

A New Commandment

Exodus 20:12-17, Matthew 22:34-40

At this stage of my life and ministry, I believe I can identify the one theme that would most characterize my ministry, both in preaching and in personal pastoral care. I believe I can describe the one thing that has become the most overarching concern of mine as I continue to serve the Lord as I believed he called me to do back in my early 20s. It is not a unique theme to me at all, in fact, it is one of the most debated and deliberated subjects in all of Christendom, a subject debated by the church from the days of the apostles unto the present day. It is a theme you see discussed plainly by the apostles and a theme that comes to the surface regularly in the yearly deliberations of the General Assembly of the OPC.

In simplest terms, I would identify that theme as the relationship between the law and the gospel. How to rightly and properly affirm both. For me that means I have to know the answer to the question of how to preach the grace of the gospel in such a way as to never give anyone an excuse to sin or to make light of sin in any way whatsoever. And it means I must know how to preach so that God's people are rightly and consistently exhorted to a godly obedience to the law without denying or even de-emphasizing the glorious truth of the grace of God presented to us in the gospel.

I don't get it perfectly right, but I try. And in large measure, in the big picture, I think I succeed when I strive for the proper balance between those two, the law and the gospel. For they are not in conflict, and not in tension, but, as our Confession says with such appropriate words, they "do sweetly comply."

That is my focus this afternoon as we study the so-called

second table of the ten commandments, the 6th through the 10th commandment. I have chosen not to preach with an individual focus on each commandment as I did a little over two years ago in our study of Deuteronomy. I'd be glad for you to go back to those sermons on our church website and listen to them, as that individual attention is so very helpful and edifying. But today, a bit more focus on the big picture, and to accomplish that I'm going to focus not only on the actual commandments as they are given to us in Exodus 20, but also on Jesus' words in Matthew 22 when he was asked, "Which is the great commandment in the law?"

What I want to do, most of all, is help you to see and understand the direct connection between law and love. Beginning with the declaration that,

I. THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD REQUIRE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.

So, when Jesus was asked that trick question by a lawyer, which commandment is the greatest, rather than fall into their trap with such a "gotcha question" as we would call it today, he silenced them with his profound wisdom. The greatest commandment is the command to love! First, love for God, which we studied two weeks ago with reference to the first three commandments. And second, love your neighbor, which is our focus today with commandments 6 through 10..

Matt. 22:34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Let me put it even more directly.

A. The law is a command to love others.

Jesus exposes the real problem with those Pharisees. They were legalists, lawyers, focused on all the particular, specific detailed regulations of the law. And they made sport out of listing them in order of importance. These Pharisees were also experts in proclaiming their own law-keeping, even to the point of perfection, because they focused only on the external applications of the law and missed the whole point that Jesus makes so plain. The law is not just a bare commandment. Rather each law, each commandment, is itself a command to love.

Sadly, too many people today try to contrast those two things, as if the duty of love can supersede the duties of obedience to the law. The practice of love is seen to be something entirely separated from the practice of law-keeping. As if the one is good and the other, by definition, bad. So it is said, we need people who love not people who are obsessed with commandments. And you, of course, can define that love however you want.

But there should be no such division, no such contrast or conflict. The law itself, the commandments of the law, each one, are commands to love. So that is the greatest commandment, the chief, the most important, the command to love others. Or as Jesus puts it, to love your neighbor.

The connection between love and the law is stated in other places, too.

John 14:15 "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

2 John 5 "And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. 6 This is love, that

we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it."

A new commandment! New, in the emphasis upon its priority, is the command to love.

John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

It really is an old commandment, too, isn't it? It is a commandment that goes all the way back to the book of Leviticus,

Lev. 19:17 "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

Jesus brings that command to the forefront. And he does something else to make it new. Maybe fresh is a better word. He makes it fresh. And that is by adding intensity. By stressing intensity. So here is the standard for your love of your neighbor, that you love him as yourself. And that's a lot! Love him as if he were yourself. It doesn't say to love your neighbor as you love yourself, thus validating the whole concept of self-love. But rather, quite different from that emphasis, you are to love him as if he were you! In other words, love him before you even consider yourself. Thus,

B. Love intensifies the duties of the law.

It's not just a one-time thing, a task that you ever fully accomplish. Instead, love has an intensity that demands your whole life, that as you would love, you treat this person who is the

object of your love as if he were you yourself.

Mat. 7:12 “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Luke adds even more intensity.

Luke 6:31 “And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. 32 “But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.”

The commandments of God require love for one another. And secondly,

II. THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD DEFINE LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER.

How do you know what love is? Well, objectively, with respect to the content and practice of that love, that’s what the commandments give to us. So what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? First, such love requires,

A. The fullness of honor given to others.

The fifth commandment.

v.12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.”

There is a very important principle to note when you study the 10 commandments, and that is that each commandment is a comprehensive summary of some broader subject, with the actual

command being that focal point. So the fifth commandment has to do with authority, the exercise of authority in our relationships to one another. And those under authority are called to live in submission, to give honor. As a primary example, children to their parents. The Bible also gives instruction to those in authority, namely the responsibility not to abuse that authority, so when Paul quotes this 5th commandment in Ephesians 5, he immediately adds in,

Eph. 6:4 “And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord.”

That same dynamic of authority and submission is given in the context of marriage, where wives are called to obey and submit, husbands to love to such a degree as to lay down their lives for the object of their love. So also elders and church members, where church members are called upon to honor and submit to their elders, while the elders are responsible not to be guilty of, 1 Peter 5:3. “...being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

So our relationships with one another are defined by God’s law, our love for one another is defined by that law. And in addition to those relationships in which there is authority and submission, the Bible often speaks of those relationships which our confession of faith and catechisms identify as relationships among equals. So in a broader context than merely husband and wife, or parent and child, Paul instructs us to submit to one another.

Eph. 5:15 “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms

and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

In Ephesians 4, that mutual submission would be defined with these words,

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Even more clearly, we read in,

Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

All of that is covered under this 5th commandment, which defines our love for one another in the way that we relate to each other.

I’ll just touch on the other commandments, again in the context of definition of loving your neighbor. The sixty commandment,

v.13 “You shall not murder.”

There, of course,

B. The sanctity of human life.

Do nothing to cause harm to your neighbor. And positively, do everything you can for their well-being. That’s love. Along with the seventh commandment,

C. The sanctity of marriage.

You can’t talk about loving one another, loving your neighbor, without setting apart the marriage relationship as special above all other relationships. So we read, v.14 “You shall not commit adultery.”

There is, of course, much to be said by way of commentary and explanation throughout the rest of the Bible, but the writer of Hebrews expresses it best, when he declares that,

Heb. 13:4 “Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

Marriage is honorable. The marriage bed is holy, set apart from all other human relationships, requiring complete and wholehearted faithfulness. Surely such faithfulness is a necessary element of the love between a husband and a wife, but honoring your marriage relationship also brings a definition of how you love others, because such love is to be free from any sexual impurity or impropriety. That is true as well for those not yet married, love is defined by the willingness and the commitment to preserve the sanctity of marriage.

1 Thes. 4:3 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. 7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.”

Then the eighth commandment, about which I would refer to,

D. The sanctity of personal property.

That’s how you love your neighbor. You don’t steal what is

his, but honor and respect everything that is his.

v.15 “You shall not steal.”

Then one more definition of love, simply identified as,

E. The sanctity of truth.

v.16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Love requires that you speak the truth. Always. In every circumstance. And that you use your words, all of them, for the benefit of those who hear them.

Eph. 4:29 “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”

So which of those commandments is the most important? Why, this one—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

With all of that, let me emphasize then that these commandments are not merely external standards of law. And they never were. The commandments address not only the outward actions but also the heart.

III. THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD ARE INTENDED TO BE MATTERS OF THE HEART.

They address the motives and desires of the heart. The law of God, the commandments, are not merely a matter of behavior modification. They are not merely some sort of external measure by which try to do our best and make ourselves look good. The very essence of God’s law focus deeply upon the human heart. And by that I mean to emphasize that,

A. The law focuses on motive and desire.

That’s obvious in the 10th commandment itself, which, unlike the previous nine, has the explicit focus upon desire, motive, and

intention.

v.17. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.”

Covet means to desire that which is not yours, with specific attention given to the reality that you want what belongs to your neighbor. And that is not love. So it’s not enough not to steal, but your heart has to be pure as well, free from covetousness, which Paul labels as idolatry. It’s not enough not to commit adultery, but your heart has to be pure in relationship with your neighbor, the object of true love according to the commandment of God. It’s not enough to tell the truth. Your heart must be free from any desire, any motive, any intention of anything that would harm your neighbor.

Now, having said that, I should emphasize that none of us does that completely, perfectly. Which is why we need continually to confess our own sins and ask for God’s forgiveness. Which, according to the promise of the gospel, he grants. But that is the standard. That is the duty and obligation of God’s law, the ten commandment. Motive, desire. Things you can hide for others, and sometimes, things you even hide from yourself. But nothing is hidden before God, who knows and understands the thoughts and intentions of your heart better even than you yourself.

So please don’t ever get wrapped up in a study of the ten commandments and fail to search your own heart, asking God to search your heart in order to reveal to you if there is any wicked way in you. And certainly don’t forget what we read in,

Heb. 4:12 "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of

the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

That’s why I always so appreciate what the prophet Micah declares,

Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

One more thought in all this, going back to the emphasis of Jesus’ words in Matthew 22.

B. The law focuses on the sincere devotion to honor others above yourself.

I’ve already alluded to this, reading earlier,

Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Beloved, that is what this second great commandment is all about. Lowliness of mind. Esteeming others better than yourself. Looking out for the interests of others, not yourself. That’s what Jesus means when he defines this intensity of the law to your neighbor with those words, “as yourself.” Love your neighbor and consider his interests...not your own. Surely, that requires lowliness of mind. Humility. And that is the proper focus of these commandments. So...

Eph. 4:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

That is the essence of this new commandment, to love one another. That is the greatness of this second great commandment. That is the most important matter of the heart that can be proclaimed. A sincere devotion to honor one another above yourself. That’s the law, the new commandment of love. And no one can do, no one in their own strength, by their own human nature, can begin to accomplish that. But can, and does, enable his people to love one another with such a great intensity.

I’ll end with Jesus’ own words.

John 13:34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”