

*The Greatest Commandment Is Not the Easiest*

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

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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“Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This famous verse is part of an ongoing battle of wits between Jesus and the Pharisees, a sort of game we might call “stump the Messiah.” The Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus, to trick him into giving a contrary answer. Like the one about whether to pay taxes to Caesar, or who a woman will be married to in heaven if she marries a succession of brothers, or which law is most important. They’re trick questions, meant to trap Jesus in a show of disloyalty or blasphemy. But he has this infuriating way of answering “all of the above.” We talked about that a bit last week. Here the Pharisees are wanting Jesus to say some of the Jewish laws are more important than others, but Jesus once more dodges the bullet, saying, “This is the greatest law, and all the other laws are summed up in it: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s simple. We might be inclined to say it’s easy. Obvious. Well, duh!

But do we really take this commandment to heart? Do we really, truly believe it? More importantly, do we do it? As with any of the parables, whenever the answer seems obvious, I wonder if the obviousness makes us miss the point.

Here’s an example. I’m part of a parenting group that’s all about attachment parenting, positive discipline, gentle parenting. The idea is that when kids act up, it’s usually for an underlying reason: they’re bored, they’re scared, they want attention and so forth. So when a child misbehaves, we go to great lengths to try to figure out what’s going on with the child, what they’re really needing, and not just to reactively slap them with a punishment. You see this all the time on Super Nanny, how the worst-behaved kids are the ones most in need of positive attention from their parents.

It’s all very well and good, except that it amazes me how often these same gentle parents will be so quick to judge, condemn and punish other adults, sometimes even their own spouses! Not all of them do this, of course, but sometimes. And what’s even worse is when they defend this harsh attitude because they’re “protecting their children.”

It’s not just this parenting group that engages in such hypocrisy. We all do it at some point or other: we place limits on our love for one another. Love for some but not for others. Or love sometimes, but only when certain conditions are met. The Letter of James says if you can’t love your brother or sister whom you can see, then how can you possibly love God whom you can’t see? Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself... Maybe we don’t get it. Maybe it’s not so easy after all. So I really wanted to preach on this passage and have us all consider the matter more closely.

The commentators I read picked up on two themes here. First, that God is life. This issues comes up more in some of the other exchanges with the Pharisees, but it’s important here, too. God *is* life. In God there is no death. And the commentators pointed out that so much of our theology is still focused on death. Think about how some people express the central question of Christianity: where will you go when you die? The point of Christianity for some people is to get you out of hell and into heaven. But that’s still focused on death. Life – particularly this life here on earth – is seen as largely irrelevant. What we do here is only important in terms of where we’ll end up after this life. But consider the implications. If I’m only concerned with whether I’ll get to heaven, then I’ll be most concerned with sin, with whether I’ve been forgiven or whether I’ve sinned too much and messed up my afterlife. And then I might start thinking about the

people I hang out with. Where are *they* going? Are they good enough, or are they sinners? And could their sin possibly rub off on me? In which case I'd better not hang out with them. And I'd better not be "soft" on sin, so I need to come down hard on sinners. If they're sinners, they're just obstacles to my salvation, and I'd better wash my hands of them. I don't have to love them. In fact, maybe I'd better hate them. Now what has happened to "love your neighbor"? Not all Christians do that of course, but you can see it, can't you? But that's death-thought, not life-thought. God is the God of life, not death. Of *this* life. How does that knowledge alter our focus?

That's the first point commentators made here: that God is the God of life. The second point they made is that love in the sense used here is not a feeling or an emotion. It is a commitment. We make a commitment to love one another. Whether we like each other or not, whatever we feel for another person, we will not wash our hands of one another. We will not give up on each other. We have a commitment to love one another, to care for each other.

Again, parenting is a good analogy. Parents may hate their kids. It does happen! Surely there are times when all parents hate their kids just a bit – and vice versa. But what do we think of parents who abandon their kids? It's wrong! Parents should never just give up on their kids, no matter how "bad" those kids are. The point of this commandment is that we must have that same level of commitment to one another.

Now when we put these two themes together – a God of LIFE and a God of LOVE – then what we get is something like what we see in Matthew 25, with the parable of the sheep and the goats. The parable shows us that it's life that matters, the life we have now, the time we have now, the people we have now. Love one another, but why? Is it so we can get into heaven? No. It's because that is the way we love God. In the parable, what separates the sheep from the goats is not faith, not whether they accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It's not sin. What separates them is how they treated others, especially those whom everyone else had given up on, had abandoned their commitment to: the sick, the prisoner, the homeless. Did you love these? Jesus asked. Then you have also loved me. Sure, there's talk of heaven and hell here, but if you ask me, that's just metaphor. It's not the point. The point is to love your neighbor as yourself, for in doing so you love God.

Now it's not that sin and forgiveness and redemption are not important, because they are. They play a very important role in all this, but they are the consequences of our life of love, and not the causes. By that I mean that a kid will misbehave and break rules, but the parent loves them anyway. The parent's love and forgiveness is what enables the child to behave, to grow into a good, moral person. It's not that the parent punishes the child first and *then* forgives and loves them. The love has to come first. The kid may still get grounded! But they are already loved and forgiven. So it should be in our treatment of one another. Love first. Love always. Love constantly. The rest flows as a consequence of that love.

But how often do we withhold love for one another in favor of judgment? How often have we said, "I hope they burn in hell!"? We all have said such a thing, of child abusers, of rapists, of terrorists – and even sometimes of our next-door neighbor who leaves all kinds of trash out on the lawn. It makes us feel good to say such a thing, as if our condemnation of their evil somehow shows how good we are. But what we're really saying is, "I no longer have to love someone like that. I can break my commitment to love them, because God must hate them too, and that's why they're gonna roast in hell. If even God can't love them, then why should I?"

But answer honestly, friends: is there ever anyone that God gives up on? Is there anyone that God just washes his hands of? When Jesus was on the cross, did he say, "Okay, God, let 'em have it!" Or did he say, "Forgive them, they don't know

what they're doing." If God doesn't give up on anyone, then what in the world makes us think we've got the right to? That isn't life-thinking. That's death –thinking.

The way I see it, the real question for Christians is not, "Where am I going when I die?" That question will take care of itself. No, the real question is, "Who am I loving in this life?" If our faith is not leading us to deepen our commitment to others, to love others, then it is meaningless.