

## Nathan Austin - Breaking the Law

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As we all know, the Law was given to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai. This was a key moment in the development of the nation of Israel, and we know that the Law was intended to be a schoolmaster or a tutor to show the way to Christ. It has been said that the law contains over 600 commandments, and yet the Law in and of itself is not enough. There are several aspects about the law we could discuss today, but the direction we aim to travel has to do with understanding the intent of the rules to help us better achieve the spirit of the law.

For example, sometimes it can be okay to break the rules in a certain sense. Many years ago, I played high school basketball, and I can still recall my coach doing everything he could to motivate us, to stir us up to action and energy and aggressiveness, and we were teenagers, and we were still trying to grasp all the interactions of the game, and one particular piece of the game was driving my coach crazy this day. He felt that as a team, we were being too cautious, and we were so worried with getting called for a foul that we were actively avoiding contact and perhaps allowing the opposing team too much leeway.

And so he told us a story, and this story involved other high school players he had coached at a Christian school and how they were extremely conscientious and careful and took great care to never foul the other team, and so he changed their perspective. He said, fouls are part of the game. If they weren't, you wouldn't be allowed four of them before you're kicked out.

And so if you consider fouls are actually part of your tool set, you can use them up to a certain point. They're not something you should avoid, merely something you should use sparingly. You might make the argument they're not permitted, but you also might make the argument they are precisely permitted to a limited degree, and similarly, there are other rules we see around us. Some that come to mind are the rules of writing.

Show a scene and emotion through your character interactions. Don't merely tell the reader everything. Avoid using adverbs excessively. Never begin a sentence with and or, but do not split your infinitives. But I would argue these are better seen as best practices as opposed to rigid rules that bind our actions.

But this is the law. You're thinking, this isn't merely a set of suggestions or best practices. Now let us lay aside for the moment that we're not under the law in the sense of the Jews. Is it true that they are rigid and unyielding? For example, the law says you should never do work on a Sabbath.

Now, according to the law, you should not eat meat, sacrifice to idols, and yet the scriptures also demonstrate that in certain times and circumstances it is okay to do exactly these things, and so we want to bring to your consideration today a Is it our responsibility to follow the rules slavishly merely because they are there? Or do we have a further responsibility to understand their intent and let that intent guide the degree and manner in which we follow those rules? Do we allow ourselves to fall into the habit of doing something just because we've always done it that way?

There's an adage you may have heard that I think bears a truly interesting thought. It goes, master the rules so you can learn when and how to break them. You'll see it in slightly different forms and attributed to various people. I'm not sure we'll really know where it originates. Nevertheless, I think it's really interesting to think about this idea that it's telling us, if we truly understand the purpose of a rule, the why, that it can simplify our decision making process in identifying where, when and how

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we should follow this rule.

Why? Why should you avoid starting a sentence with and or? But one simple reason is that younger students just developing their writing style can fall into bad habits, and their writing can be very difficult to read if they frequently do this, however, a little sentence here or there can get the point across and flow quite nicely. The reason for the rule is not to prevent anyone from ever doing this, but rather to guide the habits of early writers. Context is incredibly important, and the same is true of art.

There are numerous rules about how a composition should be laid out, how brushes should be used, how lighting should be used, etc, and this can be for painting, drawing, photography. Picasso, when he first began to paint what are now his very famous Cubist paintings, left his audiences shocked at what he saw, and yet now we consider them classics. Now, no doubt there are even such rules for music, but often what happens is that somebody breaks those rules.

They shock everyone for a while, and then viewers or listeners realize that the rules weren't quite as restrictive as they thought. They start to accept value where they previously saw no value. It can be said that the rules are mostly true, but someone who deeply understands them can work around them and with them in surprising and creative ways.

So what about the Pharisees? Did they deeply understand the law? From one perspective, the answer is a resounding yes. They made it their mission to understand the law. In fact, a defining principle for the group was their meticulous care in following their interpretation of the Torah.

But we know they weren't well loved by Jesus, nor did they welcome him as their Messiah as they ought to have. Why was this? Well, one key reason is they took the interpretation of the Torah to the extreme. They microanalyzed it, they picked it apart, they debated and concluded, and then they created an oral tradition of their explanation and interpretation to parallel and supplement the Torah.

They made the what and the how more important than the why of the law. For example, we have a well known story in Luke, chapter 14, Luke 14, verses 1 through 6. It happened that when he went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching him closely and there in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy, and Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? But they kept silent.

And he took hold of him and healed him and sent him away, and he said to them, which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day? And they could make no reply to this. Let us here make a distinction between the what and the how of the Sabbath as opposed to the why. The Pharisees were focused on the first two aspects.

They taught you were not to work on the Sabbath, but that left some gray areas. What actually constituted work? Well, they applied their logic and their intellects to the problem, and they finally came up with a clear rule to follow. The Jews, in their estimation, were prohibited from doing, and I quote, anything that a person broke a sweat to accomplish. That's work that's nice and clear cut.

You can understand why they liked an answer like this, and yet what a trap they fell into. It's not a new trap, it's a trap common to mankind. We see it all around us. It's so tempting to draw a line in the sand that suits our vision of holiness.

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And then we don't have to judge each case or each person on their merits. It's much more comfortable and easy. We just look at that line, and if they cross the line, they cross the line and we don't have to think hard. But that's not why the law is there, brethren. It's not a club of righteousness with which we can beat each other over the head.

It's not a competition to see who can adhere more closely to a long list of rules. It's not a test to see who can score better on a 600 question. Fill in the blank exam instead. It's a long form essay question. We have to write our answers in our hearts and our daily lives.

We have to justify them with our reason and our best understanding of each situation, and we're not scored based upon a simple rubric of true or false correct incorrect responses. Instead, we're assessed based upon our intent and our heart and our growth, our character, the degree to which we adhere to the spirit of the rules which God gave us. Why did God set apart the Sabbath? It was not a test to see who could figure out some puzzle embedded within the law.

It was a reminder of God's creation. It was to bear in mind that on the seventh day our Father rested, and we should rest from worldly pursuits as well. It is a day to take time out for our brethren and our families and for reflection on God's word and to recharge our spirits that struggle the rest of the week against the world and the flesh and the devil. Furthermore, it can be seen as a picture of God's kingdom, the completion of his plan. In short, the point of the Sabbath was to give us time to think on holy things and to glorify God.

Now, did Jesus glorify God by healing a man on the Sabbath? Absolutely. How could anybody who understood the intent of the Sabbath object to an action that glorified God? Is God concerned with whether or not we sweat on the Sabbath? I don't think so.

I think his concern is whether or not our hearts are in the right place. One of my favorite scriptural passages is 1 Corinthians 8, the passage referring to the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, 1 Corinthians 8 and I'm going to jump around a little bit, verse 1 and 4 and 7, 9, 10 and 13. So just somewhere in 1 Corinthians 8 now, concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. Therefore, concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world and that there is no God but one.

However, not all men have this knowledge, but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you who have knowledge dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause my brother to stumble. Now, why is this a favorite passage of mine?

Well, because it illustrates that I believe, or what I believe are two very important and underappreciated concepts. One, that some rules are not as set in stone as you might think. For example, it's not inherently wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but rather, it's wrong to believe there is some value in the meat sacrificed to idols, and two, if I recognize the spirit of a rule might be more expansive than others may see it, I still must be conscientious of my brethren, who perhaps hold a different view and may be more focused on the letter of the law. Consideration and love for the brethren are the most important rule.

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So what are the rules we feel we need to follow? Do we consider where they come from? Can we make a distinction in the type of rules we adhere to? For example, we know that divine rules are special. They are clearly not created by fallible man.

These are the pinnacle of guidance from our Lord. But be careful, because even these are subject to misinterpretation by our human flesh. Resting on the Sabbath was just such a command, and yet the application was lacking, and so, with all rules that are handed down to us from our Father, we need to make a special effort to try to look beyond the simple and judgmental part of those rules. Don't let yourself be lured into the trap of focusing on the wrong points of emphasis.

If, on the other hand, we are following rules and guidance devised by man, we should automatically maintain a healthy perspective, recognizing that such rules tend to be imperfect at best, and even in those cases, we can find a distinction between the letter of a rule and the spirit of a rule. One very simple example might be the act of jaywalking. While technically it is illegal to cross a road without making use of a designated crosswalk or walk signal, we can also recognize that there is a dramatic difference between doing so on a busy road in New York City or an isolated road in rural Arkansas. While the letter of the law is a good place to begin, we must use reason in all cases because the spirit of the law is where its most important essence lies.

Furthermore, we may follow rules because we see others doing so. When asked why a rule exists, do you ever give the answer, well, we've always done it that way. That type of response shows a complete lack of interest in the spirit of the law. To return to the jaywalking example, if a child asks you well, why shouldn't you do so? The best answer is not because we've always done so.

Instead, it's an opportunity to explain how to safely cross the street, especially if you're in downtown New York, and not only that, but it's a chance to teach the child to consider why we need to keep safety in mind.

Now, habits aren't all bad. There is a reason that we as humans rely on them. In part, habit is a mechanism for efficiency. We don't have the mental bandwidth to always be analyzing and re-evaluating everything we do or think, and so we develop shortcuts and rules of thumb to smooth out the many rough edges of our daily lives.

When a carpenter is squaring up a door, they could pull out a device to measure all the angles and try to confirm things that way. Or as a fellow math teacher once tried to explain to a friend, they could use the Pythagorean theorem to measure this and this and make sure that all the arithmetic lines up, and this carpenter friend just laughed. He says, that's too much work. You just make sure the diagonals are the same length.

It's way easier. Now, we all have our ways, and they may all work fine. But often there's a shortcut or a rule of thumb to save us the effort for certain common tasks. When should you fill up your car with gas? Maybe once there's less than a quarter of a tank.

My wife wishes I would follow that rule. How do you convert from Fahrenheit to Celsius? Well, a quick estimate can be had by subtracting 30 and dividing by 2. How long does it take to drive 300 miles? Divide by 50.

I'm sure there are more. The math ones were the most readily available to my mind, and then there are shortcuts for what to wear. No doubt some of you have had the stress of trying to figure out what should we wear tomorrow. The worst, as I recall, was trying to figure this out in the morning

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when you're already running a bit late for work.

And so one solution is to pick out your clothing the night before. Now, Steve Jobs found a great solution. He wore the same outfit every day. Every day. Jeans, black, long sleeved turtleneck and sneakers.

Now, when you have a habitual outfit, it frees up your mind to handle the other more important decisions of the day. Just one less thing to worry about, and researchers have concluded that we have only so much decision making energy in a given day. So removing the less important decisions from our plate helps reallocate that energy. Where it is more necessary.

Not only that, but schools have recognized, and we were just talking about this this morning, schools have recognized other benefits to standard outfits like school uniforms. There's a reduction in unacceptable dress, a reduction in distractions as a result of unacceptable dress, a reduction in the hierarchical battles that some students engage in because of style. Now, these are the upsides to habitual actions, but it should be no surprise that there are of course, accompanying downsides. When we become accustomed to following habitual actions, we start to believe they're the only acceptable way. So someone who questions or deviates from the acceptable course is then often quickly judged, in the best case as careless, and in the worst case as somehow morally lacking.

Our flesh is far too willing to judge on very little evidence, and we need to be careful to not feed it that kind of half baked fuel.

Another peril is that after a long period of time following a habit, perhaps even over many years, we may lose sight of the real reason for our behavior. Why do we read the manna in preparation for a testimony meeting? Could we instead substitute a reading from Songs in the Night? Surely it's a small difference and yet perhaps it has never occurred to some. Why?

Well, that's just the way we do things. On occasion, a chairman has substituted the vow song to Open Day of Convention, and I've seen some taken aback. Less because of any particular rationale, I think, and more because it violates their habitual expectations. There's no doubt comfort for the Catholic who recites the rosary, and yet is there not equally a danger that in all that repetition they start to lose a sense of the meaning of the words?

Our brains are actually built to identify danger, and danger comes from surprises and the unknown. In fact, this danger, this danger recognition occurs at the deepest, most instinctive levels of the brain. So you could make the argument that this response is perhaps among the most fleshly in that it doesn't seek to understand or think through alternatives. It just reacts, often in ways that are the least productive. In any event, it's not the familiar things that trigger our attention, but it's the unfamiliar things.

There can be a rumble or a hum to daily life with animals and home appliances and children across the street, and we don't notice them, and, and when it suddenly grows silent, that's what gets your attention. I'll share one more anecdote about how our habits can blind us. I keep an eye out for interesting discussions around math education in the US and I recently saw a commentary on and an excerpt from a new book or relatively recent book on how culture shapes and is the secret ingredient in education.

It details how Estonia completely discarded its traditional approach to math and science and reading education after their break from Russia, and they overhauled things. They reexamined

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what they taught, both when and how they taught it, and they grew to become the top country in math, science and reading outside of Asia, and the difference between a country like Estonia and the U.S. there's some great differences there, but one key difference is they were willing to throw it all out and build it from the ground up.

They questioned everything. They didn't permit themselves to fall victim to the trap of we should teach this and that in such and such an order because we always have. The only thing worse than that rationale is lying to yourself about why you won't change. Sometimes that's the real reason. But we convince ourselves there's value where really there is just more familiarity and the convenience of this well worn path.

So by now we've established a few key points. Often it is the intent of a law or process that is the most important, and through repetition we can become far too focused on that process and lose sight of the intent. So let's take a small look at how we can break the rules. Maybe before we go there, I should lead with a disclaimer. I read that passage earlier about the eating of meat sacrificed to idols for a reason.

Just because something doesn't offend me doesn't mean everyone here will be okay with it. In any conversation about the rules we hold dear, we must be completely clear this ends up being an individual choice. Furthermore, we must work to have faith and trust in our brethren that they're working at this just as we are. Our decisions are going to be different based on our experiences, our temperament, our where we are in our walk, and so I will talk through some examples.

But you each must look at your own habits and decide for yourselves which ones are all about routine.

Are you paying attention to the spirit? And if you don't like my suggestions, that's fine, because they're only intended to get you thinking. If you think there's a good reason, there's a good reason. Go for it. So for starters, do we habitually start a day of convention in the same way every time?

And if so, do we do this because it is important to do so or because it's convenient? And we become so accustomed to this procedure that it feels necessary? We mentioned a short while ago how some brethren enjoy beginning the day by reading the Vow, and I can absolutely see why some find this very valuable. Is there a problem with the vow song as an occasional alternative or maybe some other reading to get our hearts attuned to spiritual matters? If someone brought in a really experienced great reading this last week and I want to share it with you, is that appropriate?

And if someone has a different thought about how that day convention should be started, do we judge them and jump to conclusions? Is it really about the content or are we perhaps extremely uncomfortable with change? Moreover, is it really wise to raise some of these behaviors to the status of rule or law whereby we judge someone else for not following them? Ought we not permit people to think for themselves and deviate from tradition and norms in healthy and constructive ways?

What about asking sisters to pray at meeting? I'm not going to tell you should or you shouldn't do this, but I am going to ask you to consider how you feel and why. In some circumstances I know there are brethren who are uncomfortable with a sister offering a prayer at a Sunday meeting. Or perhaps there are others who are okay with this but less comfortable with a prayer offered at a convention. Or maybe it's a small gathering or depending on how many brethren are available, these are all important questions.

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There are also habits. They can become habits, and maybe this is for a very good reason. Maybe it's not the real danger. The only danger is that you follow that habit without being sure you understand why.

So I encourage you to do just that. Ask yourselves why can they give a good prayer? Do you believe they bring their own insight and perspective? In First Corinthians 11:14, there are scriptures that cover speaking and prophesying by women in the church. Do we feel these instructions apply equally to prayer?

Is that the same thing as speaking and prophesying? Were these general injunctions or very specific points made to a specific group that had a specific problem? Depends where you read, but there are some interesting points about that particular group and why these points were being made. Like I said, just trying to get you to think about why not trying to change your opinion. Can you think of other areas where we do a lot of quick deciding without a lot of prayerful consideration?

I'm sure I have many blind spots and would love to learn about the things that you feel are perhaps too habitual in our spiritual walk. I'm sure you all recognize other things than I do. When humans are afraid, our brains can go into fight or flight mode and our ability to see the big picture or to consider the opinions of others can be sorely lacking. But remember, perfect love, casteth out fear. Look at the Pharisees.

How did they react to different? They absolutely feared. They could only see the way that different affected their power and their comfort zone. No doubt they had a deep and viscerally uncomfortable reaction to our Lord, not because there was any particular deviation from the Spirit of the law, but because there was a deviation from what they had decided and they were unable or unwilling to even pause for a moment and reflect. It is also very important to emphasize this does not mean that anything outside our comfort zone should be encouraged.

Quite the contrary. Sometimes that comfort zone is there for a reason, but it does suggest we ought to at least consider it from time to time. Imagine a sailor hundreds of years ago. They would check their course numerous times throughout their journey. In the same way, we should check our course from time to time to make sure we've not wandered in the wrong direction or miscritical information.

There's nothing wrong with re evaluating, just making sure. Back to the Pharisees do the Scriptures give us any indication on their part that they made any effort to understand we do see Nicodemus at least partially swayed by Jesus, but he was in the vast minority. Aside from him, we don't see much evidence of an effort to reconcile the new and different message coming from Jesus with their laws or more accurately, the extremely detailed framework they constructed on top of God's laws. Although it is easy to talk in generalities about the difference between the letter of the law and the Spirit of the law, it can be much more difficult to find that distinction in practice. One interesting example is found in 1 Samuel chapter 21 David was on the run from Saul and came to the town where the tabernacle was.

He met with the priest and asked for food. In fact, he even misled him about what brought him there, and the most amazing part was that the only food available was the old showbread. We read in 1 Samuel 21 verses 3 and 4 and 6. Now therefore, what do you have on hand?

Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found. The priest answered David and said, there is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread, if only the young men have kept

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themselves from women. So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the presence, which was removed from before the Lord, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away.

We know that this bread was consecrated for use in the tabernacle, and by law was intended as a symbol, and to be eaten specifically by Aaron and his sons in a holy place. Leviticus 24:8, 9. What in the world was David doing eating it? Yes, it's true, he was eating the old bread. But there's really nothing in the law as we see it to consider this particular situation in and of itself.

It's an interesting story. But it gets more interesting. We read in Matthew, chapter 12, Matthew 12:1-8. At that time, Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain, and e.

But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, look, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath. I guess they were sweating while picking the grain. But he said to them, have you not read what David did when he became hungry? He and his companions, how he entered the house of God and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone. Or have you not read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?

But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, I desire compassion and not sacrifice, you would have condemned the innocent for the Son of Man. Rather, you would not have condemned the innocent for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. So why is Jesus mentioning this? He appears to be making the very important point that the Pharisees are once again getting the wrong message from the law.

They're so focused on pointing their finger at violators, they aren't giving any thought to the intent behind the law. Moreover, they remained ignorant of something much more important than the Sabbath picture. They could not see that Jesus was their long awaited Messiah. Things were changing and they were missing out. Why were the disciples picking the heads of grain and eating it?

Because they were traveling with Jesus. They recognized him, they chose to follow him, and they wanted to learn from him in the midst of all that they did not have food close at hand, so they ate a bit of grain while walking. Was this the kind of thing that God really forbade? If his law was intended to make sure the hearts and minds of his people were focused on him and His Word and His plan, and even His Son. I'm pretty sure the disciples of all people were doing exactly what they should have been doing.

And picking up a little grain along the way was hardly detracting from that, and when Jesus mentions David, he appears to be saying approximately the same thing. The fact that he mentions it at all suggests that by one interpretation, David could be considered in the wrong. You could easily make the claim that he had violated the letter of the law. But Jesus argument strongly implies there's a deeper layer there.

It is difficult for us to be exactly sure what the underlying justification was. Some suggest the law didn't apply to old bread. Some suggest the priest received special permission from God. My preferred answer is the primary purpose of the bread was for Aaron and his sons, but once that purpose had passed, and especially in a case of need, there was no reason to prohibit it. To be sure, there's no scriptural justification for that interpretation.

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You're welcome to your own answer. But the lesson at its core is that Jesus himself confirmed that although the letter of the law would convict David according to the spirit of the law, he remained blameless. No doubt there are any number of ways in which it would have been inappropriate to do so, from asking out of laziness or pride, or perhaps eating it while unclean. We've said it before, and I think it bears repeating that when it comes to doing what is right, there are not always easy answers. That is why we must continue to struggle with the challenge of wrestling with the Scriptures and why we must be patient with others who are going through that exact same challenge and maybe coming to different conclusions.

There's of course a danger in being too free thinking, but there's also a danger in being so closed minded that ours is the only acceptable path. This is exactly the behavior of the Pharisees who had determined in their brilliance that sweat was unacceptable on the Sabbath, and so therefore healing must be equally unacceptable. Unfortunately, the takeaway of this argument is that there is no simple list of answers that we can relate to in order to do the right thing. There's not even a simple approach to finding those answers. That's what the Pharisees wanted, it's what they thought they had.

And the blind following of those answers was a huge part of what prevented them from recognizing the Messiah. Instead of attempting to provide each of you with answers, this is a message of encouragement for each of you to look, to be aware and to recognize that each of our human tendencies to recognize each of our human tendencies and to do what you can to fight against the negative ones, and so we'll leave you with a few warning signs for us all to bear in mind. When we hear a new thought, do we reject it immediately and without consideration? Or do we see someone do something in a different manner and immediately think to ourselves, well, at least we're doing it the right way.

Do we find ourselves doing things out of habit without ever actually asking ourselves why do we do it that way? When someone suggests something outside our comfort zone, is our first response one of fear? Do we determine our final thought or response without having once considered the view from the other side of the thought? And do we think there is no possibility of a middle ground? That is, are we sure that we have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

And if I may say, if we feel this way, shouldn't we feel really careful and introspective? That's a really strong opinion to have. I mean, I'm sure the Pharisees felt exactly like that. Brethren, do not get the wrong impression. It's not my intent to literally encourage breaking of the law.

Instead, I'm hoping you will walk away with a bit more curiosity about your own habits and traditions, and that you will spend some time considering how to spend more of your time in meditation about the why and less time going through the motions again and again merely because that's the way we've always done it.

Our goal should be spending the time to really understand his will and His Word. For it's only when we have mastered the Spirit behind the rules that we will know when and how to follow them. At a deeper level, Our Lord actually gave us the ultimate tool to discern the Spirit of the Law. He gave us one test to apply that should help direct our thoughts and actions. In Matthew chapter 22, he shares the greatest commandment of the law, Matthew 22 starting with verse 37, he said to them, 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 foremost commandment, and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

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So praise and thanks to God.