany, and within 60 days, to the rest of Europe.

Martin Luther called the church back to the basic gospel message of God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, His Son. On October 31, 1517, Luther ignited a movement that would change the course of human history. As our parent Church, the Missouri Synod says,

The Reformation was, first and foremost, all about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was then, and it still is now. And every person in every generation needs to hear the Good News of their Savior from sin and eternal death.

In that spirit, we come to our Saviour and Lord, recognizing that apart from Him, there is no salvation. Apart from Him, we are dead in our sins and separated from God for eternity. Without Jesus Christ, we are without hope.

Despite His good news message, Jesus faced opposition during His earthly journey. One day, after Jesus had put the Sadducees in their place, another religious group gathered around Him.

vv. 34-36 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

The Sadducees couldn’t discredit Jesus, so a group of Pharisees gave it a shot. The Pharisee who questioned Jesus was an expert in Jewish law. So was Jesus.

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vv. 37-40 And he 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 great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

William Quayle, a Methodist bishop of the 19th century, was travelling by train when he engaged a group of businessmen in a spirited conversation. Quayle wasn't dressed in clerical garb, and the businessmen mistook him for a salesman. The group was impressed by the bishop's charisma and enthusiasm. They decided he must be a great salesman, regardless of what he sold. Finally, one businessman had to know, so he asked, “What's your line? What do you sell?” Instantly, Quayle answered, “Horizons! I sell horizons!”

What a great response. Visionaries do sell horizons. They broaden the perspective of others; they expand the range of what others see and can become. Jesus did that. He cast a vision of total dedication to God, which flows into how we treat others. Before and after He named the Great Commandment, He lived the Great Commandment.

Every Sunday that our family attended church, I heard the two great commandments. They were spoken in every worship service. Those two commandments cast a vision for life for all who can see it. They draw a horizon that draws us to God and closer to others.

The two great commandments are necessary for us because we are so easily seduced and subverted by substitutes. The biblical word for anything that takes the place of God is idolatry. Some substitutes would be good if they were properly placed under God.

I think about how, for some people, family is everything. Or health is everything. Or work is everything. There are plenty of substitutes, and some of

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them are incredibly destructive. All of them are ultimately destructive if they are placed above God.

Author Eugene Peterson notes,

Without diligent, clear-sighted watchfulness, congregations relapse into golden-calf idolatries, much as cultivated fields without care relapse into weeds and brambles. Religion is the enemy of the gospel.

You remember the story of the golden calves. When Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the law from God, the Israelites in the valley became nervous. They wanted some religious action, and Moses’ brother Aaron obliged them with two golden calves to worship. Religion is what happens when we take our eyes off God.

The Reformation was about restoring the church’s vision of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Religion can motivate us to love our neighbour without even a thought about loving God. Some of the best lovers of neighbours will never enter a church, except maybe in a box for their funeral.

On the other hand, you cannot love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and not fulfill the second commandment. The book of James tells us,

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? [James 2:14-16]

What good is that? It’s no good at all. James is clear that our faith is seen in our love for others. We love others because God first loved us. Our love for God propels our love for others.

The Pharisee, who was a lawyer, questioned Jesus to “test” Him. Asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus offered two of them because the two cannot be separated. To those who would put emphasis either on relation with God or on service to neighbours, his refusal serves as a reminder that the

Christian life always includes both. The second great commandment can be a check-up that helps us examine our life of faith. Then again, it isn’t necessarily a reliable test.

A few weeks ago, on a Friday, I was asked by someone I was visiting if I had any grand plans for the weekend. I thought about it and answered no. I asked her if she had any grand plans. She replied that she was going to participate in a walk for charity at a Park in Kitchener. I asked her when the walk was scheduled, and she said Sunday morning. I asked her, “What about all the church people?”

The world doesn’t care anymore about Sunday morning worship. They have prioritized fundraising for good causes, youth sports, and other activities over the worship of the one, true God who created all things. Our focus on loving our neighbour can blind us to how the love of God is not in us. In Canada, we have plenty of religious and non-religious do-gooders.

Religion is the enemy of the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church in Luther’s day was a purveyor of religion. Religion tells us to do good to others, which is a wonderful thing. However, religion also tells us that our own efforts merit us good standing before God. Religion never gets us to the place where we recognize that our righteousness is as filthy rags before God, as the prophet Isaiah teaches us.

For those whose god is the human community, or Mother Earth, or any other idol you can think of, those who worship them can become so consumed by their idol that they cannot see their actual spiritual condition. Everyone who has ever been born, except for Jesus Christ, needs a Saviour. Everyone needs what Jesus Christ did on the cross. We cannot be righteous before God without the offering of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Jesus Christ is the only sufficient sacrifice for everything that would otherwise separate us from God forever. Without receiving Jesus Christ as Saviour, we have no salvation. Without following Jesus Christ as Lord, we have no hope.

Following Jesus Christ as Lord means loving God with your whole heart, soul, and mind. It means loving your neighbour as yourself. All of us have been so twisted by sin that it can feel unnatural to be what we were created to be - lovers of God and lovers of others.

Who are we? We are a community of saints, inspired by love for God, one another, and for members are devoid of rivalry, mutual resentment, love of gain, ambition to rule, and the like. This is the ideal. God made us to be like Him, but our sinful nature leads us to prefer the distortions of God's image that we have become. God wants us back. He wants our total devotion. How is total devotion possible?

Only by the power of God placed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Only by the Holy Spirit activating the law of God in our hearts.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself.” This is what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

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This is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Pray that God will empower you to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Anything that distracts us from loving God and our neighbour is destructive for us and for our congregation. In the end, only God-intoxicated people can fill this world with God’s love. It will be people filled with the love of God who will best love their neighbours. Can we be those people? Only with God’s help. Amen.