

“Love Over Law” – John 2:13-22

Are you still feeling a little uncomfortable from that reading in John’s gospel? It’s hard not to be a little uncomfortable when you hear it – after all, here we see a Jesus who is nothing like the pictures we coloured in Sunday School. This is no sweet image of a gentle Jesus tenderly cuddling a cute little lamb in his arms, surrounded by adoring children gazing up peacefully at him. Here instead we have a rather ugly scene of a man gone berserk, flailing a whip, chasing people, kicking over tables and generally wrecking the joint. This is a scene more reminiscent of a brawl in a mining town tavern than a pastoral meadow. I’m sure that in the confusion even the disciples were asking, “Whoa, dude! What set you off?”

What indeed was it that set Jesus off to wreak such havoc in the most important worship place in his faith tradition? It seems pretty clear he was angry at people who were conducting business in the Temple, sellers of doves and sheep and cattle, and money changers. And yet were these people not doing what was required? Were they not making it possible for the faithful to exercise their faith in the ways they were called and required to, with burnt offerings to the Lord? Were they not following the laws of their faith?

We also heard the proclamation of the Law in its original form in the Exodus reading, a scene made famous in a movie with Charlton Heston as Moses coming down the dusty mountain, robes flowing in the wind, thunder and lightning at his back, hair and beard flying free, and a gigantic tablet in each hand. The background music swelling (no, not the party music from the base camp below ... that’s a different part of the story). The music I remember is much more martial, stirring, somber and serious. Somber and serious and fierce was also the look on Moses’ face, a look that apparently set the tone for the next few thousand years. After all, he was carrying the Ten Commandments, wasn’t he? Carrying the very Law dictated to him by God on Mount Sinai, a Law meant to prescribe every action of God’s people. Weren’t these the very rules that when broken would define a person as condemned?

Frankly, no, but unfortunately that is the view into which people have slipped time and again over the ages, understanding the Ten Commandments as a tool with which to condemn, to isolate, to exclude people. Time and again since Moses came down from the mountain carrying these commandments from God, people of faith have misunderstood the nature and purpose of these commandments. Time and again the clergy and the powerful within Temple, synagogue and church have misused these commandments to exercise their control over the people. Over the ages people have formed around these commandments layers of practices, laws and regulations harder than the coldest heart.

This is exactly the situation that Jesus railed against in his tirade in the Temple, and in his other condemnations of the Pharisees. What set Jesus off was the way that Law was being abused, the way that it had overtaken faith itself so that worship of God had become secondary, the very opposite of what the Law was originally intended to be and do.

In the almost two thousand years between Moses delivering the Ten Commandments to the Israelites and the ministry of Jesus, the Law had evolved into a highly-complex set of rules. That was not necessarily in and of itself a bad thing, but the hypocritical misuse of the Law by the religious and the self-righteous was. “You have turned my Father’s house into a market place” he raged in the Temple, overturning tables and scattering the coins. How could it have come to this? How could a faithful people have gone so far off the rails in understanding what God had done in giving the Ten Commandments, and the Law? Apparently they had lost sight of the context in which the Commandments were issued, even though it is well described in Scripture as part of the Exodus experience..

The giving of the Ten Commandments was part of the Exodus experience, but in hearing that we all tend to say, “yeah, yeah, Moses, bulrushes, Egypt, Pharaoh, Red Sea, chariots, Charlton Heston, yadda, yadda”. Let me say it again, so you can hear it clearly: the giving of the Ten Commandments was part of the Exodus experience. The giving of the Law was a highly significant part of what the Israelite people saw as their defining moment, their rescue from slavery in Egypt. But note carefully - the Ten Commandments were given by God to His people after He had saved them from Egypt. The people of God received these Commandments as a result of being saved by God’s grace and mercy, not as a way to find that salvation. In giving these Commandments to His people, God was declaring anew His covenant with them, defining the way in which He wanted his people to live in that covenant. It’s vitally important to understand the difference between the cart and the horse, and to get them in the proper order. Obedience to the Law, to these Commandments, is a response to God’s grace and mercy, not a way to earn them. Instead of seeing the Commandments and the Law as a mine field laden with religious traps for the unwary, in which any misstep can result in being blown out of God’s favour and out of the lineup into heaven, we need to see the Commandments and the Law as a User’s Guide to God’s Grace, a way to respond to what God has already done, a way to live and proclaim that grace and mercy already received.

We have vigorously discussed this very issue a number of times in our bible studies ... as recently as yesterday. The issue from a Christian perspective is the tension between understanding salvation on the one hand as a free gift from God in Christ, or on the other hand as the result of our “good” behaviour. Now before you tune out or dismiss me as completely off-track, pause for a moment and come along with me as we explore this important subject.

The Reformed Church, of which we are a part, firmly avows a doctrine of salvation by faith, that we are saved from our sins and reconciled with God through his grace in Jesus and in Christ’s sacrificial actions on the cross and in his resurrection. While this seems clear enough when we say it, it seems much harder to live out. It is easy to find examples of churches and people of faith today who live as though they believed that somehow our salvation in Christ is fragile, or can even be revoked if we don’t behave properly. In many churches the emphasis is on ethics and righteous behaviour, which doesn’t seem like a problem until you notice that their definition of righteous often goes against the very loving and accepting actions for which Jesus was calling.

This brings us back to Jesus’ rampage in the Temple. He was not railing against the Law, he was railing against the way the interpretation and the implementation of the Law had been manipulated and corrupted. The issue for Jesus was not the Law, not even in the complex and confusing set of minute regulations into which it had devolved between the short and powerful version given by God through Moses and the time that Jesus cleared the Temple. The issue was instead how people had gotten so into following the letter of the law that they were missing the spirit of the law.

Now I’m not going to analyse the Commandments one at a time (yes, there is grace and mercy, even here!) – that’s better done in the Bible Classes – but there is one structural characteristic that I want to point out. There are, of course, ten of them (otherwise we wouldn’t call them the ‘Ten Commandments’!) – all except numbers Four and Five are prohibitions (“don’t’s”) and those two are more positive (“do’s”). It’s interesting that those two are positive, because they form a transition from the first four that define our relationship with God and the last six that define our relationship with other covenant people. The link between these two

groups is a pair of “do’s” instead of the “don’t’s” that people usually associate with the Ten Commandments.

In terms of priorities, it is clear that the First Commandment is foundational. The prohibition against worshipping other gods is the basis for all other regulations. We should note that this is not the same as monotheism; quite the opposite it assumes that there are alternative gods to worship, and this is as true today as it was in those ancient times. The gods we worship today are perhaps more subtle and complex than the idols and graven images of Moses’ day, but no less enticing. Fame, power, wealth, and self are the gods of today that come to mind immediately, but the list is long: fitness, leisure, and although it pains me to say it, technology! The expectations of us set down in these Commandments are as applicable today and should be taken as seriously today as they ever were.

Recognizing that, how do we avoid falling into the trap of misusing the Commandments as a legalistic and moralistic trap for others? The best way to avoid that trap is to see what Jesus had to say. When the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus by asking him which was the most important commandment, His answer was clear and powerful: “all of the commandments are good”, he replied, “but I will give you a new one”. With an answer that paralleled the overall structure of the commandments (that four/six split re God/others) Jesus told his challengers, and us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”[Mt 22:37-40] Jesus also in other places condemned the legalistic overbearing demands of the church leaders with direct challenges such as, “Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, for you lay heavy burdens upon the people and lift not a finger to help them.”

And so the uncomfortable yet fairly simple lesson we can take from Jesus’ rampage is to understand his zeal for hearing the compassion of God in forming a covenant with and protecting his faithful people, and his passionate cry to return to practicing a faith that not only honours God but also pays respect in very real ways to all of God’s people. With this simple understanding there is no way we could stand proud just because we had observed the letter of the Law, but we can take comfort in all the actions we do in our faith that are consistent with loving God AND loving our neighbour.