

October 6 – Love

A sort of recurring controversy over the last couple of decades has been the issue of whether or not the Ten Commandments can legally be displayed in places like schools and courthouses. In some cases courts have deemed the commandments historical and not religious and have allowed them to stand.

In others the courts have ruled it's a violation of the First Amendment to our constitution – the part that says the government shall make no law establishing a religion.

I'm not going to argue this one way or another.

What I want to point out is the irony. Jesus said that the whole law could be summed up by these words: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

At the heart of the commandments is love. And yet the efforts to defend the display of the commandments in these controversial spaces never seem very loving.

In some ways it's like the ten commandments to some people have become mostly just a symbol. At worst, they've become a tool to divide.

And yet their original purpose was to shape a community around love.

What would our society look like if Christians just focused on living the commandments instead of arguing about their place?

What if we put love at the foundation of our lives?

Where do we even start?

Well, the very beginning of the commandments would be a decent place to start. And what we see there is that it really starts with God's love for us. Before the commandments were even given to the Israelites, God won their freedom.

We read last week about the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. We've now leapt forward 40 years.

Israel is at the boundary of the promised land. Moses is getting them ready to live there as God's free people. The whole book of Deuteronomy consists of his teaching.

We've never been slaves in Egypt. But through Christ's death and resurrection, we are pulled into a life of ever unfolding freedom from the things that tie us up in knots. Daily God's love is infused into us and fills the very cells of our bodies.

Becoming truly aware of that...truly experiencing that love...can be so powerful that the love naturally flows from us to others and the commandments aren't even needed. That's the goal toward which God is moving us.

But in the meantime, we aren't always good about the whole love thing. So sometimes, we just need to act like we love our neighbor as ourselves, and maybe eventually real love will follow. And the Ten Commandments are a pretty good guide for that.

So what would it look like if Christians followed the Ten Commandments, even when we don't feel very loving? And how might that impact the people and creation around us?

Let's work our way through them and see.

You shall have no other gods and you shall not make for yourself an idol. An idol is really anything that's not God that we put our faith in...and sometimes even worship. There are lots of candidates for our modern day idols...money...buildings...weapons...power...celebrities...political leaders...

Mostly it seems that when we put our faith in those other gods, constant fear and anxiety result. We fear losing the object of our worship. Gradually that fear and anxiety turns into anger and resentment.

If fear, anxiety and resentment are all too often part of your life, maybe it's a sign that your deepest faith is in something other than God. Maybe it's time to renew your worship and prayer life. Talk to me if you want some suggestions.

You shall not make wrongful use of God's name. The first thing that always pops into people's minds is swearing using God's name. Or maybe even typing OMG in a text message. Far more damaging is doing terrible things in God's name. Or assuming you can act as a judge for God and condemn certain people or groups in God's name.

Martin Luther, in his small catechism, said the proper use of God's name is to call on it in every trouble, to pray, praise, and give thanks. Prayer turns us back to the love which sustains us.

Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. We did a whole series on the sabbath during the summer. Truly practiced, this commandment frees us from the need to constantly be productive...it's a counter to the culture of busy that keeps so many people anxious, frazzled

and exhausted. What if we did this and it actually caught on? Maybe there'd be less anxiety and frustration all around!

Honor your father and mother. This mostly seems obvious and kind of no brainer to many of us.

But family relationships can be among the most difficult to negotiate. How can we as Christians support families who are struggling with addiction, abuse, conflict and general dysfunction? And when we're the ones caught in that, can we have the courage to ask for help?

You shall not murder. Both Jesus and Martin Luther took this even further. Jesus said not only don't murder, but don't retaliate for wrongs done to you and don't hold grudges against others. And Martin Luther said not only don't murder, but help and support others in every physical need.

You shall not commit adultery. Again, seems obvious to most of us. But what if we as Christians worked on finding ways to support one another in our marriages and partnerships from the very beginning? What if we asked for help sooner when our relationship got rocky? Pride often keeps us from letting others know our struggles.

You shall not steal...and for that matter, don't even covet what others have. I'll roll these commandments together. Be content with what you have. Envy would be the word I'd use in place of covet. How much mental energy do we use and how much resentment do we let build because we want what someone else has.

And I would include in this not just possessions or spouses, but physical attributes and talents and so forth.

In our culture, sometimes we don't just want other people's stuff, we want to be someone else.

Our endless desire to have or be more and more and more has wreaked havoc on God's creation...and our own self-esteem.

If we are truly able to love ourselves, jealousy and envy sort of naturally disappear and we can just be at peace with who we are and what we have.

And finally, do not bear false witness. Do not lie...especially about someone else. Sometimes it seems like social media exists as a platform for bearing false witness.

I would add to that – you shall not put mean stuff about anybody on social media. And by anybody I mean anybody from the kid everyone loves to bash on Instagram to sharing political memes that bash a person or group. Let me say that again...you shall not put mean stuff about anyone on social media.

Martin Luther again took this further – that we should defend others, speak well of them and explain everything in the kindest possible way. What if we actually did that?

God gave these commandments as a gift for people to shape a society that works for everyone...a society where everyone is loved...where fear and anxiety are cast away...where resentment and hatred die...where people have what they need to flourish.

That's the definition of the Kingdom of God. In Christ, we are being pulled toward the fulfillment of that kingdom.

But for those days we don't feel very loving, what if we just did the commandments anyway as best we can?

What kind of world might result?