

Matthew 22.³⁴⁻⁴⁰

³⁴But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. ³⁵Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, ³⁶“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”

³⁷Jesus said unto him, “‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.’” ³⁸This is the first and great commandment.

³⁹And the second is like unto it, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus’ conclusion seems so logical. So straightforward. So right. Why, then, is it so difficult to live? And why do we so often mutate “commandments” into some rote and lifeless legalism devoid of and divorced from love?

The answer is as simply as Jesus’ conclusion: It is easier. It is easier to do stuff than to relate with others. And because it is easier, it is doable. And because it is so easily doable, it makes us feel oh so righteous. And this, for the religious minded, is everything—feeling right with God.

Israel had inherited innumerable commandments and ordinances in relation to the proper function of its temple. The record seems pretty clear that for the most part the nation was—at least mechanically, in a technocratic sort of way—meticulous, scrupulous about observing these directions. People died fighting to maintain the temple’s proper functioning. It would seem, then, that the nation was dominated by the love of God. It certainly wanted you to think so. And yet, the Hebrew prophets are almost universal in their assessment. Because the apparent “love of God” that took place inside the temple did not match the “love,” either of God or the neighbor, that took place outside the temple, the temple with its meticulous observation was a sham. Jesus, as we have seen agreed. After a series of generalized accusations concerning Israel’s sin, this is Isaiah’s first specific, in-depth look at the nature of the nation’s sin.

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom;
give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah.
To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?
saith the LORD:
I am full of the burnt offerings of rams,
and the fat of fed beasts;
and I delight not
in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.
When ye come to appear before me,
who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts?
Bring no more vain oblations;
incense is an abomination unto me;
the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies,
I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hateth:
they are a trouble unto me;
I am weary to bear them.

And when ye spread forth your hands,
I will hide mine eyes from you:
yea, when ye make many prayers,
I will not hear:
your hands are full of blood.”¹

What made the meticulous temple worship so abominable? The lack of love and its companion, justice.

“Wash you,
make you clean;
put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes;
cease to do evil;
Learn to do well;
seek judgment,
relieve the oppressed,
judge the fatherless,
plead for the widow.
Come now, and let us reason together,
saith the LORD:
though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson,
they shall be as wool.”²

One can kill a million sheep if one wants. But all that bloody death will have less cleansing impact than the assistance one lends to just one vulnerable person. Jesus’ precious blood is no more efficacious or cleansing in a life lived in injustice to the vulnerable. We will stick with Isaiah for another example. Fasting is a good idea. It’s a “commandment,” right? Good for both body and soul. A commendable indication of self-control. Surely its observance is indicative of the love of God. It can’t be deformed into something dead, can it? Israel was under this false impression.

“Cry aloud, spare not,
lift up thy voice like a trumpet,
and shew my people their transgression,
and the house of Jacob their sins.
Yet they seek me daily,
and delight to know my ways,
as a nation that did righteousness,
and forsook not the ordinance of their God:
they ask of me the ordinances of justice;
they take delight in approaching to God.”³

But God knew. He knew that any commandment—even one whose objective was a display of one’s love of God—any commandment, no matter how scrupulously observed, was an abomination if it became divorced from love and care of others.

“Is it such a fast that I have chosen?
a day for a man to afflict his soul?
is it to bow down his head as a bulrush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?

¹ Isaiah 1. ¹⁰⁻¹⁵

² Isaiah 1. ¹⁶⁻¹⁸

³ Isaiah 58. ¹⁻²

wilt thou call this a fast,
and an acceptable day to the LORD?
Is not this the fast that I have chosen?
to loose the bands of wickedness,
to undo the heavy burdens,
and to let the oppressed go free,
and that ye break every yoke?
Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry,
and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?
when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him;
and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?”⁴

It can be difficult to love some people. People can be so annoying. It is even harder to love everyone all of the time. It is harder yet to consistently act upon the principle of love. But, one need not worry about relationships in rote legalism. Don't worry how or why. Just do it.

Jesus, of course, knew all of this. He had experienced it. He knew how hard his standard could be. His standards ended up sending him to the top of a cross. But this attachment, real attachment to real people and real attachment to an active God, is the only way to survive, not only here on good ol planet earth, but out there in the cosmos with its unknown challenges and delights.

The Lent and Easter Season is a good time to take stock of the whys and whatfors of our daily observance of God's commandments. It is a good time to study and pray and ponder and plead that our hearts might be softened so that we do God's will out of love unfeigned. Then, it will not matter so much what good we do in their lives, or where we do it, or how often we do it. It will simply be good old fashion charity—the pure love of Christ.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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⁴ Isaiah 58.⁵⁻⁷