



FLAMES OF FAITH



18 Elements of Catholicism
to Light Your Way

Peter Darcy

Flames of Faith: 18 Elements of Catholicism to Light Your Way

By Peter Darcy

Table of Contents

Introduction

Section One: God & Neighbor

1. [The Two Great Commandments \(Included in this overview\)](#)
2. The Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit
3. The Twelve Fruits of the Holy Spirit

Section Two: Church

4. The Four Marks of the Church
5. The Precepts of the Church
6. The Apostles Creed

Section Three: Sacraments & Disciplines

7. The Seven Sacraments
8. Guidelines for Fasting & Abstinence
9. Rules for the Eucharistic Fast

Section Four: Moral Life

10. The Ten Commandments
11. Two Types of Sin
12. The Act of Contrition

Section Five: Virtue

13. The Three Theological Virtues
14. The Four Cardinal Virtues
15. [The Golden Rule \(Included in this overview\)](#)

Section Six: Mercy

16. The Corporal Works of Mercy
17. The Spiritual Works of Mercy
18. [The Four Last Things \(Included in this overview\)](#)

Conclusion

Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1 – The Two Great Commandments

“Love” may be the trickiest word in the English language. If you think about it, when we say we “love” certain things, we could be using the same word in totally different senses. “I love chocolate-covered cherries” or “I love sports” has a fundamentally different meaning than “I love my wife and children.”

Most people would be willing to give their lives for their loved ones, but no one would be willing to die for a box of chocolates (well, maybe a few chocoholics would).

We are faced with this same dilemma of the English language when addressing the Two Great Commandments. Let’s first hear how Jesus expresses them:

One of the scribes, when he came forward...asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

Notice the word “love” in both of these statements? It has two different meanings.

We can only love the infinite God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. There are no conditions placed on this love. It encompasses the whole person and implies a sense of worship and obedience. It is total and absolute – the way God loves us.

Human Love

Not so with people! Jesus does not command us to love other human beings with heart, soul, mind, and strength. That would be impossible. Even worse, it would actually be a form of idolatry.

You may have witnessed a scenario where someone loves another person “too much”. It puts the other person in the place of God. A situation like that always ends in disaster because it places a burden on the persons who are objects of a love they cannot possibly live up to.

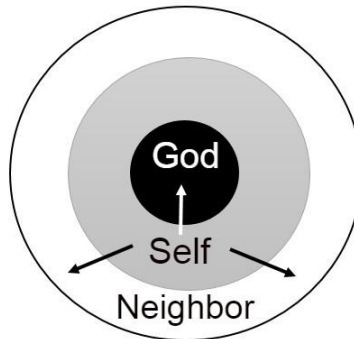
The way we are supposed to love our neighbor is “as we love ourselves.” We will explain more about this type of love in the chapter on the Golden Rule (Chapter 15). However, God’s command is simple and clear: loving one’s self is *the condition* for loving other people.

Love of self is not the kind of narcissism we see in the lives of celebrities and self-absorbed individuals. Love of self is self-respect, integrity, character, and humility.

Let’s look more closely at how these loves relate to one another.

Two Commandments, Three Loves

The Two Great Commandments contain three types of love. Love of God (#1) is absolute, as we have noted. Love of neighbor (#2) is an expression of our self-love or self-respect (#3). Think of these loves as concentric circles. Here's how they would look in a chart:



Admittedly, the chart is pretty basic, but so is love. Let's not make it more complex than it is. Someone once said that "Love directed *upward* is adoration / Love directed *outward* is charity / Love directed *inward* is self-respect."

Notice that "self" is the middle *ring* of this chart, not the middle *circle*. The person who loves God and neighbor in a proper balance is not the center of his own universe, God is. Keeping God in the center of everything, we are able to love self and others with much greater strength and genuineness.

The middle ring also makes us intercessors and mediators between the ones we love: our lives become a channel through which love of God enters the world and through which our prayers for others rise up to God.

Two commandments, three loves. Simple.

Love is Real

The two Great Commandments are not abstract. They are very real. To prove this, we can ask ourselves some concrete questions about how we express these loves in real time.

"Love of God" Test

1. Do I worship God in my interior life: heart (emotions), mind (intellect) and strength (will)? And with the totality of my being (soul)?
2. Do I often express my worship through the virtue of religion, that is, being regularly faithful to religious practices and teachings?
3. Do I obey the moral law and pray every day?

"Love of Self" Test

1. Do I neglect my basic needs to the point of betraying my own health and wellbeing?

2. Do I invest reasonable amounts of time, resources, and effort in the care of my mind, my soul, and my spiritual fitness?
3. Does my family (an extension of self) receive my best efforts and tangible expressions of love on a daily basis?

“Love of Neighbor” Test

1. Do I follow the Golden Rule (Chapter 15) in treating others the way I wish to be treated and in loving them as I love/respect myself?
2. Do I regularly practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy (Chapters 16 and 17) on behalf of those who suffer or are in need of my help?
3. Do I develop the human virtues (Section 5) so that I can be the best possible person for the sake of others?

What must we do to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves? To love God, our neighbor, and ourselves we must keep the commandments of God and of the Church, and perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. *“My dear children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).* ~The Baltimore Catechism, 190.

Inseparable Commandments

We can use another familiar image to describe the Two Great Commandments: they are as inseparable as two sides of a coin.

Whenever anyone asked Jesus, “Which commandment (singular) is the greatest?” He always answered the question by talking about the Two Great Commandments (plural) because they are actually inseparable.

We cannot fulfill these two commandments *independently* of each other because one without the other deprives our love of integrity. Let’s take two examples of this:

Hypocrisy: Those who love God without love of neighbor are like the Pharisees in the Gospel. They would “devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers.” Jesus rejects hypocrisy of that sort because it separates love of God from love of neighbor. Jesus adds, “They will receive a very severe condemnation” (Luke 20:47).

Humanitarianism: On the other hand, those who pretend to love their fellow human beings without transcendent faith in God usually end up doing great harm to the people they are trying to help.

Examples abound, but the most serious example of that today involves the person who believes that abortion is a legitimate help to women. This mindset is a kind of secular humanitarianism without any reference to the law of God, and

it always harms women emotionally, spiritually, and sometimes even physically, not to mention that it always ends in the death of an innocent child.

St. John the Evangelist sums up this kind of partial love. For him, love of our neighbor is an expression of our love of God:

One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother (1 John 4:20–21).

So, in sum, the Two Great Commandments are actually one commandment of love. There's no better way to conclude our chapter than with a quote from a saint who knew a lot about love of God and neighbor:

“Spread love everywhere you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next door neighbor... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness; kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting.” ~Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Summary

The Two Great Commandments require us to love God and our neighbor in a balance. In sum:

1. They are different kinds of love: one is total, the other is conditional.
2. Love of God requires worship and challenges us to obey His moral law.
3. Love of neighbor requires self-respect as its primary condition, enabling us to live according to the Golden Rule and the demands of charity.
4. These commandments should never be separated; they are two sides of the same coin.
5. Love of God without neighbor is religious hypocrisy. Love of neighbor without God is empty humanitarianism.

Chapter 15 – The Golden Rule

We're accustomed to thinking about "rules" in a negative way, as limitations on what we want to do. But when we talk about *The Golden Rule*, we are using "rule" in a very different sense.

We must think, instead, of a "ruler" – a measuring rod, a yardstick, a unit of measurement. That gives the term a different feel, doesn't it? The Golden Rule is not just another restrictive guideline for Christians to follow. It is a standard of measurement.

But what exactly does it measure? It measures our own behavior.

Before we discuss the basics of The Golden Rule, let's look at several places where it appears in Scripture. As the essential dimension of our love of neighbor (see Chapter 1), the Golden Rule is part of the revelation of God's love to humanity.

The Golden Rule in Scripture

Tobit 4:15	"Do to no one what you yourself hate."
Matthew 7:12	"Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."
Luke 6:31-32	"Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them."
Galatians 5:14	"For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Intentions vs. Actions

The question may be asked: Why do we need a Golden Rule at all? There is one very good reason. Namely, we cannot see our own behavior objectively.

We judge ourselves by our *internal intentions and needs* (which we always presume are good, right?) while we judge others by their *external actions* (behaviors) or by how their actions affect us. And in fact, sometimes we are completely blind to the way our own behaviors affect others.

In other words, we can see into *our own* hearts, but we can't see into the hearts of others. Only God can see this hidden dimension of human existence (1 Samuel 16:7).

Because of this, God tells us to measure “good” and “bad” behaviors in human relationships by another yardstick: the Golden Rule. It uses our basic human desire to be treated fairly as the standard for deciding how we will treat others. It is not based on subjective feelings or intentions.

Here’s the core of it: If we don’t like something other people do to us, why should we do that same thing to someone else? On the other hand, if we appreciate when someone does something good for us – or if we wish people *would do* certain good things for us – then we should do those same things for others.

If it’s good for me, it’s probably good for thee. If it’s not good for me, chances are my neighbor won’t like it either!

Removes the Double Standard

Here we have perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Golden Rule: it removes that double standard of judging ourselves differently from the way we judge others. It gives us a single standard of judgment about human behavior that applies both to ourselves and to our neighbor. Jesus gave us a parable about this:

“Oh God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity,” said the Pharisee (Luke 18:11) as he looked down his nose at the sinful tax collector kneeling before God in repentance. The Pharisee was the centerpiece and hero of his own religious drama.

Because of that, the Pharisee felt free to tell God about all the faults of the sinner next to him: *“greedy, dishonest, adulterous”*. It’s easy to see faults in others, isn’t it? It’s not quite as easy to see those same faults (or any faults) in ourselves.

In other words, the Golden Rule challenges that “inner Pharisee” in each of us who interacts with others the way a superior being relates to his inferiors. It injects humility into our relationships because it reminds us that – yes – we really *are* like the rest of humanity, as much as we hate to admit it.

Sins of Omission

The fact that Jesus stated the Golden Rule in a positive form (“Do unto others...”) adds another dimension to the negative principle from the Old Testament above. When Tobit was counseling his son Tobias on how to act in the world, he told him: “Do to no one what you yourself hate.”

Tobit enunciates a solid principle of upright conduct, but it doesn’t go far enough.

For example, what if we witnessed another person being abused or cheated out of money or attacked before our very eyes? Should we just say, “Gosh, I would never do that to another person” and then go about our own business?

That is not Christianity! That is what we call a “sin of omission”. That is, Christians are sometimes *obliged to act* in a morally righteous way in order to fulfill the law of love toward our neighbor.

In certain circumstances, we may judge that it’s impossible to help someone in need (we shouldn’t think we can solve everyone’s problems), but we *should* ask ourselves a Golden Rule question at a moment like that: “

What if I were in that guy’s shoes? Would I want someone to speak up for me or help me against this injustice?”

You may recall the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). It’s a good example of a serious sin of omission regarding one’s neighbor. The wealthy man totally ignored the suffering of his fellow human being laying at the gate of the rich man’s own home. The man never asked himself the Golden Rule question:

“How would I feel if a man who has all the comforts of this world stepped over me and ignored my serious needs every time he entered his home?”

“Be generous to the poor orphans and those in need. The man to whom our Lord has been liberal ought not to be stingy. We shall one day find in Heaven as much rest and joy as we ourselves have dispensed in this life.” ~St. Ignatius Loyola

The Common Good

The above parable indicates that there is a social dimension to the Golden Rule which literally helps to keep society from falling apart.

Imagine how different society would be if everyone held themselves to this higher standard of behavior: I don’t cheat others because I don’t like to be cheated; I don’t attack others because I don’t like to be physically or verbally assaulted, etc.?

A lot of social ills would cease overnight if people took bad behavior *as personally* as that! The world would also be totally transformed if people asked themselves what good they could do to others to improve their lives.

The Golden Rule is the foundation of what Catholic social teaching calls “the common good”, which means the good of society as a whole. Societies fall apart when people act only in their own self-interest.

The Law of the Gospel requires us to ... put into practice the words of the Lord. It is summed up in the Golden Rule, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; this is the law and the prophets." The entire Law of the Gospel is contained in the "new commandment" of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us (CCC, 1970).

The Challenge

When Jesus gave us this standard of judgment, He didn't say it would be easy! In fact, the Golden Rule challenges the cultural standard for viewing the world, which most people naturally view through a lens focused on their own wants, needs, or desires.

There is nothing wrong with having plans for personal advancement, but there is something deeply wrong about walking through life like the Pharisee with no regard for anyone else but oneself. The Golden Rule saves us from living a selfish life.

Like everything in Christianity, we must interiorize and practice this standard one situation at a time, throughout the course of our lives, so that it becomes our single standard of judging how to relate to others.

Without the Golden Rule ruling over people's *hearts*, this world would be a pretty dismal place.

Summary

The Golden Rule provides a standard for judging our own actions. We do to others what we want done to us. In sum, the Golden Rule:

1. Functions as a "ruler" (yardstick, standard, unit of measurement) for evaluating our behavior
2. Is a positive re-statement of a negative principle from the Book of Tobit and also helps us to avoid sins of omission
3. Overcomes a "double standard" of judgment (that is, the hypocrisy of the Pharisee)
4. Must be internalized through countless acts of conscientious judgment and self-examination over time
5. Is a basic principle of Justice and the foundation of the common good of all societies

Chapter 18 – The Four Last Things

One Sunday, the new pastor of a parish mounted the pulpit and told his congregation that he felt privileged to be their pastor. He promised that he would dedicate himself heart and soul to pastoral ministry and try his best always to be available to them in any need.

Then he said one thing that everyone remembered, even years later: “I will always love you and serve you, but I will not coddle you or tell you what you want to hear. I will tell you what you *need* to hear to get you to heaven.”

That priest’s example perfectly summarizes the Church’s teaching on the Four Last Things – they are what we *need* to hear to get us to heaven. The Four Last Things are these: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, and they’re too important for our eternal salvation for the Church to ignore.

As difficult as these realities are, the Church always *speaks the truth in love* (Ephesians 4:15) as a parent speaks to a son or daughter. Let’s take them one at a time.

Death

If you walk into the Capuchin Franciscan Church in Rome, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the friars will take you down into the Church’s crypt to see perhaps the most shocking reminder of death in the annals of Church history.

From the 1500s to the 1800s the Franciscans had no adequate burial space for their deceased priests and brothers, so they buried them in – you guessed it – the basement of their church. There are four thousand skeletons in the huge crypt!

Some of the bones and skulls are arranged in displays, and at the very center is one skeleton standing upright and dressed in a Franciscan habit. This one holds a sign that reads, “What you are now, we once were; what we are now, *you shall be.*”

Admittedly, it’s a bit gruesome...but it gets the point across, doesn’t it?

Death is not just a physical reality. It is also a spiritual reality we all have to face. The Church describes the point of death as that moment when our souls separate from our bodies and our spiritual destiny is fixed for all eternity: “Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ” (CCC, 1021).

More specifically, each person “receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death...either entrance into the blessedness of

heaven through a purification...or immediate and everlasting damnation” (CCC, 1022).

Preparation for death, like paying taxes, is not an issue we should be lazy about because what follows death may be equally shocking if we make the wrong decision.

Three scripture passages on Judgment

1. “And the [reprobate] will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). 2. “Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son” (John 5:22). 3. “God will repay everyone according to his works” (Romans 2:6).

Judgment

There is nothing more common in our morally relativistic age than to hear people scolding others about being “judgmental”. (Scolding is a pretty judgmental attitude in itself when you think about it.)

The Church is not afraid of judgment because God has revealed a final judgment as one of the last realities we must face in life. The Church is only afraid of being judged *unworthy* of heaven.

There are two types of judgment after death. The first is the immediate judgment of our souls after the moment of death, which the Church calls the “particular judgment”.

A graphic way to envision the particular judgment is this: When we die, each of us will sit down with the Lord Jesus, one-on-one. Then together we will watch an extremely detailed investigative documentary *of our own lives* from birth to death: it will feature everything we ever did, every decision we ever made, and every good and bad act.

And Jesus will let us know what He thinks of it at the end. Won't that be fun?

Based upon the evaluation of our conduct in this life, each person will “receive his eternal retribution in his immortal soul.” Reward or punishment. It doesn't get any clearer than that. Numerous scripture passages tell us we will be “judged according to our deeds” (Romans 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17, among others).

At the end of time, there will be a second judgment called the “general judgment” in which Christ will come “to judge the living and the dead” as we profess in the Creed (Chapter 6). There He will reveal God's whole plan for the entire human race as envisioned in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25.

Admittedly, the second judgment is hard for us to fully comprehend, so it's probably better to keep our eyes focused on preparing for that *first* judgment.

Heaven

It should be clear by now that the goal of our lives is to get to heaven, and the Church's mission is to help us get there. God has not revealed in great detail what heaven will be like, but it's not a *physical* place. Rather, it is a state of being and blessedness that the Bible can only describe in beautiful and peaceful images as expressed so well in the Catechism:

"Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live forever with Christ. This mystery of blessed communion with God is beyond all understanding and description. Scripture speaks of it in images: life, light, peace, wedding feast, wine of the kingdom, the Father's house, the heavenly Jerusalem, paradise" (CCC, 1023, 1027).

Included in the Church's understanding of heaven is the notion that we must be completely purified in soul in order to enter there (Revelation 21:27). Those who have died in grace (that is, repenting of their sins) usually undergo a period of purification that we call Purgatory as the final cleansing of the reality and effects of their sins.

Purgatory, however, is not a "third option" between heaven and hell. It is the ante-room of heaven for all who have *already* been saved by their final repentance from sin.

Hell

The reality of Hell, on the other hand, is not very mysterious at all. Many great saints and preachers have tried to stoke its fires hot in order to break us of our denial about it and make us aware that it is *distinctly possible* for beings with free will (namely, humans and angels) to end up there.

Once again, hell is not a physical place as such. It is a state of being devoid of God. It comes about by one's deliberate rejection of God and the eternal happiness He offers to all His children. It is a deep mystery why anyone would reject that offer.

By definition, then, hell is a state of torment that a person freely chooses. If we die in mortal sin without repentance in our soul, hell is our lot for eternity. The Catechism again states:

God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want 'any to perish, but all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). (CCC, 1037)

One final thing regarding hell: we must avoid falling for the error of the Jehovah's Witnesses who say that God will just annihilate all sinners at the end

of time. The true God doesn't create free beings just to annihilate them. Everyone gets to choose where they want to spend eternity (even Jehovah's Witnesses). Their doctrine in itself is a denial of the reality of hell.

For those who are uncomfortable with the idea that a loving God could allow His children to spend all of eternity in hell, remember this: the Church tells us not what we want to hear but what we *need* to hear.

“You have seen hell where the souls of poor sinners go. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many souls will be saved and there will be peace.” ~Our Lady of Fatima to the shepherd children, Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco in 1917

Summary

The teaching on the Four Last Things is the Church's way of helping us stay vigilant about the most important realities of our salvation. In sum, the Four Last Things:

1. Remind us to “stay alert and sober” about the either/or decision we face at the end of our lives
2. Are spoken to us in “truth and love” by the Church, even though they are hard realities to face
3. Give us the key understanding of *ultimate reality*
4. Are often depicted graphically in churches, art, and preaching as reminders of the final consequences of our free choice
5. Admit of no exceptions or negotiation

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