
That's All We Need

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 29 October 2023

Deuteronomy 34:5-12 • 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 • Matthew 22:34-46



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The world is full of rules.

Some are common-sense, like “Look both ways before you cross the street.” Some are placed on us as children, for our own good, like “Don’t play football in the house!” or “Eat your broccoli!” Some are enforced by law, like “Stop at the red light, and don’t go until it turns green.”

And then there are those which were given to us a long, long time ago, by God, like “You shall not murder” and “Honour your father and mother.”

Jesus, the Son of God, was never a stickler for rules, as we see in our Gospel passage today. Several times in the Gospels, he encounters groups of Pharisees, and they are usually complaining about something he or his disciples have done. The Pharisees lived by many rules, and it was important to them to have them all

spelled out. And, like Parliament or the US Congress, they thought they weren't doing their job if they weren't thinking up new rules — whether they were needed or not. So they took the Ten Commandments, a simple, short list of laws, which easily fit on a sheet of paper (or a couple of stone tablets), and expanded on them, creating specific, detailed interpretations about everything: food, sex, the Sabbath, marriage, death, everything. Over time, these rules and interpretations were collected in written form in the Mishnah, although this did not happen until after Jesus' time on earth. They were an oral tradition until they began to be written down around the end of the first century. In general, they are an expansion of the laws you can read in the first five books of the Old Testament.

So the Jews took ten laws and made them into hundreds, maybe thousands? Jesus took the opposite tack. He took ten laws and reduced them to only two. As you have often heard me say, Christianity is simple: love God and love your neighbour. Those are the two laws, and they are all we need. Loving God covers the first four Commandments, and loving your neighbour covers the remaining six. Where the rabbis gave their people interpretations of God's law in minute detail to serve as a guide for living, Jesus seems to trust his followers — us — to do the interpretation ourselves. Perhaps more than that, Jesus came to us to show us how to live in God's kingdom, and left us with the Holy Spirit, who will continue to guide us. So we truly do not need volumes of interpretation, if we stay in tune with the Spirit.

But of course this implies an obligation on our part. To believe in Christ is to have perfect freedom. Not the freedom to sin or to break the Commandments, and not the freedom that the modern world seems to value — to be yourself, no matter what, and to have no one stop you from doing what you want. That sort of earthly freedom results in social disorder, as people consult only their own desires and ignore those of others. Self-actualization — speaking “one's own truth” — moral relativism — a whole host of ills results from this. Faith in Christ does not give us this kind of freedom.

No, the freedom that we may enjoy in Christ is what Paul spoke of in his Letter to the Romans:

Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. (Romans 6:19-22)

Our freedom in Christ is freedom from sin, and true freedom from sin means that you no longer are tempted to sin. You can do what you want, but what you want is righteousness, not sinfulness. You want the good, not the bad. You want the good

so much, that you can't even really imagine doing the bad. So the burden of temptation has been lifted from you. Imagine a world where no one would even think of harming another person — where every person put other people's needs and wants before their own.

But we are not perfect yet — God is still working on us. We are still not free from sin. So our obligation, as disciples of Christ, is to continue to choose the good, while actively avoiding the bad. Still, we have the Holy Spirit to guide us, and through the Spirit's influence we know what is right and what is wrong — and it all comes down to those two greatest Commandments: love the Lord the your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. That's all we need. Thanks be to God. Amen.