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Sermon

The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-46; Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

26th October 2014

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How do you rate the importance of various laws? What do you think about these English laws?

- It is illegal to stand within one hundred yards of the reigning monarch when not wearing socks.
- It is illegal to die in the Houses of Parliament. I'm not sure what the punishment for this particular offence would be.
- A 2006 tax law makes it illegal not to tell the taxman anything you don't want him to know - but you don't have to tell him anything you don't mind him knowing.
- Londoners may not have a pigsty outside their homes.
- You may kill a Scotsman within York's city walls, unless he is carrying a bow and arrow...
- A law enacted by Edward VI states that anyone found breaking a boiled egg at the sharp end will be sentenced to 24 hours in the village stocks.
- And finally, it is an act of treason to stick a postage stamp bearing the image of the British monarch upside down.

Those were a few of 380 laws rescinded in 2008. If those are unimportant, which are important? What is the most important law in New Zealand? It is a tough question and the answer requires great wisdom.

Jesus was asked, "Which is the greatest commandment?" This was a standard topic of debate amongst the Pharisees. Jesus responded with two. The first was Deuteronomy 6:5:

Hear, O Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength.

Heart, soul and strength overlap to mean our whole being. We are to be whole-hearted in our love for God.

Yet there is a difficulty. Anyone can say they love God. With spiritual assertions, anything can be said yet cannot be measured or tested. The test comes in our actions. What we do shows what we believe. This world is proving ground for the reality of what we say we believe and think.

Hence, the second commandment is needed. The first commandment alone is meaningless as is pointed out in 1 John 4:20-21:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Conversely, the second command to love our neighbour requires the commandment to love God. To quote Donald Carson, "Disciplined altruism is not love. True love demands abandonment of ourselves to God, and God alone is the adequate incentive for such abandonment."¹

This second commandment is from today's Old Testament reading. It is part of a section of the Law on how to live in relationship with a Holy God. The Hebrews were to be holy because he is holy. We cannot be in fellowship with him, if we ignore his ways.

The issues raised in relation to neighbours are fair judgements; not hating in word or action. Fairness in justice stems from the Judaeo-Christian revelation. Much of the world pays lip service to it while busily ignoring it. But God insists that in law there must be no favouritism for the rich. Wealth does not and must not entitle anyone to preferential treatment – especially in legal judgements. They cannot buy the outcome they would like.

Most of us are not judges although we do have some JPs who may sit on the bench. JPs take note that God cares about the fairness of your judgements and condemns favouritism. But what about the rest of us? Isn't there a desire to please and favour the rich person? She has influence. He may reward me if I flatter him? It is a common response; it is an extension of this principle – we need to be careful.

It will surprise some that God condemns the other extreme too – "Do not show partiality to the poor." There is a reverse favouritism which is also condemned whether it is motivated by sympathy or guilt. There is to be fairness not favour.

Another consequence of this rule is that bribery is out. On both our trips to Tanzania, we saw low level requests for bribes by the police. They stopped our drivers for no reason and angled for payment. In both cases, our drivers were able to talk their way out of the situation. It helped when we were in a vehicle bearing the Church's name.

From the issue of fairness as a component of loving your neighbour, God turned to not hating your neighbour. Don't slander – it is low level hatred. Don't gossip about other people. This can be a real problem in fellowships. Don't do it! So much which is said is incorrect; it can so easily be inspired by dislike or judgment. God tell us it is low level hatred – so if you feel like gossiping you better forgive instead and keep quiet!

The next stage of hatred is endangering your neighbour's life. How might we endanger our neighbour's life? Perhaps dangerous driving; allowing dangerous circumstances where someone may be injured. How important is this? There is the statement right there, "I am the Lord!" Remember who is talking; remember whose nature is concerned about this behaviour.

While much of the OSH interpretations seem to have gone too far, the underlying principle is correct. We find it explicitly in Deuteronomy 22:8:

When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.

¹ Barker K.L. & Kohlenberger J. III (Eds), 1994, *The NIV Bible Commentary Vol 2*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, Comment on Mt 22:40

Don't hate your brother in your heart. A grudge is bad news. So how do we deal with them? The Leviticus passage says we are to rebuke the person frankly. If we harbour resentment it will poison us.

There is a strange fact about humans. If we admire someone we start to act like them; we subconsciously copy them. A former vicar of mine, whom I admire, used the expression, "That's absolutely right." It wasn't my turn of phrase. Yet after I had been around him for a while I heard myself come out with it - we pick up the style and mannerisms of those we admire.

Equally if we feel strongly against someone we start to act like them; we subconsciously copy them. Years ago I worked in a team and found one of the others really irritated me. After a while, to my dismay, I found I had adopted one of his mannerisms! Whatever we concentrate on, we grow like.

In Leviticus 19:17 God warns us not to harbour resentment, less we share in our neighbour's guilt. If our brother, sister, neighbour is doing wrong, what should we do? The instruction here is, "Rebuke him." If we don't we become complicit with his wrongdoing and share in his guilt.

Paul taking the Law and the love together restates it as, "Speak the truth in love." Be careful how you rebuke and certainly don't exaggerate. We need to think very carefully before attempting such a thing.

The other action needed in such cases is forgiveness. It is not easy but nor is it as difficult as we all like to make out. Jesus teaches us to forgive your brother 70 times 7, i.e., without limit.² If he commands us it is possible for us to do it. The trick is to realise it is a decision of the will not a feeling we summon up. The great thing is that once my will has forgiven my feelings start to follow.

So we need to be prepared to forgive people. We can do it without their knowledge – often to tell them would be needlessly to hurt them. We often take offence over trivial matters which they couldn't have known would be hurtful. Learn to express your forgiveness in prayer aloud to God in words like: "I choose to forgive X for doing Y. I release her from my judgement. Father God please bless X." It is usually very freeing. This is not confined to minor hurts. We have helped people who have held unforgiveness for years find peace through this simple approach, including deep family hurts and a rape victim.

What is this love like? We can learn from the Epistle. Paul recalls the time he came to the Thessalonians. There had been opposition but he had dared to tell them the gospel. He wasn't trying to trick them; he didn't use flattery or pretend something to get money from them. Do you hear the similarity to what we just discussed – he was not courting a rich or powerful man for what he could get out of him. He did not come with bad motives. He was aiming to please God to whom he was accountable.

He came with love. Do you hear the tenderness he expresses. "We were gentle among you like a nursing mother caring for her little children."³ That is a surprising picture. Paul is not the harsh character many would paint. "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel but our lives as well" – why – "because you had become so dear to us."

Why do people react against Paul, when he was able to be so tender, when he wrote the 'love chapter' of 1 Corinthians. Is it not because he was also firm about what was right and wrong? Is it because we don't like hearing any contradiction to our wishes?

It was Paul who wrote, "Speak the truth in love." The love that Jesus and Paul talk about desires the best for the other person. It is not so much based on feelings as on good will - at times **determined** good will. This *agape* love will therefore work for the good of the other even when being attacked or opposed. It is not

² Matthew 18

³ 1 Thess 2:7

about being 'nice.' It is not 'gentle Jesus meek and mild.' If you think that, I would say, read the gospels, do you really see such a man there?

The reality is that all people are wounded and can act or react outside love. It is Paul, again, who wrote to the Christians in Philippi with tenderness but a realistic concern about a particular relationship. He tells them that he loves them and they are his joy and his crown and then continues in Philippians 4:2-3

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

The fact that these women were at loggerheads did not mean they were not Christians – their names are still written in the Lamb's book of life.

No one said it was easy being in community, maintaining loving relationships with diverse people – it takes commitment and work. We can take heart from the continuation of the same passage:

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.