

Hung up on the Law

October 26, 2008 | (Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Proper 25)

Lectionary citations

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 with Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:46)

Jesus' statement of the two great commandments is so simple, yet so complex. He gave the "right answer" to the Pharisees, an answer consistent with Jewish tradition. Yet, the way he yoked these two great commandments together and declared them as a foundation for the "law and the prophets" challenged everything the Pharisees believed, as it challenges us today.

The first commandment would have been the very familiar to the Pharisees.

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. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. (Deuteronomy 6:4-6)

Today's Gospel replaces "strength" with "mind." The Jews of the Old Testament did not distinguish the mind from the heart and soul. The readers of the Gospel, familiar with Greek philosophy would need the addition of "mind" to make clear that Jesus was talking about the whole person. This commandment is an unconditional commitment to love God with everything you have—mind, body, and spirit.

It is often said that Christian love is a choice, an act of will, a commitment, which is reflected in our behaviors. Some say that "Love" is not primarily a feeling but fidelity to the covenant, a matter of willing and doing. Some say that the mind comes first and the rest follows later. I think that for some people, the heart, soul, or body comes first and the mind and the rest follow later. It is quite possible to fall in love with God with all your heart. It is also possible to first love God in Spirit. Some may first love God in their strength, in the joy of being in a body created by God. You may remember the film "Chariots of Fire," where the Christian Olympic runner said, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." Different people come to the love of God in different ways, but that love must grow to capture the entire person.

The second commandment was also familiar to the Pharisees.

Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:17-19)

That commandment applied not just to fellow Jews, but to foreigners living among the Jews.

When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:33-35)

To the Pharisees, the first commandment, to love God was a primary commandment, equal to the Ten Commandments in importance for living a godly life. The second commandment, to love the neighbor, was a lesser commandment, desirable, but not essential. By saying, "the second was like unto it," Jesus raised the command to love the neighbor to the level of the great commandments.

The "likeness" of these two commandments is puzzling. The first commandment is unconditional—love God with everything you have. The second seems more tentative—love the neighbor only as much as you love yourself. What happens if you do not love yourself very much?

The second commandment equated with the "golden rule." The golden rule is about as close as you can get to a universal ethic. Socrates proposed it, "Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others," and Confucius promoted it, "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself." The great Rabbi Hillel, the teacher to the Pharisees, put it this way, "What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man: this is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary."

The golden rule comes in two forms—the positive form: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and the negative form: "do not do to others what you would not have them do to you." Unlike the Rabbis and philosophers, Jesus emphasized the positive side of the golden rule—loving your neighbor is much more than just avoiding harming him. "Live and let live" is not a bad philosophy, but Jesus was challenging us to do more than just leave our neighbors alone.

The second commandment was also "like unto the first commandment," because it was really a way of living out the first commandment. The Golden Rule is not the foundation of Christian ethics. The foundation of Christian ethics is love of God. If we love God unconditionally and completely, we will love everything that God has made, especially the one thing made in God's image—human beings! If we love God completely, we will love ourselves and care for ourselves because God made us in his image. As Christians, we also know that our savior thought us valuable enough to die for us. Loving God opens us up to receiving God's love for us. A person, who loves God, loves him or herself, not selfishly but with a deep gratitude to God. If we love ourselves because God made us in God's image and we know that God finds us worth loving; it becomes so much easier to love our neighbors. This is brilliantly summarized in 1 John 4.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:10-12)

The Golden Rule is a universal ethical standard. Our fundamental conviction that the Golden Rule is correct reflects that all people are created in God's image. However, the Golden Rule is weak on its own. If we

try to carry out this commandment through the strength of our own will, we will ultimately fail. History has shown that failure can be disastrous. We cannot carry out the second commandment without God's help and we cannot receive that help unless we are living the first commandment. The second commandment needs the first commandment as its foundation and support. The belief that the second great commandment can never stand without the first separates secular reformers and political activists from those who spread the Good News of God's Kingdom. The second commandment, love of neighbor, must lead to the first commandment, love of God. It has been shown again and again that try to love our neighbor without God's support inevitably leads to burnout, disappointment, and loss of hope.

Together the two great commandments support the Law and the Prophets, which "hang" upon them. This echoes the statement of Rabbi Hillel, that the rest of the law was "mere commentary." The Law carries out these two great commandments. All 613 commandments in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) can be viewed through the lens of the two great commandments. For the Ten Commandments, it is easy to see how they fulfill love of God and love of neighbor. For many of the other commandments, we may have to use our imagination to see how they were intended to fulfill the two great commandments.

Before we are too hard on the Old Testament Jews for having 613 laws, we might consider the thousands of laws in the US, State, and local law codes, not to mention thousands and thousands of regulations in the Code of Federal Regulations, many of which have the force of law. If the number of laws indicates the level of sinfulness that must be controlled through law, we live in a much more sinful society than did the Pharisees.

It seems that for the Jews, their love of God was expressed by separating themselves from other nations—setting themselves aside as God's Holy people. The church has the same goal, but wants to bring all people from all nations into our fellowship. This is why, unlike the Ten Commandments, Christians have ignored many of the 613 commandments. These obsolete laws include those related to diet and ritual cleanliness. However, it is dangerous to be too quick in setting aside the Law. At another point in Matthew, Jesus says, *"Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."* (Matthew 5:18)

What is important to remember is that the two great commandments are the foundation—everything else, including the Law is built upon them. For Christians, loving God completely means loving Christ and acknowledging him as our Lord and Savior. By this faith, we receive the gift of grace so that we may be born again in the image of Christ. The Law is required because of sin. We need the Law because our sin nature is strong in us. However, when we are born again through Christ, our sinful self is put to death and we no longer need the discipline of the Law. As our nature is changed, we will live with integrity in our new nature, a nature that tends to righteousness and holiness, just as our old nature tended to sin.

It is in grace filled lives, that we go beyond the Law—the 248 "thou shalt" and the 365 "thou shalt not" of the Torah. Here is where the positive nature of Christ's Gold Rule becomes more evident. In a grace-filled life, loving the neighbor does not mean leaving your neighbor alone. It means joining with your

neighbor in the life of the Church, the body of Christ and serving Christ together. 1 John gives a brilliant statement of how the love of God will be reflected in our life of love in the Church.

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If we say we love God yet hate a brother or sister, we are liars. For if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love one another. (1 John 4:15-21)

Amen.

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