

With only a few weeks left in the Big Ten season, reality is starting to set in that some teams are having a better than expected season, others are having seasons they already want to forget. Some coaches have secure jobs, while others are on the hot seat. There is one reality that has stayed the same since 1906 in NCAA football. That was the year that it was officially decided that teams needed to gain 10 yards for a 1st down. The 1907 guide book told teams how to make the now very familiar posts with a 10 yard long chain. Chain gangs have been used ever since to determine if a team gets a 1st down or not. Ever season individual games and even whole seasons have hung on those measurements.

1st down measurements are only 1 part of the game. This year's official NCAA Football Rules book is 273pages long. No wonder there is confusion at times about what the right call should be. Confusion over rules has been with us for a long time. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had identified 613 individual laws. How could anyone remember all of them? We have trouble remembering 10 Commandments! One of the religious leaders tried to trap Jesus when he asked this trick question. ***"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"*** (Matthew 22:36 NLT)

Jesus must be a football fan, because his answer has two measuring sticks. Jesus told the religious leader, ***"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself."*** (Matthew 22:37-39 NLT) Jesus didn't say anything new. He repeated the commands recorded in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The one thing that Jesus did is to link the two together. He tells us how important it is to love God and to love other people. Love is the greatest commandment. Love is the measuring stick for life.

The first pole, or greatest command, is to love God. We talked about that last week when we said that God wants followers who are totally committed to Him. Of course, we know that we don't always love God. He doesn't always get 1st place in our hearts or our lives. There are so many other things that can come between us and God. It is easy for us to look at other people and see their "gods" that come between them and the Lord, God. But it is not so easy for us to do that because we can find excuses, justification, rationalizations for our own false gods. If we gave God 1st place in our lives, we would keep all of the rest of the commandments. We would always honor and respect Him and use His name properly. We would joyfully and gladly worship him, not just on Sundays, but every day. And we would treat other people with respect, honor their relationships, protect their possessions and reputations and defend their lives.

Jesus doesn't want us to just say that we love God. We say we love a lot of things. I love chocolate, sports, my wife and kids. God created the first family and wants us to love and care

for those in our families. But these people or things should never become more important in our lives than God. Jesus says to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind. That is total commitment. And that is what God expects from us.

The second pole is to love our neighbors. That is not always easy, either. Sometimes things like self interest, laziness, distrust, dislike, or fear can stand in the way. It is hard for us to love someone when we have no personal interest in them. Do you remember how Jesus defines the world neighbor? He defines neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan and says that anyone that we encounter who needs our help is our neighbor. (Luke 10) Jesus also tells us to love our enemies. (Matthew 5:44) That's not easy. But it is what God expects from us. Jesus also tells us that anything we do for someone else in his name, we do it for him. (Matthew 25:40)

But Jesus doesn't ask us to do something that He wouldn't do himself. Jesus shows us what love is. His life was one of compassion. With his very first miracle, Jesus saved a young newlywed couple from total embarrassment by turning water into wine at their wedding reception so that the party could go on. The Gospels are full of accounts of Jesus healing the sick. Jesus defines love this way. ***"This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends."*** (John 15:12-13 NLT) John, one of Jesus' twelve closest friends, describes love in these words, ***"This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins."*** (1 John 4:10 NLT) We know that Jesus did just that. He died in our place to pay the price for our sins. God's love for us in Christ is the greatest love of all time.

If we had to love God enough to earn His favor, we would be in trouble because we could never love Him enough. If we had to love others enough to make God love us, we would never know if or when we had done enough. There will always be people out there in need of our love, in need of our help, in need of our support. We love God because he first loves us. And we can love others because of His love living inside of us. Have you ever wondered how you could love the unlovable? Do you need someone to show you how to help the people who are already around you? God can do that by transforming our lives. Galatians chapter 5 tells us that the 1st fruit of God's Spirit in the life of the Christian is love. The Good News is God already loves us. The reality is that we only need to respond to His love by loving Him back and loving others. And He even makes that possible.

So how are we doing? What do you think would happen if Jesus were to break out the twin sticks of loving God and loving other to measure us today? How would we measure up? Would we 1st and goal or 4th and a mile to go? Reality #7 is not only that God commands us to love, but He loves us first and gives the ability and the desire to love him and others. Amen.