

## **For the Love of God**

Matthew 22:34-46

Heather Prince Doss  
Sea Island Presbyterian Church  
23 October 2011

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.

The words are so familiar we hardly know they belong anymore to Scripture. They are as much maxim as they are the Word of God. Christians and Jews alike can rattle the saying off without even a fleeting thought to its power. You don't even really have to be religious to appreciate that last part. In popular culture we call it the Golden Rule: treat others as you wish to be treated. Even the most secular of our public schools teach it.

Speaking of public schools and commandments, it struck me that while we in the United States have had plenty of debates and lawsuits about where the Ten Commandments can be hung and taught, I have never heard anyone really argue that we should hang these two commandments anywhere.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.

Well, almost never. The Lord actually instructed Israel to hang the first commandment – to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might – on their gates and on the doorposts of their homes (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). It is a practice that some Jews keep unto this day.

Why is it that we are willing to fight for the public display of the Ten Commandments but we politely ignore God's call to hang the first and greatest commandment even in our own homes and then reduce the second greatest commandment (which is like the first one) to a neat and tidy secular maxim that we can teach even a toddler?

I suspect the answer to that troubling question has something to do with our preference for the visible and concrete, something to do with our desire to know, own, control, and judge. "Love your neighbor as yourself" or the more sanitary, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is about neighbors and others that we can see. We may not be very good at the loving, but at least we can see each other and look in one another's faces. Even our far-away neighbors we can see through the eye of television and the internet. Love your neighbor is concrete.

The Ten Commandments are concrete, too – as heavy as the stones into which they were first carved. Of the ten commands, eight are prohibitions: "Thou shall not . . ." In our culture, at least, they read like a checklist. Did I lie today? Nope. Check. Did I commit adultery? Nope. Check. Did I covet my neighbor's new boat? Ok, maybe a little. Work on jealousy issues tomorrow – after I leave the boat dealership. We like the Ten Commandments because we like

the idea of standing with pride before the Lord and saying, as the rich young ruler once said, “All these I have kept since my youth” (Luke 18:21). And even if we know that we will never keep all Ten Commandments perfectly, at least we have something by which to measure ourselves and others.

So why do we hang the Ten Commandment but not the Greatest Commandment? Why do we recite the second commandment like a nursery rhyme? I think if we are honest it is because we are afraid. The call to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength seems huge and vague and elusive. It is like a great fog that has settled over the marsh. You can see it, you can even feel its dampness on your skin; but you cannot, for the life of you, touch it or hold it. You cannot measure its volume or capture it in a jar as you could catch a jar of rain.

We are afraid because we know how often we fail at our human loves – how often we let down those who count on us; how many birthdays we have forgotten; how resentment can strangle love; how the warm, mushy feeling of love can wax and wane like the moon. If we cannot love our neighbor who we can see, how can we possibly love our God whom we cannot see?

How do we know if we love God well, anyway? Do we know we love God if we get a warm, fuzzy sensation when we pray? What about all those times we have heaped up prayers but the words fell flat and empty? Do we know we love God when material blessings abound? What about all the people who pray with great faith but stare into empty cupboards? Or all those whose cupboards are full but whose souls are empty?

Indeed we are afraid because the call to love God with everything we have is more like a morning fog than a stone tablet, more like a haiku than a nursery rhyme. It is not something we can know, own, control, or judge. It is not really even a feeling, as we are accustomed to thinking about love. The call to love God with everything is, first of all, a call to relationship. It is not so much about measuring, controlling, or even obeying as it is about openness: openness to receive God’s love for you, openness to be impacted by that love, and openness to return that love. We are afraid because we know that like any relationship worth having, this one requires all of us.

In that sense, loving God is perhaps a posture. Posture is the way you express with your body the truth of your soul. Posture is all of you - body and soul. When you are confident or proud you stand tall. When you are embarrassed, you look away. One who is broken sits with head bowed or maybe stiffened with resolve. There is one prayer that I know that expresses better than any other the posture of one who loves God. I can imagine the posture of the one who prays, but I cannot describe it. So I invite you to hear the prayer of St. Ignatius, to imagine his posture, and to feel it for yourself:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.

That is the posture of love for God. It is a posture of total self-emptying. It is the same posture that God, in love with his people, takes toward us in the person of Jesus Christ. To love God

with heart, soul, mind, and strength is to be in a relationship with the one who loves you more than life itself. This is not to say that loving God is easy. Relationships are usually not easy. It is still more morning fog than stone tablet. For we who like to know, own, measure, and control, it will not come easily to love God with all everything we have. "But to love God is not a goal we have to struggle toward on our own, because what, at its heart, the gospel is all about is that God himself moves us toward it even when" the morning fog is thick and "when we believe he has forsaken us. The final secret, I think, is that the words: 'You shall love the Lord your God' become in the end less a command than a promise."<sup>1</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

When it really comes down to it, it is not important to me to display the Ten Commandments in schools or courthouses. Removed from the deep and abiding love of God and our loving response, they are just a checklist of moral standards - moral standards worth keeping, no doubt, but moral standards nonetheless. The Golden Rule is a good rule to teach our children and employees, a good rule to keep ourselves, but divorced from love of God and love for God is it simply good ethics.

What makes the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule particularly Christian in orientation is one thing: love - the self-sacrificing love of God for his people and the all-encompassing love of God's children for their Father. My invitation to you this morning is to put away your stone tablets, measuring sticks, and all the other tools that you have used for proving yourself before God. Put them down and let Christ lead you into the thick, sweet morning fog: love that requires nothing of you but everything.

Let us pray:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fredrich Buechner. "Love" in *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. (San Francisco: Harpers, 2006) p.103.