

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 5, 2021.

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God. “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. “You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18).¹

The Westminster Confession and Catechisms teach us that God’s Moral Law is “summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments,”² “the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.”³ We are also taught there is a further summation of the Moral Law.⁴ As Jesus explained, the “great and first commandment” is “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . .And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Therefore, as God has given us as Christians his Moral Law, not as a “covenant of works” but as a “rule of life,” we look to it as the revelation of God’s will, to love God and our neighbor.⁵

While there is a beautiful simplicity to Jesus’ two great commandments, the practical outworking of them can seem less simple. Thankfully, he who commands also “knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). He knew this of Israel when he gave them his law, and he knows it of his children today. He knows that we learn through stories, such as Jesus’ Parable

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² The Shorter Catechism Q. 41, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 379.

³ The Westminster Confession of Faith 19.2, *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴ The Shorter Catechism Q. 42, *Ibid.*, 380.

⁵ The Westminster Confession of Faith 19.6, *Ibid.*, 88-89.

of the Good Samaritan, and we often learn by real life application from the wheat field to the workplace.

Consider our passage today in Leviticus. He who is holy calls his people to be holy, like Father like child, a set apartness of and for God. What follows is a less succinct almost lyrical expansion of the Ten Commandments, an elaboration on what it means to love God and examples of what it looks like to love our neighbor. For example, it may surprise us to find that despite the thousands of years that separate us from ancient Israel, how Israel is commanded to love their neighbor is remarkably relevant for us today. So, if I too may summarize, loving our neighbor means loving generously, honestly, equitably, justly, and reasonably.

Love Generously

In an agricultural economy, fruit of the planted field is sold for profit. Profitability is determined by sales exceeding cost, and therefore the farmer is incentivized to maximize the yield of his field; every square foot of land that is not producing reduces profitability. Even more costly is planted and producing land that goes unharvested. From a purely financial perspective it seems unfathomable. However, in God's economy financial gain (or loss) does not determine what his children do. Love does.

Leaving the edges of a fruit-filled field unharvested makes no sense financially. Leaving fruit on the ground seems wasteful. Grapes left on the vine are akin to lost profit. But to the poor, to the sojourner or immigrant it can mean the difference between life and death.

Although most of us are far removed from the land and vineyards that yield our food and wine, the illustration should not be lost on us. The unharvested edges, the un-gathered gleanings, the remaining grapes on the vine and ground are tangible demonstrations of loving generously. Loving generously is costly, intentional, and a provisional blessing to your neighbor. It may not make financial sense, as sacrificial giving rarely does, but it blesses others according to God's sovereign appointment.

Note that which is costly, intentional, and a provisional blessing to the poor and needy is not without discernment. Those in need must harvest, glean, and gather, but that is not the point. There must be something to harvest, glean, and gather, which comes through those who love their neighbor generously.

It also reveals the attitude of the heart. On the topic of giving and worldly wealth, Jesus reminds us, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). Yes, there are promised blessings and rewards to those who are generous, but that is not our motivation. Love is, a love for God and our neighbor in need.

Love Honestly

When we think of honesty, we typically think of telling the truth, but lying is just one form of dishonesty. Stealing is another. The theft described here likely involves deception, whether

through underhanded actions or not keeping one's word⁶ and subsequent loss. Stealing is akin to lying in tangible form. For this reason, dealing falsely is included with stealing and lying, as it is nothing less than verbal theft.

As may be apparent, the Eighth Commandment is quoted in this passage followed by a paraphrase of the Ninth. What may be less obvious, is that the Third Commandment is included too. How does the dishonesty of stealing, falsehood, and lying take God's name in vain? By invoking or swearing upon God's name as a ruse for honesty, God's name is profaned. Swearing to God that you are telling the truth when you are not is more than lying; it is profaning the name of God. But even at a more fundamental level, we are commanded to tell the truth to our neighbor as a representation of our God who is Truth.

He who is Truth is also Love, and he who is love loves us. We are loved to love, and honesty is loving your neighbor. Theft and deception, falsehood and lying break trust and breed suspicion, and that isn't love. Truth does not come through dishonesty, nor does love. Transparency rather than deception, truthfulness rather than falsehood, truth-telling rather than lying really and purely reveal a love for God and your neighbor.

Love Equitably

Commonly referred to as the "Golden Rule," Jesus said, "whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them..." (Matt. 7:12). Implicit in this "rule" is the human desire to be treated equitably, or fairly, treating your neighbor how you want to be treated.

In contrast, oppression, or mistreatment, is not love. For example, not paying or not paying in full for services provided by our neighbor is a form of theft. While we may not think of it this way, compensation is commendation. When we pay someone fairly, we are acknowledging not only their work but also their value. Paying unfair wages for services rendered may keep more money in your pocket, but what does it say about your heart? Love pays fairly and well.

But it's not only in what we pay, it's also how we treat those who are most vulnerable. The command not to "curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" is an appeal to mercy. Those who cannot hear must trust what we say about them; those who cannot see must trust where we lead. Our neighbors who are most vulnerable must trust that we say and do what is in their best interest, treating them as we wish to be treated.

Loving equitably is more than mere fairness because it carries the weight of the fear of God. The Proverbs tell us that "A righteous man knows the rights of the poor" (Prov. 29:7). He knows their rights because he fears the Lord, knowing but for the grace of God he too would be poor. He contends for their wages, he has mercy on their disabilities, he loves them as he has been loved, loving his neighbor for the love of God.

⁶ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 314.

Love Justly

Loving our neighbor does not mean showing partiality. The injustice of partiality ultimately helps no one and actually hurts those we are commanded to love. Sympathy for the poor and needy or favoritism for the wealthy and influential must never cloud our judgment. For the child of God, truth is not relative but established according to the righteousness of God, and so we must look to it regardless of our feelings. Justice must not be perverted even for those most vulnerable.

This is true not only in what we do but in what we say. While most of us are not judges, we all have tongues, and how we use them in matters of truth truly matters. We love justly when we speak truthfully. Slander then is verbal hate, and a slanderer is one who promotes injustice by hateful words. And slander may be at its worst when used to “stand up against the life of your neighbor,” an idiom meaning jeopardizing the life or well-being of your neighbor by spreading lies. “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire,” says the Apostle James, “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. . . . With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:5-6, 9). Speaking truth is right and just; it’s also love.

Loving justly is rooted in loving God’s truth and desiring to promote that truth in and for our neighbor. Loving justly also safeguards us against acts of unjust mercy that have the illusion of love but in the end hurt our neighbor. As our loving God is the ultimate judge, we love as he loves, and he loves justly.

Love Reasonably

Because the positive summation of the Moral Law instructs us to love God and our neighbor, it should not surprise us that the attitude of the heart is addressed at the conclusion of our passage. You may demonstrate acts of generous, honest, equitable, just, and reasonable love, but if you hate someone in your heart, your acts of love, while perhaps practically helpful, render you a hypocrite at best and a lawbreaker at worst. Curiously, such hatred of the heart is not confronted first by the command to love but with the practical: “you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him” (19:17). The root idea is that we are not to brood over conflict or even annoyance with our neighbor lest we develop a hatred for them and therefore sin.

But in context, the matter appears to be more egregious than neighborly strife, whether real or perceived. Your neighbor has offended you to the degree that you are tempted to retaliate. You want vengeance, and if you cannot get it, you hold onto it, stored safely in the vault of your heart, a labyrinth of hatred.

Loving reasonably then starts not with your neighbor but with your heart. What hatred have you stored up, held onto, even nurtured in your heart? Is this reasonable? Is this what God desires for you? How is hatred in your heart affecting your love for God?

Loved to Love

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” but he said the second greatest command is “like it,” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). The second is like the first because loving our neighbor is a tangible expression of our love for God. As the Apostle John put it, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20).

Interestingly, in the preceding verse John tells us the origin of this love: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And because he loved us, he sent his only-begotten Son, “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary.”⁷ He was made man, loving generously, honestly, equitably, justly, and reasonable, like his Father. And in his love, he died for us: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Loving us generously, he has bestowed the riches of his kingdom upon us. Loving us honestly, he has given us the Spirit of Truth that we may love the Lord in truth. Loving us equitably, he has saved us not by our works but by his mercy and grace. Loving us justly, he has justified us as righteous. Loving us reasonably, he has reconciled us to God our Father. As love, he has loved us, and in his love, we love our neighbor. We have been loved to love.

⁷ “The Nicene Creed,” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 846.