

A man was asked at his 60th wedding anniversary, what was the secret to his marital bliss, and how he and his wife never seemed to argue. He replied:

“When we were leaving the church after we were married, my wife's donkey refused to move. She got off the donkey, looked it directly in the eye, and said “that's one!” A little ways down the road, the donkey again refused to move. She got off again, looked it directly in the eye, and said “that's two!” Again a little farther, and donkey stopped and refused to go forward. At this, my wife pulled out her gun, walked up to the donkey, said “that's three!” and shot it, dead. I yelled at her “You can't just shoot your donkey like that!” My wife walked over, looked me right in the eye, and said: “that's one!”

We like to make rules for others to follow. I know I enjoy that! I can make lots of procedures and guidelines and structure – but as for *following* them – that's where I get impatient at times.

In our OT reading, the Israelites have been through a lot. They've taken 40 years to go on an 11 day journey – none of them who started, except Joshua son of Nun, will actually enter the promised land – only their children will get in. After this taxing journey, God, through Moses, gives the Israelites a whole list of commandments – a list of rules. There are general ones, and specific ones. There are commandments about worship, about daily life, about behaving to each other. There are things I would never have thought of, for example:

“When a man is newly married, he need not go into the army nor be obligated in any way; he must be free to stay at home for a full year and bring joy to the wife he has married.”

What a specific law!

Now, the Israelites have finally come to the point where they are about to enter the land promised to them when they left their life of slavery in Egypt. Here God strives to make them understand, and through them strives to make *us* understand, the choice that we are being given.

God says: I have shown you how to choose life vs. death. Life and death; prosperity and adversity; blessings and curses. The way of Life: Love God, walk His ways, follow His commands. The way of Death: turn away from God.

This is why the Pharisees, a powerful group of people in Jesus' time, were so obsessed about observing every aspect of the law, and trying to make others do so as well – they wanted life, and they wanted it badly. But as Jesus pointed out to them time and again, they failed in the basic underpinning, the foundation of what all the laws were based on.

What are the foundations of God's commandments? Jesus states them in Mark 12:28:

Now one of the experts in (what we know as the Old Testament) came and heard (Jesus and the Pharisees) debating. He asked Jesus: “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is: ‘**Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.**’ The second is: ‘**Love your neighbour as yourself.**’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

In other words, love God with all your being – and love your neighbour as yourself. You feed yourself? You should feed your neighbour. You clothe and house yourself? You should clothe and house your neighbour.

A community of Christ is to have two over-ruling characteristics. The first characteristic is that it is to be a community of life. The fruit of that life is shown in two ways:

- 1.) By how fervently, passionately, zealously, powerfully they love God. They don't just love God, they LOVE GOD. Everything they do, everything they think, everything they say – has, as an ultimate end-goal, to show God how much He is loved.
- 2.) Related to that love of God, they love the Images of God. This means all humanity, all that God created in His image, they love in His name. They treat them as they want to be treated themselves. They care for them when they are hurt, they help them to care for themselves, they pray and yearn for them to enter into life themselves.

Which brings us to the second characteristic: a community of Christ is a converting community. It is an island of life in a sea of death. As a community of life, it desperately wants to spread that life into the sea of death, so that eventually, death is swallowed up and is no more.

You see, we have the wrong picture of death. A fellow on the bus home from Syncrude told me this story the other day, which he insisted was true: He was looking up old cars on the internet, and saw a picture of an Oldsmobile Cutlass for sale, which reminded him of something that had happened once. He knew a fellow back east where he came from, who he described as “a little off.” This fellow still lived with his mother, who was in her nineties. She became very sick, so he decided he would drive her to the hospital. So, they got into their Oldsmobile Cutlass and he started driving. Along the way, unfortunately she died – right in the passenger seat while he was driving. So, he turned off the road and went through a drive-through, and bought himself an ice cream(!). He then continued his trip to the hospital.

He told his friends of how he had done this on the way to the hospital, and they couldn't believe it. He replied: “Well, Mum didn't care – she was dead! And I wanted an ice cream.”

We picture death as our physical bodies stopping to work. God is outside of that perspective. For God, death is when an Image of God becomes broken. When He can no longer see Himself in it. It's like He created us all to be mirrors of Him, and unfortunately most people have become darkened so that God can barely see Himself in them, instead of bright, shining, and reflective as He originally designed us.

And so, loving God and loving our neighbour (characteristic number one), a community of Christ follows Him in seeking out the darkened mirrors and inviting them to turn back into Images of God (characteristic number two) – in other words, it seeks to continually enlarge its island of light, until the darkness is no more.

The Psalm we read echoes this: “Happy those who walk with the Lord and keep His commands!” And Paul, in his letter to the people of Corinth, tells them they have lost their way and need to return. As He says: “as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? Only God who gives the growth. We are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.”

This is a message for us too: as long as we have jealousy and quarrelling, we are behaving not as the living but as the dead. We are God's field, God's building, God's temple – let us therefore behave not as people of darkness, but as people of light.

And how far does that extend, to behave as people of light? Very far indeed! In the story of Jesus by the writer named Matthew, Jesus tells us:

You were told: Do not murder. I say: do not be angry, do not hate. Be reconciled with one who has something against you before offering your gift to God.

You were told: Do not commit adultery. I say: do not lust. Stop doing evil.

You were told: you may divorce your spouse with a certificate. I say: do not divorce, or you commit adultery.

You were told: tell the truth when you give an oath. I say: tell the truth, period.

In other words, to be children of God, walkers with Christ, our love for God and for each other needs to go beyond the many laws and guidelines that the Old Testament details out, down to the very foundations – our very being needs to be transformed into loving God, and loving our neighbour – our very existence should be defined by that. It is something we cannot do by ourselves! It is only accomplished through giving ourselves over to the Holy Spirit, and truly following God through His Spirit. It is accomplished by admitting our failures to God, receiving forgiveness, and trying again, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

We becoming a community of light, a community of love, interacting with joy and caring – and inviting all around in to the party.

Are you curious as to what that would be like? To be a life-giving community, spreading love to all in your life? To be so focused on showing God at all times how much God is loved – that your very being is filled with Him and His joy? To see, daily, darkened mirrors becoming bright as others regain their identity as Images of God, what they were originally created to be? To watch in awe as our little island of light becomes bigger and bigger, going from the size of a few rocks, to something you could put a house on, to the size of Iceland, then Greenland, then a continent, until finally the darkness is swallowed up and is no more? To be a part of God's purpose, re-instituting His original plan of walking with His people, rejoicing that there is no separation between heaven and earth?

Are you curious? Because that is the choice that is being given to us, today.

To God's glory and our joy;

Amen.