

Sermon: The Great Commandment

Lev 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thes 2:1-8; Mat 22:34-46

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As teenager I became a christian, through Youth for Christ. And I became a solid fundamentalist teenager. The Bible was God's love letter for me, and every word in that letter was meaningful.

I remember a discussion in secondary school with the teacher of religious class, the kind gentleman said that for him the Gospels are more important than the book of Numbers. I veered up, 'how can you say that, if it is the word of God, than it must all be equally important.'

1. Summary of the will of God

Say whatever you like about the Pharisees, but they were not fundamentalists. They wanted to test Jesus, and with the question of this lawyer, they made clear, that they believed in a hierarchy in the commandments of God. Some are more important than others.

They had calculated that there were 613 commands and in practice, they realized that some are hard to combine. For instance, do not work on the sabbath. Easy enough. But boys had to be circumcised on the 8th day after their birth. Law of God. What if that eight day would be on a Sabbath? Which law then prevails?

For the Pharisees, laws of the sabbath and food laws were paramount. This was logical, for these were concrete - you just do it - and they were also boundary markers. 'This is who we are.'

Now Jesus could have said, "All things God has said are equally inspired and important." But like the Pharisees, he was not a fundamentalist either. So as a teenage Christian, I should have listed better to my religion teacher.

Jesus says, "Love for God and love for man is paramount. That is the heart of the will of God." These central commandments, number one and two, clarify and explain all other biblical commandments for behavior. Love must be our motivator and the basis of our behavior.

All you need is love.

Eh no, that is not true.

Mind you, Jesus did not speak against the rest of the commandments. All the law and all the prophets depend on the law of love. The whole Old Testament hangs on this central law of love.

That does not make the rest of the word of God less important, but Jesus gives us the lens through which to interpret all. The attitude by which to fulfill the will of God.

Thereby Jesus escaped from the accusation that he considered other God-given laws unimportant. He made clear: love is the heart of it all, he did not say that it all was not important.

We today - what is important for us? Love for God? Love for others?

Look at how you spend your time and money, and what you speak about much. Is our life defined by love for God and others? Or does it show more love for ourselves?

In recent years some pop-psychology has used this very bible verse about love for God and others to be the heart of the will of God, to actually say: you must love yourself, because only if you love yourself, you can love others.

However - how much we love ourselves is not the standard. The apostle John, in his first letter, gives us the standard:

By this we know love, that He laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (1 John 3:16)

The love of Jesus for us is the standard; that defines what true love is. Yes, we have to love others as ourselves - that does not mean - as we love ourselves. It means, we are to love our neighbors as if they are us. Do not see strangers or enemies in other people, but treat them as if he is you.

Love God and love people. These are two equal laws. They are two sides of the same coin. You cannot love God and hate your brother. John wrote in the same letter,

If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar. (1 John 4:20)

It is impossible to love God and at the same time to hate other people. If you do hate people, John says, your love for God cannot be real. Because God is the one whose imprint is on people, as because God himself loves people. How can we hate what God loves?

The opposite is also true. Humans are often not so nice; it is exactly because we know that God loves us, with our imperfections, and it is because we love Him, that we are enabled to love others.

Without God, how can we love difficult people? Unteachable people? Arrogant people? But by seeing God's image in them, we are helped to love.

Love for God and for others, that is truly the boundary marker for Christians. Not how we go to church, not that we eat pork, not that we have a cross on our neck or our arm, none of this sets us apart. John wrote in his Gospel these memorable words of Jesus:

Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (Gospel of John 13:34-35)

2. Holiness and love

We have read this morning from Leviticus, where the holiness of the people - them being different, set apart for God - is defined by the laws of God. The heart of this, Jesus says, is love.

So love is the best expression of holiness.

The struggle of Jesus and the apostles throughout the New Testament, seems to be how to keep the people of God - the church - together in holiness and unity. For us that seems to be extremely hard.

Often those who focus on holiness want to exclude others who are less perfect than desired. And those who focus on unity often lay the bar so low that even Saddam Hussein could be part of their church - assuming he wanted to.

But if we see that our holiness is really defined by the extent of our love, then to maintain the unity of the church may be somewhat easier.

Though even love does not close its eyes for what is wrong. Even if we see wrong in people in church - we still love. That works as a great cement in a community.

And love sometimes means also saying no to people if they are clearly on the wrong path. That is their own choice, and in the world we live in, it is their full individual right, but to people who walk to the abyss, it is not very loving to just say, 'You are okay', and pet them lovingly on the shoulder.

Love is nor a negation of right and wrong. Just as it is not a negation of true and untrue.

Immediately after Jesus spoke of the law of love, he questioned the Pharisees exactly about their theology. 'Who do you think the Christ is? Son of David? Or Lord?' The content of our faith matters.

In the Gospel of Mark, where we find the same story about Jesus speaking of the great commandment, a more complete text of Jesus' answer is written. Which commandment is most important?

Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

The love for God is positioned by Jesus in the context of the Jewish statement of faith about who God is.

We cannot play love against proper christian theology, as if for the sake of love and unity all should be condoned. We believe in a church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This entails a certain unity in the proper apostolic faith. Our creed, as the heart of our Christians beliefs, must be upheld.

But the right theology without love, is useless. If our life and our Christian mind is not permeated with love, the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, calls our lives just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Love holds our personal life, our friendships, our familylife and our community together. But love as defined by our Lord himself, and not taken out of that biblical context and filled with contemporary meaning.

It means being prepared to sacrifice your own interests for the sake of someone else. Going through the dust for someone else. Suffering wrong for someone else. Being - as Jesus was for us - being for someone else.

Noways love is often interpreted in terms of just accepting others and their behavior and beliefs without any precondition and if needed by setting aside all norms of Scripture. I fear that we have then given up on our love for God and people.

3. how is love the cement?

But even if we sometimes, for the love of God, have to underline the need for a Christian lifestyle and a solid apostolic theology, and oppose certain people. we should never do this at the expense of our love for those same people.

Just as our Lord was always generous to people who came to him, let us show the same generosity. If Jesus could enjoy dinners with tax-collectors, with public women, with religion bigots, why can we not? Our love and generosity to all people shows them the love of God.

Conclusion

For me this is also the reason to be very welcoming to all people at the time of Holy Eucharist. It is holy - as it is God who in his love gives himself to us. Let sinners come. God receives us with

open arms. He loves us without limits. That is my only hope in life, so how could I be less generous to others. Who am I to stop people from coming to God...

Yes our Lords asks us to change our lifestyle. He asks us to live for him. He also wants us to change our religious views - that is why he asks of us: "who do you think the Christ is?"

He wants us to love him and all people and to have the apostolic faith-content. But his own love for us precedes all this. And even when we suffer from a lack of love for God and for others - even if our views are imperfect and they are - he welcomes us with open arms because he can never not be himself.

He is love. And it is in the context of His love for us, that we learn to love Him and others, and that become to know Him as he is, in accordance with the apostolic faith.

This is our challenge today. Love God, love all people. The Word of God for us does not give us a thousand rules and regulations to modify every aspect of life; we do not have a sharia like Islam that suggests that God dictates our behavior in every detail.

Love defines our life. Love is the rudder that helps us to maneuver through the river of life that is full of obstacles. But if love for God and people motivates our choices in life, and our behavior, we will sail safely - carried in the loving arms of God - to the end of life and beyond.