

Love - The Fulfillment of the Law
Matthew 5:13-20, Psalm 119:1-8, Deuteronomy 30:15-20
February 13, 2011

*Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.
Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.
They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.
You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.
Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!
Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.
I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.
I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me.* Psalm 119:1-18 (NIV)

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees, and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NIV)

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, nor the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commandments will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:13-20 (NIV)

Two weeks ago Pastor Alex began our very brief look at Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*, found in the Gospel of Matthew, as we continue to follow along with the (Revised) Common Lectionary of readings for the year. Alex did a wonderful job of looking at the Beatitudes, Jesus’ pronouncement of blessings before Jesus actually gets into his core teaching session of what life in the Kingdom of God is supposed to look like:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the meek, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Blessed are the merciful, Blessed are the pure in heart, Blessed are the peacemakers, Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. Matthew 5:3-12 (NIV)

How many here this morning want to be blessed by God? Isn't that what we all want? Or, is it? What does it mean to be blessed by God? Think of all the people that we read about in the Bible that were blessed by God: Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Job, David, John the Baptist, Jesus' original disciples, the apostle Paul. How about the one who was blessed so much she responded "and they will call me blessed?" Yes, Mary, the mother of Jesus being startled and afraid when the angel of the Lord appeared to her with the words, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God." "Favor with God," blessings! And Mary would accept those blessings, singing out:

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he was mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me - holy is his name." Luke 1:46-49 (NIV)

Do you think when Mary spoke those words that she really understood what that pronouncement of blessing by God meant? How about having to tell Joseph she was pregnant, not by another man but by the Holy Spirit of God? Fortunately the angel of the Lord would speak to Joseph in a dream, but how about all the other people who interacted with Mary during her pregnancy? Do you think there might have been some people talking behind her back, or maybe even not so behind her back? And then she gives birth to her baby in a filthy stall out back of the inn. How blessed is that? And then before she knows it she has to escape with her son to Egypt because King Herod wants to kill the baby. And how would you like to raise the perfect child? And just when she finally thinks she has it figured out, at the wedding feast in Cana when they ran out of wine, Mary says "no problem, my Son will take care of that." And Jesus' response, kind of a rebuke of his mother, "Mom, what are you doing, my time has not yet come." Oops! Or a little while later when her son's ministry was really intensifying and out of concern for his physical well being she went looking for him and while standing outside overheard the words of own son, "who is my mother, father, brother and sister." That must have been a real self esteem booster! And then to have to stand-by, and see her own son tortured and abused, and led to the cross to be crucified before her very eyes. And Jesus' last words to his mother, motioning to the disciple John, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." For all you mothers here this morning, how would that make you feel? Blessed by God?

Jesus begins his greatest teaching session about the kingdom of God with the pronouncement of blessings. Most of us read that list like it is something that we have to aspire to. Like, if I do this or that, I will be blessed, I will inherit the kingdom of heaven and be adopted as a son or daughter of God. But the "beatitudes," which is just another word for "blessings," are in the indicative sense. They are not something we can earn, or is to come. It is a fact! If you find yourselves in one of those categories, or perhaps several, better yet all, consider yourself blessed!

God's blessings and the kingdom of God is not something that we earn, or that we can work hard to obtain, or have all the right beliefs or doctrine, or do all the right things, it is something that just happens to us. And the only thing we can do is take steps to allow it to happen to us. Alex's illustration a couple of weeks ago of filling the glass up with water. But first, before it is filled with God's Holy Spirit, it has to be emptied of our spirit, emptied of ourselves. Emptied of our sinful human nature.

After pronouncing the blessings Jesus tells the ones who are blessed:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:13-16 (NIV)

"Salt and Light." The implication is that those whom have been blessed by God should be different from the rest of the world around them. Salt - something that dramatically changes the taste of something. It adds flavor. And you don't need very much. In Jesus' day it was also a preservative. They didn't have freezers so they would coat food in salt to preserve it. Light - you don't need very much of that either, to provide light to a darkened room, or a dark house, or a darkened world. In Jesus' day the houses were relatively small, perhaps just one room, sectioned out for eating, sleeping, living. A little light would go a long way.

What is it, exactly, that is supposed to set those who have been blessed by God apart from the rest of the world: that which preserves, adds flavor, goes a long way, attracts others, invites others to want to come to the light? Is it right beliefs, doing all the right things, saying the right words, acting a certain way, or holiness? Or might it just be unconditional love?

For God so loved the world (and everyone in it), that he sent, and gave, His one and only Son, that whoever may believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Owe no debt to anyone except the debt that binds us to love one another. He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. Love never wrongs the neighbor, hence love is the fulfillment of the law.
Romans 13:8,10 (NAB)

As a typical male, I am not one who is really that fond of shopping at the mall. Less fond of it the older I get. But there was a time that I used to like to go to the mall. Not to shop for things but just to watch people. And the bigger the mall the better. I can specifically remember once being in a mall in Toronto, the Eaton Center. I was sitting there watching all the different people walk by. But you know I didn't just watch the people, while I was watching them I was making judgments: Oh, that one she's pretty. That one, not so. Oh, he's in shape! Him, not so. Based on their appearance, what they were wearing, the way they related to their spouse, their kids, their facial expressions - did they have a smile on their face or a scowl.

Based on all that, within myself I concluded some are “godly” while others are “ungodly.” “That one’s in,” “that one’s not.” But you know, I don’t just do it while I am sitting at the mall, I do it as I go about my everyday life. You need to help me out here, I am going out on a limb, please don’t leave me dangling. Am I the only one here who does that? Or is it something about our human nature? Is it something deep down within us that causes us to feel the need to stand in judgment over people?

Let’s go back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were created to enjoy all of creation, to have constant communion with God. They had access to everything. With the exception of one thing. What was that one thing? The one tree that was in the middle of the garden. And what was it that that tree represented? The knowledge of good and evil.

“God did say, ‘you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it or you will surely die.’ “Oh, you will surely not die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Genesis 3:2-5 (NIV)

I couldn’t help but think about Alex’s analogy two weeks ago of the kingdom of God being like the Lord of the Rings, and Frodo reaching for that one last ring, and thinking you know what, we have all reached out and grabbed hold of something that we were never meant to take hold of. The knowledge of good and evil, good and bad, and with it the sense of the need to judge people. That is our greatest sin. To be like God. Because when we do that we become our own little gods - picking and choosing what sins are better or worse than others. We end up comparing ourselves to others. Ultimately judging one another. Who’s in, who’s out. That which leads to death.

I have been reading a great book entitled Repenting of Religion by Gregory Boyd. The main theme perhaps captured best by its subtitle: “Turning from Judgment to the Love of God.”

If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is (only) one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor. James 4:11-12

That, just one of many verses in the Bible telling us that it is not for us to judge others. “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged” (Matthew 7:1-2). Or for those of us who have been going through the Book of Romans in our Bible study on Sunday evenings:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgements do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance.

Romans 2:1-4 (NIV)

The central point to those three verses is that our judgment is never really “in accordance with,” or “based on truth.” We don’t know the whole truth of any person’s story. We don’t really know what’s in their hearts. The central point of Romans, chapters one and two, is that humans all have enough revelation of God to live right with God, but none of us do. Hence, when any of us set ourselves up as judge of others, we bring judgment upon ourselves, for we ourselves are all guilty. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely (and only) by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.”

The central truth is that we cannot hold love (at least the way God calls us to love - the same way he loves each of us) and judgment together. They are antithetical. They are an oxymoron. They just can’t go together. They’re like water and oil.

We have a hard time letting go of that prohibition of judging. Or we try to explain it away. Well, I am not really judging the person, I’m judging their behavior. Make no mistake about it, there is right and wrong behavior, much of it defined by God in his Word. But we need to be careful, because there is a very fine line between assessing behavior and casting judgment on those involved. I know, I have crossed it many times.

You see while I sit in the mall trying to measure everyone up, God sits there and says “I love that one, and that one, and that one, and that one, and that one . . . I love them all in the same way I love my Son, Jesus Christ.”

Gregory Boyd writes in Repenting of Religion (p. 101-102): “because we have rarely taken seriously the specific nature of our separation from God as depicted in the Genesis narrative, we have often trivialized sin by understanding it merely as that which is evil rather than disobeying God by trying to get life from knowing good and evil. Consequently, the church has to a large extent continued to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil without realizing it.

“Indeed, sometimes we have been guilty of promoting the fruit of the forbidden tree as though it were salvation. We have too often defined ourselves as the practitioners and defenders of the good, the judges and conquerors of evil, and the saviors of people and society. We churchgoers not only eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we do it better than others!

Two weeks ago while Alex was taking his class at seminary in Tennessee, that very same week I was at a different seminar in Ashland, Ohio. The third part of a four part program, over the course of a year, entitled “Pastor’s of Excellence.” There are about 80 different pastors from throughout the country and Canada participating. One from as far away as Hawaii. Why she would want to come all the way to Ashland, Ohio in January, I haven’t quite figured out yet. Both men and women, young and old, some pastoring for just a few years, others for many years. Some with large congregations, others with just a handful of members. But it is a much different educational experience than I have ever participated in before. It is all about looking at yourself and your own relationship with God. The basic premise being that you cannot lead people where you yourself have not gone.

Some have referred it to the same feeling you have just before going in for a major surgery, without the anesthetic, but knowing you will feel better when it's all over. I have discovered that there are a lot of people out there with a lot of pain in their lives. A lot of brokenness and woundedness. I have heard some horrendous stories. And those from a group of pastors. Which makes me wonder, is it just pastors who are dysfunctional? Or is it possible that there is a lot of woundedness in our own midst? And how about it our own community? Isaiah 53:4-5 say: *"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."* "By his wounds we are healed." Jesus said, I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full."

Of course I've had to look within myself as well. I don't have the past that some of the others have had, I thank God, but I do have a past. A past which has told me I have to earn God's love. The harder I work, the more I do, the more pleased God is with me. The bad news is I think many of us suffer from the same disease. Not only is it in our genes, our upbringing, it is what much of our society tells us as well. You see we know it up here (our head), that we can't earn God's love, but we haven't experienced it down here (our heart).

At our elders retreat a few weeks ago we looked at our current mission statement, *Sharing the Love of Christ in our own community and around the world*. And we questioned ourselves, how are we doing with that as a church? *Sharing the Love of Christ* has to be the foundation of everything we do. All else is just window dressing. If the love isn't there it doesn't matter.

The apostle Paul's words from his great passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13, which isn't as much about marriage between husband and wife as it is a description of the love that should be exemplified by all Christians, the love of Christ:

And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

1 Cor. 13:1-3 (NIV)

Being salt and light is *Sharing the Love of Christ* in our community and around the world. With no exceptions. The same unconditional love that God offers us in Jesus Christ we offer to others. No judging, just unconditional love. Sounds impossible doesn't it. On our own it is. Without the supernatural empowerment of God's Holy Spirit, which comes after we put our faith in Christ, and continue to allow ourselves to be emptied of ourselves and filled with that Spirit, it is impossible. For someone who has not been filled with the Holy Spirit, there is nothing about Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* that we are going to look at over the next couple of weeks which makes sense. But with the Holy Spirit, our eyes, our ears, our hearts are enlightened and changed.

You see, as Greg Boyd points out, "there is an element of the truth in the serpent's lie to Eve. (The most important lies always contain some truth). In a sense the tree did really make Eve like God in knowing good and evil. She was now like God in a way she wasn't before. The serpent's lie wasn't about the nature of the forbidden tree and what it would do; it was in the implication that this was desirable for her. In fact, for finite beings like ourselves, this kind of knowledge is a curse because it blocks the unconditional and unsurpassable life-giving love of God flowing to us, abiding in us, and flowing through us to others."

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction, blessings and curse. I set before you judgment or love. You can't have both! Leave the judging to God and live in the unconditional and unsurpassable love that comes only through Jesus Christ. It is in His name we pray.