

GETTING IT HALF RIGHT

Which is the most important of God's commandments?

Jesus said that question has a two-part answer.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

And, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The two go hand in glove.

You can't love God and not love your neighbor; and whenever you love your neighbor, you're loving God at the same time.

If you only obey the commandment to love God, you're only getting it half-right.

If you say that you love God but you don't love your neighbor, you're not really loving God.

And if you claim to love your neighbor, but your actions and attitudes contradict that claim, then your love for them is disingenuous. It's not genuine.

One day a man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard. As he approached an intersection, the traffic light turned yellow. He did the right and safe thing, coming to a stop at the crosswalk even though he could have beaten the red light if he had stepped on the gas and accelerated through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration because she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

While she was still ranting and raving, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up.

He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a police officer approached her cell and opened the door.

She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

The officer said, "I'm very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, screeching and flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. Then I noticed the *Choose Life* license plate holder, the *What Would Jesus Do?* and "*Follow Me to Sunday School*" bumper stickers, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk.

Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

If you claim to love God but you don't love your neighbor, you're not really loving God. You're only getting it half-right.

You can plaster your automobile with Christian bumper stickers and fish emblems until you can't see the body paint anymore.

You can honk if you love Jesus every single time you back the car out of your garage.

You can attend worship every Sunday until the Church Council votes to name a pew in your honor.

You can do all of those things and more to express your deep and abiding love for God. But if you don't love your neighbor, you're only getting it half right.

Have you ever wondered how you can love God when you can't see God?

How do you express your love to a divine being who is like the wind?

You know the wind is there because it rustles the leaves in the trees or messes up your carefully styled hair, but you can't actually see the wind.

And you know God exists because you see the fruits of the Spirit that are born from the actions God takes

But you can't actually see God.

So how do you love a God you can't see?

The first letter of John, which is probably my favorite book of the Bible, can help answer that question. In the fourth chapter the author writes:

"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

And further down in the same chapter, he says, "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."

If you claim to love God but you don't love your neighbor, you're not really loving God. You're only getting it half-right.

Margaret Nava, in a book called *Random Acts of Kindness*, shared the following experience.

The year 2014 had been financially difficult for me. Aside from Social Security, my only other source of income was writing. During the last six months of the year, several of my manuscripts had been rejected and the idea well was running dry.

I suffered a series of health problems; my twelve-year-old car needed a new battery, tires and brakes.

The water heater and furnace both quit working.

Christmas was just around the corner and my checking account was looking alarmingly anemic.

When I opened one of my Christmas cards, I discovered a gift card along with the note: "Buy something special for yourself."

There was no signature on the card or return address on the envelope.

All of a sudden, ideas began pouring into my head. Perhaps I could buy a new pair of winter boots, a digital camera or that printer I'd been needing. Or maybe I'd buy some of the DVDs I'd been wanting for a time.

Wow . . . this would make my Christmas!

Feeling both pleased and oddly embarrassed, I set the card aside until I could figure out who might have sent it.

Our church sponsors a food pantry. Local grocery stores provide bread, cereal, eggs, beans, canned goods and produce. Once people register, they can come in and get whatever they need. Everything is free.

As I was helping distribute food two weeks before Christmas, I noticed a forlorn-looking woman approaching my counter. She wore a stained T-shirt, threadbare jeans and a denim jacket that showed signs of recent mending.

As she placed a bag of dried pinto beans and a small onion into a plastic grocery store bag, I asked if she was shopping for her family.

"No," she replied, "just me." There was obvious sadness in her voice, but also a need to tell someone her troubles. "My daughter and her family live in Florida and my husband died a couple of months ago. I was thinking maybe I'd get some tortillas and beans for Christmas dinner. My husband always liked pintos."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"It was Jack," the woman said.

She started telling me all about her husband: his crooked smile, the color of his eyes, the years he spent driving a big rig to support their family, and the way he enjoyed going to church, especially on Christmas Eve.

As she spoke, tears trickled down her cheeks. “This will be my first Christmas without him. We never had a lot of money, but now there isn’t even enough to buy our grandchildren Christmas gifts.”

Searching in my apron for a tissue, I discovered the gift card I had been given and handed it to her, saying, “Here, maybe this will help. Merry Christmas.”

At the New Years’ Day worship service, our pastor read the following letter, forwarded to him by the food pantry.

Dear friends at the food pantry,

Two weeks ago I felt as if life wasn’t worth living. My husband, Jack, drove an 18-wheeler for a living. On his way home from Colorado three months ago, he ran into a sudden rainstorm on the Interstate.

The driver in the car in front of him lost control on the slick pavement and started swerving from lane to lane. In order to avoid hitting the car, Jack drove his truck into a ditch. It overturned and he was killed.

I later learned that the people in the car, a mom, a dad, and a two-month-old baby, were on their way to visit family in Texas. Jack saved them all.

I was devastated. In all our twenty-three years of marriage, Jack had never wanted me to work. After his death I tried to find a job but, without any skills or experience, no one wanted to hire me. When what little money I had left after burying Jack ran out, I started going to the food pantry.

Two weeks before Christmas, I came to buy the ingredients for what I thought might be my last dinner—pinto beans and tortillas. However, one of the volunteers handed me a gift card. There was no value printed on the card, but I hoped it would be enough to buy my grandchildren a few small gifts.

Imagine my surprise when I went to the store and found out the card was worth \$500.00. The unexpected money allowed me to buy presents for my grandchildren and enough groceries to fill my pantry. Feeling encouraged, I signed up for a call center training program and will begin working in less than a month.

Someone once told me that God always provides. Up until the day I walked into the food pantry, I had begun to doubt that. However, on that day, God not only provided, He did it in a way that changed my life.

If it had not been for the volunteer and her generous gift, my Christmas would have been quite different. I wouldn't have a full pantry, I wouldn't be looking forward to starting a career and earning a living, and my future wouldn't look as good as it does now.

I thank that volunteer, the food pantry and all the people who reach out to help others in need and show them God's love. God bless you all, and have a wonderful new year. I know I will.

A grateful friend.

Do you see how, when Margaret Nava loved her neighbor, that needy woman she encountered at the food pantry, as she loved herself, she was also loving God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength.

Loving her neighbor by so selflessly giving up the gift card that she could have ultimately used to meet her own significant needs was a powerful way for Margaret Nava to express her love for the Lord her God.

And by doing that, Margaret Nava manifested the love of God to that needy woman in the food pantry, and let her know that God did care about her and would provide for her. And that dramatically changed the woman's life.

I'd be willing to bet that the divine love the woman in the food pantry felt because of Margaret Nava's generous act of giving ignited in her heart a flame of love for the God who loved her so much. A flame that had been close to being snuffed out.

And there's a very good chance her newly enlarged love for God kindled love in her heart for the neighbors she would encounter in her own life, just as one of her neighbors had done for her.

Do you see how love for God and love for neighbor are intertwined? Can you see the tangible, inseparable connection?

Doesn't it make perfect sense that you can't love God and not love your neighbor; and whenever you love your neighbor, you're loving God at the same time?

Love God and love your neighbor. They go hand in glove, and you need to do both.

Because if you only obey the commandment to love God, you're only getting it half-right. Amen.