

Sermon for Sunday, July 18, 2010
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GOD'S LAW AND GOD'S LOVE
Mark 12:28-31; Romans 13:8-10

1. Love and the law

Several summers ago, I was visiting my mother. We had been out and were on our way home. My mother said, "We need to make one more stop. I put some tomatoes and zucchini in a bag and I need to stop and give them to Mary." I wondered why. Were they in a garden club where members exchange vegetables?

"No, I just don't think Mary eats very wisely. She doesn't eat enough vegetables. But if give them to her, she'll eat them," she said.

That's my mother: compassionate, thinking about others, loving her neighbor as herself. As Paul said, instead of stealing, we should work, so we "have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28). Her act of love fulfilled the law (Romans 13:10).

The church often studies the Ten Commandments one by one. But it can be a tough study. No matter how hard we try to put them in gospel perspective, the study can leave us feeling guilty and condemned. But the law is important. So for our summer-time classic sermons series, I want to review the Ten Commandments through the summary Jesus gives us. That way we can hear the law and emerge with something better than a cloud of guilt feelings.

Let's pause there for a moment. We have been taught to hate guilt feelings because our culture often says people often want us to feel guilty so that we will follow an ethic that serves them and gets us to do what they want. It's certainly true that people sometimes try to manipulate us through guilt.

But there are other reasons to feel guilty. One of them is that we are guilty. We don't like to feel that we have done something wrong, but true guilt is like a trip to the dentist – painful but necessary. That is, proper feelings of guilt contain blessings. It is a sign of spiritual life when we test our lives against God's standards. It's a sign of life and godliness when we see our failures, lament our failures, repent, and seek the Lord for forgiveness and restoration.

In this way the law leads us to Christ. The Lord is holy, righteous and good and we are not. But God's displeasure and our guilt and self-condemnation constitute an intermediate stage, not a resting place. As John said:

"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17). So "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

This is the great theme of Scripture. God loves us, sent his Son to rescue us and calls forth an answer from us. The gospel is the core of God's love for a fallen race. Among other things, the law teaches us how to answer God's love and to extend that love to others. Fredrick Buechner said:¹

- **The love for equals is a human thing** - of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Magnificent Defeat*, page 105

- The **love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing** - the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.
- The **love for the more fortunate** is a rare thing - to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice.
- Then there is the **love for the enemy** – love for the one who... mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain... This is God's love. It conquers the world.

2. Love for God in the law

Some Pharisees once asked Jesus, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:36). Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).

Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 from the heart of the sermon Moses preached to Israel just before they entered the promised land. Moses first reminds the Israelites that the Lord delivered them from Egypt and entered a covenant with them. As part of that covenant, he gave them His law. Those laws reflect His character and promote a just and loving society.

Israel must love God, serve no other gods and make no idols because there is no god like Him. Moses underscores his point with a series of questions:

- "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7). He is the only God who **listens**.
- "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous... laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (4:8). He is the God who **speaks**.
- He plucked Israel from Egypt with "miraculous signs and wonders, great and awesome deeds." The Lord did "these things so that you might know that the Lord is God; besides him there is no other" (4:35). He is the God who **acts**.

Therefore, Israel must worship the Creator of heaven and earth, the personal God who speaks, listens, and acts. Moses then restates the ten commands (5:7-21) before he summarizes them in 6:1-5: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Moses fairly shouts, "This is the climax." Israel heard God's law and must obey him because He redeemed them, because He has power to bless them with a good, long life. The one God is the Lord your God. Therefore love and obey Him.

Some people notice that Jesus' quotation from Deuteronomy is not absolutely precise. Moses says Israel should love the Lord "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **strength**" (6:5). Jesus says we should "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind**" in Matthew (Matthew 22:37). Elsewhere, he commands us to love God with heart, soul, mind **and** strength (Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). The minor variations aren't inconsistencies, they mean we should love the Lord with all our faculties, those mentioned here plus our emotions, will, intuition and any other faculty we have.

- We love God with **heart and soul** when we embrace Him in our core with our deepest beliefs and commitments.
- We love God with the **mind** when we understand our past and our present as He does and dedicate our future plans and goals to Him.

- We love God with our **strength** when we dedicate our body, our energy, to Him. We love God with our strength when we follow Him, come what may.

What is next? How do we go about loving God? Deep down, everyone knows that cruelty, theft, gratuitous violence are wrong. We know it's wrong to curse God. But how do we love God? The law is one means.

The question leads to an important point. It is misguided to propose a conflict between love and the law. Paul says love fulfills the law (Romans 13:8). Jesus says love summarizes the law (Mark 12). The law teaches us how to love but the Bible never says love is the law. We cannot simply dream up, excogitate or discover the best way to love God. We need guidance and the law gives it.

Sometimes there seems to be a conflict between love and the law. Suppose we are driving on Sunday and see a car stuck along the road. The law forbids works on the Sabbath; love says "Stop and help." But when Jesus healed the sick on the Sabbath, he taught us that it's lawful to offer help (Matthew 12:1-8, John 5:1-11). We love God by worshipping Him and resting in Him. But Jesus shows we can give rest to others through deeds of mercy just as God gives rest to us. So the Sabbath law promotes love for God and neighbor. Love and law cohere.

The law tells us how to love, at least in outline. At a human level, we have to tell each other how we want to be loved. If you want to make me a birthday dinner as an act of love, you will ask what food I like. More profoundly, the Lord tells us how to love Him. In part, we love Him when we love each other.

In April 1961, the trial of German Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann started in Jerusalem. In July 1961 Stanley Milgram, a Yale psychologist, resolved to study how Eichmann got people to obey his murderous commands. Did they share his deranged beliefs or were they cowed by his authority? He devised an experiment. In it an authority commands an ordinary person to inflict pain on an innocent person. He recruited people for a psychological experiment and told them its purpose was to study memory and learning.

As the experiment begins, the recruit meets a stern experimenter in a white coat and a friendly person who is allegedly another recruit. In fact, both men were actors. The experimenter explains that they will research the role of punishment in learning. One person will be the "teacher" and the other the "learner." The recruit became the teacher and the actor became the "learner."

The learner is led to a room and strapped in a chair with an electrode on his arm. The "teacher" goes to an adjoining room with a generator. The "teacher" reads two word pairs and asks the "learner" to repeat them. If the "learner" gets the answer correct, they move to the next word. If the answer is incorrect, the "teacher" is supposed to shock the "learner," starting at fifteen volts.

By design, the actor keeps failing. The "teacher" has control of generator that inflicts shocks in fifteen volt increments – 15, 30, 120, 240, 450 volts. Each voltage has a rating, from "slight shock" to "danger: severe shock." The "teacher" is ordered to increase the shock each time the "learner" misses a word. The teacher doesn't know it, but the "learner" is never shocked. But the actor pretends to suffer terribly. He screams, begs for mercy and pounds the wall. If the "teacher" protests, the scientist insists: "The experiment must go on."

Every "teacher" administered heavy shocks and most – MOST - continued until they reached the maximum, allegedly life-threatening level. The goal of the experiment was to determine if people would obey an authority that told them to inflict pain on others. It was designed to recreate some of the conditions that led millions of Europeans to collaborate with the Nazi's orders.

Shall we follow the orders of a vicious authority? It's an old question. In ancient Athens, a group known as the "thirty tyrants" seized power and ordered five leading citizens to seize an innocent man and

bring him to them to be executed. Four men obeyed. The fifth was Socrates. He ignored the tyrants and went home.²

I read about this experiment a long time ago and have pondered it often. I would resist the evil authorities! But virtually no one does in this and similar studies. Would I be different if I were twenty-one and the director was very authoritative?

How can we resist the pressure to sin, to harm others? It helps to have God's will emblazoned on our mind, to know it so deeply we cannot forget it when we face a difficult test. Call it the 3 a.m. rule. There some things you should know, some things you should be able to do, even if roused from sleep at 3 a.m. At 3 a.m. we should know "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you love your neighbor as yourself, will you collaborate with the Nazis? Shock him till he screams? No.

Is it that simple then? Know and you will do? No, because the pressure to sin against others for selfish advantage can be unbearably strong. How can we resist? The whole Bible shouts. Obedience begins not with the command to love neighbor but with the command to love God, to fear Him, hold Him in awe, fear Him more than you fear Nazis, tyrants, or scientists.

In the Bible, fear of God and love of God here are allies. To love God is to know Him as the majestic God, the fear of Isaac (Genesis 31:42) and hold Him in awe. In short, the first command drives or empowers all the rest.

The first commandment is as simple – Love the Lord with heart, soul, mind and strength. But how shall we love God? We can love neighbor by extrapolation from the way I would have others treat me. But we can't extrapolate from our likes and dislikes and simply do that for the Lord. The first four commandments tell us how to love the Lord.³

First, we love God by allowing no rivals, no other gods. We let no one and no thing threaten His central place in our lives. It is our first priority to know God, to deepen our relationship with Him. We will never betray Him to get ahead or save our skin. We value God for who He is, not just what He gives or does for us.

Second, we never make or worship an image of God. We let the Lord define Himself. He is free and alive and is not bound by our concepts. As a corollary, we do the same for the people around us. We expect them to grow, change, and define themselves. We don't tell them they are incapable of this or that.

Third, we love God by taking His name, His acts, His words, and His character seriously. We use His name to speak *to* Him, and to speak *about* Him in positive ways – to pray, give thanks, share His gospel. We strive to conduct ourselves in ways that reflect well on His name.

Fourth, we love God by devoting our work to Him. We act as if He is watching – which He is. We also rest from our work to spend concentrated time with Him. We also lay aside our recreation to spend time with Him. We work for the one we love; we also let Him work for us, when we take a day of rest.

These are God's laws. With them God prescribes how we should love Him. Yet they are more than commands. The law is prescriptive but it is also motive and emotive.⁴ The law is **emotive** because love is an emotion. We can *feel* love toward a neighbor. We should *feel* love *for Jesus* when we think of him: leaving heaven, coming to earth, enduring all the indignities of infancy, the animosity, the betrayal, then the crucifixion. All for us.

This summer, I accidentally stayed in a rough motel. "How rough?", you ask. When we got into our non-smoking room, I couldn't tell which was stronger - the smell of cigars or the lavender and lilac that

² Kupperman, *Six Myths*, page 95

³ Gill, *Law*, pages 322-8.

⁴ Murray, *Principles Conduct*, pages 22-26

was supposed to cover it up. The sheets were rough, too. I've slept on dried corn cobs that were softer. When I woke up in the morning, the calluses on my feet were gone – the sheets had rubbed them off. But my face and neck were bleeding in five places. Terrible. Then I realized my room was surely nicer than any place that Jesus, King of heaven, every enjoyed.

So the law is command, but it's also **emotive** and motive. The law tells us to love the Lord and that motivates us to act from the heart, to obey.

Jesus could have said our first duty is to "serve the Lord" or "obey the Lord" or "fear the Lord" but he said, "Love the Lord"? Why? Because "only the free service of our wills is acceptable to Him." The man who obeys God loves Him first. He does not seek "the forced obedience of men, but wishes their service to be free and spontaneous".⁵

3. Love for neighbor in the law

I wonder: how many of you helped a friend or neighbor in the last few days? When a storm comes, we feel connected to others. We do need each other. We are all members of the human race. Or perhaps you like to think of yourself as a good neighbor, as a benevolent person.

Paul says one thing counts - "Faith working by love" (Galatians 5:6). So if you helped your neighbor out of love, it's a beautiful thing. Our hearts are full of desires – they are desire factories. We want our pleasure, honor, security and much more. If we lay that aside to care for a friend or neighbor in need – not to get something, not even the right to congratulate ourselves afterward - then God's love is in us.

If we feel compassion for a needy friend, love is emotive. If we see a car stuck and go help, then love is our motive. James 2 says that "love your neighbor as yourself" is the royal law and so it is, in two ways. It is part of God's law given to Moses (Leviticus 19:18). It is also the law of the king Jesus.

In this life, sadly, love is never perfectly pure. Even if it were, we might not know how to love someone. Therefore, God gave us the other commandments to teach us how to embody the love command. Consider:

Number five - We love our parents by honoring them, listening to them. The fifth command applies to all who are in authority. It teaches us that God may speak to us through His agents – parents, teachers, bosses and other leaders.

The Lord gives us life and truth through people who are His agents. We should honor them if only to honor the Lord who placed them in our life. That can be hard if your father abandoned you or your boss stole credit for your work or the teacher is making mistakes. If someone betrays their position, we may need to disobey them. Even so, we love him and give him all the respect we can muster.

Number six - We love our neighbor when we do nothing to threaten or harm her life or health. She is God's creation, therefore we protect her life and peace.

Number seven - We love our spouse by remaining faithful in body and mind. More broadly, the seventh command teaches us to keep all our commitments and to help others keep theirs. Don't tempt others to violate their commitments.

Number eight - We love our neighbors by respecting their property. We don't steal or abuse it. We protect it. Several laws from Exodus illustrate:

- If a man lets his animal stray and they graze in another man's field, "he must make restitution from the best of his own field or vineyard" (22:5).

⁵ Calvin, *Gospels*, 3:36).

- If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him (23:4). We rarely see wandering donkeys, but we do see stray soccer balls. We love our neighbors by caring for their property.

Number nine - Commands we love our neighbor by telling the truth to her and about her. And we never tell the truth in ways that wound and destroy. Number ten - We seek our neighbor's good instead of coveting his goods.

The ten commands protect basic human rights. We have a right to work and to rest. We have a right to live, to own property, to be told the truth, to have a family. The law protects the basic human rights. James says "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a royal law. So true. It's from the King. It's fit for kings. It describes the standard the King will use for judgment on the last day:

- God won't ask what kind of car you drove, He'll ask if you gave anyone a ride.
- He won't ask about the size of your house, He'll ask if you welcomed people into your home. He'll ask if you were a good neighbor, whatever your "hood."
- God won't ask about title or salary, He'll ask if you used them for others.
- He won't ask how many friends you had, but how many you befriended.

Ex-presidents Bush and Clinton teamed up in disaster relief from 2005-2007. They saw the power of love: "There are two Muslim countries where our standing is better than ever, Indonesia, and Pakistan. The reasons are the tsunami and the earthquake... When we took out first [trip] to the tsunami area ... we visited little kids, and part of their therapy – if they lost family during the tsunami – was to draw pictures. In picture after picture American helicopters were dropping food, not bombs, dropping ladders to get people out of isolated places." (10/06 Atlantic, 49)

4. God's love for us in the law

But the best news is that the Lord who commands love gives love first. "Love your neighbor" is what the king says and what He does. The plan of redemption, from Adam onward, is God's loving work to reconcile us to Himself in love.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus defined our neighbor as anyone who crosses our path. By his incarnation, Jesus determined to cross our path. He became our neighbor and loved us, his needy neighbors.

By his sacrifice on the cross and by his resurrection, he demonstrated his compassion for us. He gave himself so we can "live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2).

"God so loved the world that he gave His only Son not to condemn the world, but to save the world" (John 3:16-17). That is why "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). Then he said, "Love one another as I have loved you" (13:34).