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³⁷ Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

You are God’s Servant to Do Good to Others

Incurvatus in se

In-grown is a bad thing—at least as far as I can tell. I’ve never heard of an ingrown anything that’s good news. If you’ve ever had an in-grown hair, that’s when a hair that is supposed to grow out away from your body turns around and grows back into your skin. It can be red and tender and even get infected. But what’s even grosser than an in-grown hair is an in-grown toenail. That’s where your toenail, which is supposed to grow out away from your body to protect your toe, turns and grows back in toward your skin. It can be painful, get infected and even require surgery. But there’s something even more appalling than that.

You see one strand of hair is just a tiny part of your body. A toenail is just one piece. But what if your whole nature—all your thoughts, all your priorities, all your actions—what if it was all in-grown? How nasty would that be? Well, just like a lot of medical conditions, there’s a fancy Latin name for that. Ancient Bible scholars call it *incurvatus in se*—the soul curved inward on itself.

Pharisee’s Question

That is what Jesus encountered just days before he died on the cross. Maybe you know Jesus was crucified and buried in Jerusalem, but he spent a whole week in the city before he was arrested. The whole time he was there, groups of religious leaders would come up to him and challenge him. They wanted to get him to say something wrong so they would have a reason to arrest him. Two of those groups were called the Pharisees and the

Sadducees. They had almost nothing in common except for two major things: 1) they both hated Jesus, so they were willing to cooperate to take him down. 2) they both had a nasty case of *incurvatus in se*. Instead of serving other people and passing blessings from God to their friends, they made religion all about *me*. The Sadducees tried to fool Jesus and he kind of embarrassed them. Now it's the Pharisees turn.

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This guy's question actually gives away his curved inward soul. The Pharisees were famous for being sticklers about God's rules. We make our catechism students memorize the ten commandments, but if you went to Pharisee catechism class, you'd have to memorize over six hundred commandments. It would be kind of cool to have that much Bible memorized. God gave all those laws as a way to serve him and his people to take care of each other. But the Pharisees had souls curved inward. They would argue about which commandments are best so that they could make themselves look better than people who only obeyed the worse commands. So Jesus gives this man an answer to settle their debate and to straighten out his soul.

The First and Greatest Command

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.

Jesus is pulling this quote from the Old Testament, so he's answering this guy's question. But think about what that means. *All* your soul, *all* your strength, *all* your mind. You are to be 100% totally devoted to the Lord. So when a Pharisee, this really happened, would brag that he washed his clothes three days before the Sabbath day so he could be sure that on the Sabbath, when he put on his shirt he didn't squash a bug and accidentally "harvest" on the day of rest—when he bragged about that, Jesus would point back to the greatest commandment. God never told you to wash your

clothes three days before the Sabbath. He did tell you to make your life all about him, and not all about yourself. So love the Lord your God with everything you've got. If you don't love God, you can't truly keep any of the other commandments. And if you do love God, you'll want to keep all the other ones anyway.

Do you ever struggle with this one? Ever feel your soul curve in on itself? It's easy to love and praise God when things are going well. But when he sends a bad prognosis, another shortfall in the budget, when he allows your greatest fear, then who truly loves God with every ounce of his being? The Pharisees asked Jesus about God's law and Jesus gave them God's law. But we are only understanding God's law correctly when we know that we cannot do it.

But Jesus did. Remember on the night before he died, just days after he taught this to the Pharisees, Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane begging God not to let him die. He said, "Father, if there is any other way..." Jesus wanted to be ok, to be safe. But do you remember how he ended his prayer? "Not my will, but yours, be done." More than he loved himself, more than he loved his safety, more than anything, Jesus loved the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his mind.

The Second Great Command

But then Jesus added even another command. He said, **"³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'** **⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."**

God wants us to love him above all things. But that love is not just a happy feeling, it's a commitment to action. And there's not a lot of actions we can do to bless God. There are some, but he wants every second of your life to be an opportunity to praise him. God made you his servant to do good to other people.

Do you ever have trouble with this one? Do you ever feel your soul curve inward, so that your life is all about you? This one hit home for me this week.

I heard about a Polish anthropologist who studied Americans and found that we see people in three categories: Scenery people, machinery people, and real people. Scenery people are the ones you just see. The person you pass in the grocery store, the guy on the other side of the sanctuary who you really don't know. They are like extras in a movie all about me. Machinery people are people I need to function a certain way so I can get through my day. The girl who makes my latte. The administrative assistant who screens your calls. The preacher who says his peace and then sits down on time. The worshiper who nods along and waves to me at the end of the service. Just like machinery, the only time you need to treat machinery people as real people is when something goes wrong. Real people are like me. They're allowed to have a bad day. They have hopes and dreams. They can make a mistake, and I'll give them the benefit of the doubt. They're your LifeGroup, your wife, your kids, and *some* of your relatives. The number of real people in each of our lives might be large or small depending on how nice I am. This category of real people can't include everyone can it?

That hit home for me this week because it was my diagnosis. *Incurvatus in se*. I've got an ingrown soul. How about you? Is your life more about you than those around you?

Jesus said "Love your neighbor as yourself." If real people are those I treat as kindly as I treat myself, then that category can't possibly include everyone can it? Jesus says it must. And Jesus did this. When he went to the cross he was not just going for his disciples. Not just for his family. Not just for the people who were least annoying to him. No, to quote St. Paul, **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst."** He paid for the sins of a world that hates him.

Jesus Kept the Great Commandments

What's so powerful about Jesus words to this Pharisee with his crooked soul, is that *Jesus* is the one who says them. The law that Jesus laid down is heavy enough to crush that Pharisee. And the Bible doesn't record what happened to him after this. But I know he got to see Jesus love the Lord

with all his heart soul and mind. I know he got to witness the Savior show ridiculous love to others. I know that you've seen it too.

You see Jesus' miraculous love when you see that cross up there. That's where Jesus went to take away all your failures to love. You see Jesus' love when you receive his body and blood to wash away all your sins. You will not be punished for breaking the greatest commandment. You will be in heaven forever because of what Jesus has done.

You Can Keep the Great Commandments

When you see Jesus love, it does NOT change his law. Instead, it changes you. Before you knew Jesus, your soul was completely curved in on itself. You had no way to love God, and no way to love others, not truly. But then a miracle happened. Jesus took up residence in your heart and he has endowed you with a bit of his power to love.

That's why John could write this in the passage we read before. **"It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another."** (2 John 4-5)

It gives *me* great joy when I see our members loving one another. When I see one person get groceries for another, when I see people volunteering their time, when I see you getting over grudges It means that we're growing. Even though all of us are naturally curved in on ourselves, by the power of Jesus, you can straighten up your soul and love God, and love other people—not just when it's easy or beneficial, but you can do it as a self-less response to what God has done for you.

I want you to think of a person who's hard for you to be kind to. Picture their face. What do you allow for yourself that you don't allow for them? I'm challenging you to do for them, what Jesus did for you. Befriend, be generous, be loving, even if they don't deserve it. In heaven we'll be perfectly straightened out. We'll never recoil in on ourselves again. But until then, let's not be in-grown. Instead, let's grow out and love someone.

Amen.