**THE HARDEST COMMAND IN THE BIBLE (part 1)**

Yes, we all know what the GREATEST command in the Bible is, for Jesus quoted it plainly for all to read. When asked this never-ending debate question that circulated among the religious leaders of Judaism, Jesus said, “‘*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself*’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

But the question I want to ask for our study today is this, what is the HARDEST command in the Bible? Perhaps they are one in the same. Perhaps the greatest commandment is the hardest commandment. If that is true, then I concede it without being dogmatic in my own opinion. But, in my own life I will confess to you that I find another commandment the hardest to obey. It is found in both the Sermon on the Mount and in Paul’s great chapter of Romans 12. The hardest command in the Bible is Matthew 5:38-48, with a repeat of it in Romans 12:9-21. I’ll condense them for you:

*38 “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also… 43 “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you…”* (Matt. 5:38-48)

*“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Rom. 12:17-21).

Brethren and friends, I confess to you freely that my sense of justice is so powerful that I find this battle within me to exact an eye for an eye and to hate my enemy is forever on the surface of my heart. Oh, how sometimes I wish to “heap coals of fire” on the heads of those who do evil. How I want to announce to someone who has done an evil deed, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says Rick!” If my enemy is hungry and thirsty I too often have the urge to shout, “Serves you right, buster!” Like Paul so passionately expressed, I have this war of flesh and spirit raging within me (Rom. 7:21-25). Like Jesus said, “*The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*” (Matt. 26:41).

Let me tell you why justice is so embedded in my soul. I was raised in the 1950’s and 60’s. When I was six years old I was suddenly confined to bed for a very long time after coming down with a disease called Rheumatic Fever. It attacked my joints and made it very painful to move. So, I was bedfast. That’s the bad news. The good news was I got to watch a lot of TV. The old black and white box was placed where I could regularly watch all my favorite westerns. Roy Rogers. The Cisco Kid. The Lone Ranger. The Rifleman. Gunsmoke. Bonanza. Wyatt Earp. Rawhide. Wagon Train. Lawman. Have Gun Will Travel. Cheyenne. Daniel Boone. Not to mention the war series, Combat, along with all the war movies starring my favorite actor John Wayne.

Whew, that was a trip back down memory lane. After watching all those episodes my little boyhood brain would go to sleep fighting the bad guys, and wake up day-dreaming of “truth, justice and the American way!” The good guys in the white hats always win, right? Justice means the bad guys are caught, then jailed or killed, right? We always win, right?

I grew up and soon I became a Christian. I continued to want justice to prevail. Even the Bible tells us that government is a minister of God to exact punishment on all wrong doers (Rom. 13:1-7). But personal justice, particularly personal revenge, was introduced into my life as sinful. It was not the realm of a Christian to give “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” God said to leave all judgment and justice to Him. I was to be like Christ. In other words, Jesus was my example in this way:

*For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously”* (I Pet. 2:21-23).

Everything in my DNA screams for justice --- *Now*! After all, in every TV western and war movie justice was served inside the 30 to 90 minute show. All wrongs were made right almost instantly. But Jesus puts His calming hand on my shoulders, looks me in the eye, and says, “Rick, leave judgment to God.” Oh how I struggle mightily against this command. I cry out, “But it’s not fair! It’s not right!” To which Jesus responds, “Yes dear brother, I know. But only God knows the full story, so leave it to Him.”

What if it had been left up to me to exact justice upon Peter for his betrayal? What if I was the judge and jury for Saul of Tarsus? What would have happened if I had agreed with Paul over Barnabas regarding the quitter John Mark? Earth, and heaven, would have been much less populated if I had been left with the judge’s gavel. History, and eternity, would have turned out far different if I was the executioner.

But thanks be to God that He makes us see that the GREATEST commandment, and the HARDEST commandment, are for our benefit and blessing, and for the world’s salvation. Tomorrow I want to examine further this war I am trying to win. Maybe you are too. Let’s fight together.

So until tomorrow… overcome evil with good.

I love you.

Rick