

Commandments 11: God, Your Neighbor, and You

10/23/2022

Exodus 20:1-17

Matthew 22:34-40

For the past ten weeks, we've been talking in great, maybe even "grueling", detail about the Ten Commandments, the very foundations of God's Law and the core rules that we are to uphold to the best of our abilities all our lives long. For those that were looking forward to being done, bear with me for just one more sermon; it'll be worth it, I promise. Now, as we've seen, these commandments encompass everything from murder to envy to adultery to idolatry and so much more. Then, out of these ten come another 603 commandments. That's a lot of rules to remember and try to follow. How can any person be expected to not only know but follow 613 commandments? In all truth, very easily, because all these commandments, whether we're talking about all 613 or simply the Ten that started it all, boil down to one thing: Love, and they are summed up as such in the gospel reading for today.

The gospel reading I have chosen for today is a rather famous passage and it's one I feel is one of the most important teachings from Jesus in any of the gospels. The Sadducees, the religious elite, they are trying to trap Jesus, to get him to say something that will incriminate him and cause the crowd to turn against him, leading then to his downfall. So, they ask him which commandment is the most important one, knowing full well that there is no one that is more important than another. Jesus however doesn't name a single commandment like they hoped he would. What he gives instead are summations of the Ten Commandments.

First, he says, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength." This is a summation of the first four commandments. In having no other god before our God, we acknowledge God's power and majesty before and above all things humans have given power, be it money, fame, rank, or some other temporal commodity. Similarly, in not worshipping anything except God, by not creating false idols, we acknowledge our finitude, our incapability as it were, in knowing who and what God is in Their entirety. We love God not just because we know what They are, but also because we cannot explain or understand how They love every person, regardless of that person's thoughts, words, and deeds. Yet again, by observing the Sabbath and keeping it as a single day to praise God for all Their graces to us, we are loving God. We are taking a gift lovingly and graciously given to us as a day of rest and using it to praise, thank, and reciprocate that love back to God. However, this command does not stop here.

Whereas Jesus could have stopped at "love of God," he continues, saying, "A second equal commandment is 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" This "second yet equal commandment," it turns out, is a summation of the last six commandments, all of which center around how we speak towards, act towards, and think about our fellow humans. We must not only not kill our fellow humans, but we must not hold grudges and be angry with them. We must not only not steal from them, but we must also not value their possessions and achievements above what God has given to us. Not only must we respect and honor those who are our "mothers and fathers," those who are superior to us, but also those for whom we are a "mother" or "father." Now, why would Jesus say this is "second yet equal" to loving God? It's

as if Jesus is saying that we, humans, are equal to God. In all truth, Jesus says this because “love of God” stretches to the other six commandments as well. All of us are perfectly made in God’s image, called “good” from God’s own mouth, and therefore, to love one another is to love the God who forms us. To judge, to hate, to harm one another, even if we are convinced that we are doing so on God’s command, is to not only hate and harm those who are directly affected, but the God who made them as well. Hence the reason Jesus calls the other commandment “second but equal.” In loving others, we show our love for the God who made us. In loving God, we find the capacity to love all persons. However, one could argue that, just as the commandments have a deeper meaning than what’s on the surface, so too does Jesus’ summation have a deeper layer, one that ties into the Ten Commandments as well.

Jesus talks about love of God and love of neighbor, but what he doesn’t talk about is “love of self.” This is, arguably, the deepest root from which sprouts our ability to love God and our neighbors. If we have no love in our hearts for ourselves, we cannot fully love our neighbors who look, think, and act like us. If we have no love in our hearts for ourselves, we cannot fully love the God in whose image we are so wonderfully and perfectly made. To hit on just a few of some major points from the past ten weeks: We must not only not lie to others, but we must not lie and deceive ourselves into thinking we are greater than or less than we truly are. Just as we must not desire to cause harm others, so too must we not desire to cause ourselves harm. If we have any hope of honoring “our fathers and mothers,” and in turn those for whom we are a superior, we must first be able to honor ourselves. In short, we cannot love the God who made us or our neighbors without first seeing the Christ light within ourselves, and therein loving ourselves.

In the end, this is what the Ten Commandments boil down to: love. Love of God, love of neighbor, and just as importantly, love of self. We must love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. We must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We must love ourselves with that same unconditional love with which God first loved us, even before we were formed. If we do not love and respect ourselves, we cannot love our neighbors who are our equals in God’s eyes, and we cannot love the God who formed us from the earth and called each and every one of us “good.” To fulfill these Ten Commandments, we first must love ourselves, lest adherence to the Ten Commandments becomes an impossibility. Therefore, I close this lengthy yet hopefully inspirational sermon series with a single question: When is the last time you let yourself love the “you” you are?