

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
October 2, 2011
Matthew 18:21-35

Proper 22, Year A

It is always a joy for me to pick up my Bible and read. As you all know, I really do love to preach sermons based on scripture, God's word. Reading the Bible and preaching on it is a wonderful way to continue to deepen my appreciation of God's love for each of us, and to deepen my appreciation of the importance and richness of loving God and loving my neighbors, loving all my neighbors.

In the scriptures appointed for today, we have a valuable combination of perspectives in our Old Testament scripture from Exodus, and our Epistle scripture from Paul's letter to the Philippians. The Old Testament scripture from Exodus gives us the Ten Commandments. These are obviously essential laws for us to follow. There is a series of "billboards from God" that says, "What part of 'thou shalt not' don't you understand?" Of course the Ten Commandments are essential.

We can get into trouble, however, if we slip into an attitude of thinking that if we are obeying the Ten Commandments, we are pretty much doing everything God expects of us. The main point here is that the Ten Commandments are the bare minimum. This became clear to me the first time I read Huston Smith on this topic. He explains it this way:

"The Ten Commandments constitute the moral foundation of most of the Western world. Through four of these commandments Hebraic morality has had its greatest impact [because] there are four danger zones in human life that can cause unlimited trouble if they get out of hand: force, wealth, sex, and speech. What the Commandments prescribe in these areas are the minimum standards that make collective life possible. In this sense the Ten Commandments are to the social order what the opening chapter of Genesis is to the natural order; without each there is only a formless void. Whereas Genesis structures (and thereby creates) the physical world, the Ten Commandments structure (and thereby make possible) a social world.

1. Regarding force, they say in effect: You can bicker and fight, but killing within the group will not be permitted, for it instigates blood feuds that shred community.

Therefore *thou shalt not murder*.

2. It is similar with sex. You can be a rounder, flirtatious, even promiscuous, and though we do not commend such behavior, we will not get the law after you. But at one point we draw the line: sexual indulgence of married persons outside the nuptial bond will not be allowed, for it rouses passions the community cannot tolerate.

Therefore *thou shalt not commit adultery.*

3. As for possessions, you may make your pile as large as you please and be shrewd and cunning in the enterprise. One thing, though, you may not do, and that is pilfer directly off someone else's pile, for this outrages the sense of fair play and builds animosities that become ungovernable.

Therefore *thou shalt not steal.*

4. Regarding the spoken word, you may dissemble and equivocate, but there is one time when we require that you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If a dispute reaches such proportions as to be brought before a tribunal, on such occasions the judges must know what happened. If you lie then, while under oath to tell the truth, the penalty will be severe.

Therefore *thou shalt not bear false witness.*"

Smith concludes, "The Ten Commandments do not speak the final word on the topics they touch; they speak the words that must be spoken if other words are to follow."

— Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Harper 1991), 286-88

So if you avoid doing things that could bring down your entire society, well, that's important. However, it's still only the bare minimum.

You can see the same "bare minimum" at work in the first four commandments also, the ones about our relationship with God. For example, the ideal is to recognize the holiness in every moment of our lives. But the bare minimum is to keep one day of the week holy. The ideal is that all our language would be respectful, but the bare minimum is that we not use the name of God wrongly.

The laws of God are not just the Ten Commandments, of course. The scriptures have over 500 laws in the Old Testament, including lots and lots of laws in Leviticus. The Pharisees rigorously obeyed all these hundreds of laws, and among the most

rigorously obedient of the Pharisees was the Apostle Paul. He tells us so himself in today's epistle reading in Phillipians 3.

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

And then in the next verse he tells us how God has transformed him from someone focused on obeying laws to a whole new attitude:

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.”

Conversion, for Paul, has meant that righteousness that comes from the law is worthless, he regards it as loss; he regards it as rubbish. What God has done in his life is to change his view entirely, from a righteousness of his own that comes from the law, to one that comes from God, based on faith.

The Pharisaical impulses are still there in Paul, even after his conversion, and you can see those Pharisaical impulses welling up in some of the letters he writes. Still, once he's seen that there is something so much more meaningful than obedience to laws, he cannot un-see it. It changes him. This transformation changes his interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Paul writes in Romans 13:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

What did Paul's old friends think of Paul as he writes things like these? As he says things like, “for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” his old friends must have thought he was totally crazy, and you can hardly blame them.

Still, love is the fulfilling of the law, as Paul says, as scripture says. We satisfy God's Laws by loving one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. God loves you. Love God. Love your neighbors. It is my joy to pick up my Bible and read those things. It is my joy to preach sermons based on scripture, God's holy word. God loves you. Love God. Love your neighbors.