

What Matters Most: Love or Holiness?

A sermon on Matthew 22:34-46 by Nathan Nettleton, 29 October 2017

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Today, as in Jesus's day, two fundamentally different visions of God and God's expectations compete. Jesus calls us to side with the one that centres on love rather than the one that centres on concerns for holiness.

Sermon

Next Sunday afternoon, before our normal service, we will be holding a liturgy of solidarity, hope and blessing here for LGBT+ people and rainbow families and their allies who have been caught up in the hurtful and destructive crossfire of the national debate on same-sex marriage. During the past week, Cam and I have been engaged in a rather lengthy conversation on Facebook with a man who described our public promotion of that liturgy as "an affront to the word of God." He wrote, "Shame on these leaders; who instead should repent of this assault on Christianity; and correct and admonish those who are in habitual and unrepentant sin."

My alleged failure to warn you about the cancer of sin has been a frequent theme of his numerous statements on our Facebook page this week. So be warned!! He told Cameron "You are in peril. No one in your group will warn you; and you will die in your sin. Right now; you and your group are blinded to the reality that you have all fallen into the snare of the devil; and are inadvertently his ambassadors." And of all of you, he said, "if you are attending this church; you are being led astray by the (so-called) leaders there; and are therefore deceived." So there you go. You have been warned!

Should you be worried? Personally, I don't think so, but I am also not going to tell you that you shouldn't examine such views and weigh them up alongside the example and teachings of Jesus. We don't arrive at a deeper understanding of the truth by suppressing and ignoring views that don't seem right to us. We grow as we engage openly with the views and experience of others and listen for what God might be saying to us in even the most unlikely voices.

I am quite proud of the fact that a number of you here have felt free to tell me that you personally don't believe that same-sex marriage should be legalised. I'm proud of that because your willingness to tell me suggests that you know that I love you and that I won't reject you just because you don't agree with me on this, and that you know that although the church has adopted a position that you disagree with, you know that you belong and are honoured here. I couldn't claim my right to dissent from a traditional teaching if I was trying to deny you your right to dissent. You don't have to read much of Jesus and the prophets to realise how often those who bear the word of God are dismissed as troublesome dissenters by the majority. If I don't listen for the voice of God in what you are saying, I can't expect you to listen for the voice of God in anything I say.

I'm not intending to say anything more about same-sex marriage tonight, but I do want to talk in a bit more detail about the different understandings of God that are reflected in this discussion of whether or not I am teaching and leading you as I should. And the gospel reading that came up tonight in our cycle of scripture readings happens to be one of the key passages that has come up in the debate. It is certainly one of the first passages that I turn to and seek to shape my approach around.

As we heard, Jesus is approached by some members of the devoutly religious Pharisee party and asked which commandment in the biblical law he regards as the greatest, or most important. And Jesus answers with a top two: Firstly “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and secondly, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” And then by way of commentary he adds, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now at one level, as a piece of biblical interpretation, there is absolutely nothing surprising or controversial about his answer. Any devout Jew who accepted the premise that there could be a most important commandment would have given the same answer, because this command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, formed part of a prayer which every devout Jew prayed several times a day. It was the one commandment that was on their lips each and every day.

The potential for controversy and dispute comes from another angle. It comes from either or both of the fact that Jesus answered at all, and the commentary he added after he did. You see, some religious people both then and now would have answered that there is no “greatest” commandment, but that every jot and tittle of the biblical law is equally important and we must carefully and rigorously obey everything it commands. So to some, providing an answer instead of contesting the question is controversial, and even more controversial is the commentary that Jesus adds: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words, if you love God and love others, you will almost certainly be living in conformity with the intention of the rest of the law and the prophets without even having to think about them, and for you biblical scholars, the key to understanding and correctly interpreting the rest of the biblical law and prophets is these two commandments. That is seriously controversial, both then and now.

The reason it is so controversial was clearly apparent in the online conversation this week. In fact, when I asked our correspondent whether he thought that Jesus’s “love, love, love” answer was to be the guiding principle of our life and faith, he replied that I was poking around in the scripture seeking an escape clause in order to excuse myself from facing the truth. *(To be fair, it is difficult to tell for sure whether that response was specifically to that question, but if it wasn’t, then he simply ignored the question.)* Jesus says it is the most important thing, but bringing it up is portrayed by some as poking around in scripture in search of an escape clause. Escape from what, you might reasonably ask.

Well, his view of the essential truth about God and the gospel appeared to be shaped by different texts, including another verse that speaks of the relationship between love and the law. He quoted John 14:15 where Jesus says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And he added a particular emphasis, “**IF** you love me, you will **KEEP** my commandments.” Or in other words, he was reading it as saying that “the proof of whether you love me is whether or not you carefully and rigorously keep the commandments in the biblical law.” And for further emphasis, he asserted that this was God’s acid test.

Now apart from the fact that the teacher who is talking of keeping “my commandments” is the same person who tells us that the most important commandments are love, love and love, the emphasis that our correspondent gave is questionable. His reading is grammatically possible, but in both English and the original Greek, Jesus’s words could just as likely mean “if you are loving me, then you will thereby be keeping my commandments.” And giving that

this is being said by the person who tells us that all the law and the prophets are just commentary on the call to love God and love others, that actually seems to be the more consistent reading.

But you can see the issue, can't you? The question is which way around the relationship between love and the biblical law is to be understood. Is love the acid test, and the law will take care of itself? Or is rigorous obedience to the law the acid test, and that will take care of love?

One of the tell tale signs here is the attitude to those who are seen as transgressing the commandments. In much of traditional religion, both in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in most other religions, this is expressed in a commitment to separatist holiness, that is to keeping oneself holy and separate from those who are not holy. Sin and lawlessness are seen as contagious toxins that we need to keep well away from lest we be corrupted and deceived and find ourselves cut off from a holy God who will accept only the separated righteous remnant and who tolerates no compromise or shortcoming.

During the week, Cam repeatedly invited our correspondent to come and share a meal and a time of prayer in his home, to assess for himself the lifestyle he was denouncing as reprobate from a distance. And repeatedly the reply was, "thanks for the invitation, but whilst you remain in rebellion to God, we cannot be in fellowship in any way, shape or form."

His view is not unusual. You can easily use the Bible, especially the older Hebrew Scriptures, to make a case that maintaining a righteous separation from those who are not as pure as us is the heart of true religion. There are passages where this is expressed in such extreme forms as a call to all Israelite men to divorce any foreign wives they might have and banish them into the desert lest they corrupt the pure faith of Israel. "Be ye holy. Be ye separate."

But, as common as this view is, there is a major problem in trying to reconcile it with the example and teachings of Jesus, because the religious people of his day constantly criticised Jesus for ignoring this traditional separation and instead sharing meals and fellowship with all manner of unrepentant sinners and outcasts. So even if we all thought that Cam was an unrepentant and unredeemed sinner, it would be very very difficult to see refusing his invitation to a meal as faithfully following the example of Jesus. Jesus always seems to have assumed that love and mercy and goodness were far more contagious than sin, and that we have nothing to fear.

Taken as a whole, the teachings and example of Jesus seem to challenge the holiness view of what God requires of us. Jesus accuses those who were most focussed on rigorous obedience to the law of "tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laying them on the shoulders of others" (Matt. 23:4), and in almost every recorded case, Jesus eats with people, heals people, and tells people they are loved and forgiven without first inquiring into their lifestyles and before or without them giving any indication of an intention to change their lives.

And, as we have heard tonight, when asked by the champions of religious law to nominate the most important commandment, he does not say "The first is keep yourself pure and holy, and the second is like it, stay well away from sin and sinners."

Instead he says, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

It is difficult to know just why that answer is so routinely under-emphasised by advocates of traditional holiness religion. Our correspondent this week not only dismissed my appeal to this teaching as poking around for an escape clause, but he said to Cam, “sympathy and empathy are nice attributes, but God requires obedience and adherence to his word.” Do you hear what he is saying there? Obedience is the main game, the essential requirement of a holy God, while things like sympathy and empathy are just nice attributes, optional extras that might be added to a life of rigorous obedience.

I think love is routinely sidelined as a God-given essential because it is regarded as a bit soft and as very difficult to fit into the separatist holiness perspective. A focus on keeping commandments is so much more clear-cut. You can be black and white about it. You either obeyed the commandment or you didn’t. We know who’s in and who we need to keep separate from. But if the most important things are love, love and love, it is much more difficult to identify who are the good people and who are the bad people and to keep the lines clear and the groups apart.

So the holiness fanatics try to squeeze Jesus into their system, sidelining things like his unequivocal focus on love and mercy, and amplifying things like “go and sin no more”, despite the fact that he is only recorded as saying it once and even then he prefaces it by saying “I don’t condemn you” and he says it after dissuading a mob of angry righteous men from carrying out a biblically commanded punishment for a sexual sin. He certainly doesn’t nominate it as a contender for the most important commandment.

I think that the perception that love is a bit fluffy, or just a nice attribute so long as you are first living a life of rigorous holiness, is a failure to understand the radical and even extreme nature of the love that Jesus shows for us and calls us to follow his example in.

Jesus’s repeatedly challenged the portrayal of God as a harsh angry demanding judge, and instead sought to introduce us to a God who wants mercy, not sacrifice, and who reaches out to us with a courageous love that is willing to risk utter rejection and even violent hostility rather than compromise that love. There is nothing mild or sloppy about a love that is so fiercely committed to you that it will face a tortured death on a cross rather than buckle to the demands of traditional holiness and condemn you and shun you and reinforce the old certainties. This is a hard-core, courageous, stop-at-nothing kind of love.

If you want a contemporary example, this is more like [Najih Shaker Al-Baldawi](#), the Iraqi man who last year realised that someone he saw walking into a shrine in Balad, Iraq, was about to detonate a suicide belt, and so rather than run for his life, he ran up to the suicide bomber and hugged him as the bomb went off. About forty people were killed, but it probably would have been hundreds if it hadn’t been for the courageous love of Najih Shaker Al-Baldawi taking the full force of the blast.

That kind of love and sympathy and empathy are not just nice attributes. They are the image of God. They are the essence of who God is and what God would do for us and for any

sinner, and what God wants us to become. Najih was, in that moment, an icon of Jesus, a window into the truth of how Jesus acts to save us, not distancing himself from evil, but stepping up to throw his arms around all that would harm us, to absorb its full force in his own body, and shield us as best he can.

This is an icon of the love that death cannot destroy, the love that rises from the dead and continues to throw itself between us and all that would harm us. I don't claim for a moment that anything we do will come remotely close to the love shown by Jesus on the cross or by Najih Shaker Al-Baldawi before the suicide bomber. But what we want to do next Sunday afternoon is one little token expression of that love, one little attempt to throw ourselves between some vulnerable people and the hatred and hostility that would condemn them and trample over their lives and loves.

And if our teaching and our practice will ultimately be judged by the one who tells us that all the law and the prophets can be summed up in the commands to love, love and love – the one who, while we were still sinners came and ate with us and forgive us and healed us, and goes all the way to the cross rather than compromise that love for us – then I think we can confidently face that judgement, secure in the knowledge that even if it turns out that we were completely wrong about marriage law, we are held secure in the infinitely loving and merciful hands of God.