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Mark 12:28-34
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THE TWO COMMANDMENTS

"Make love your aim." -- I Corinthians 14:1 (R.S.V.)

Love is the central and ever present theme in the religion of Jesus which we call Christianity.

It sounds very simple and uncomplicated. Everyone knows or thinks he knows what love is. One would suppose there could be no argument or doubt concerning its meaning, and every Christian could thus get on with the business of loving. Such, however, seems not to have been the case and love has proven to be a very complicated and sometimes controversial subject. The followers of Jesus have been discussing it for nigh on to twenty centuries.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God," and you shall love Him "with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." This is Jesus' supreme command. It is direct and right to the point. God must always be first. No man can fail to love God wholly and sincerely and call himself religious.

Jesus insisted that love for God must be absolute, and that is precisely where we usually fail. We love God only partially and occasionally. Our devotion to other things often interferes with our devotion to God. He comes first only when there are no other immediate demands on our love and attention.

An unknown poet once caught in verse our wavering, compromising love of God:

"I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,
Real service is what I desire.
I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord,
But don't ask me to sing in the choir.

I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord,
I like to see things come to pass.
But don't ask me to teach girls and boys, dear Lord--
I'd rather just stay in my class.

I'll do what you want me to do, dear Lord,
I yearn for the Kingdom to thrive.
I'll give you my nickels and dimes, dear Lord--
But please don't ask me to tithe.

I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord,
I'll say what you want me to say.
I'm busy just now with myself, dear Lord--
I'll help you some other day."

This is not Jesus' concept of love for God. This is not that love which is given "with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength." That kind of love needs complete devotion and loyalty with no strings attached. Seeking God becomes our foremost concern; pleasing Him our first obligation. "And", said Jesus, "until we first love God in this fashion, we will not know how to love others properly and adequately."

II

These two great commandments which Jesus gave his followers were a summation or digest of the ten commandments given by Moses. What the two commandments therefore say to us is that if we really love God and our neighbor, we will not kill, steal, lie, covet or commit adultery. You cannot do these things if you are really possessed of love.

Now, of course, part of our trouble is in definition. What is love as Jesus used the term? It is certainly not romantic love; it is not initiated by moonlight and soft music. Rather it is the sincere and wholehearted desire to express constructive goodwill toward others in the same fashion as God expresses it toward us, whether we deserve it or not. It always seeks to promote the best interests of others in the most enlightened way. It is, therefore, not a pampering, spoiling love, always giving what the other wants or demands.

This, you see, is why we must love God first. Until we do, we just cannot understand how properly to love others. God loves us, but he sometimes lets us suffer. God loves us, but he does not give us everything we want. He sometimes lets us suffer, and withholds what we desire, precisely because He does love us.

This is where love for God and love for neighbor differ. There should be no limitations on our love for God. Jesus said that love must be complete, "with all the heart, mind, soul and strength." But when Jesus talked about neighbor love, he imposed some limitations which we sometimes overlook. The limitations are summed up in those words, "as thyself". "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself!"

If one really loves himself in the highest sense of the word, if he wants for himself what God wants for him, there are many things he will deny himself. There are many things he will force himself to do which he does not really desire to do. If a man really loves himself, he will do toward himself only that, but all of that, which God desires of him. If he truly loves his neighbor, he will thus do for his neighbor precisely that same thing--what God wants, not what the neighbor wants.

III

So it becomes obvious that Jesus could not reduce the commandments further than to these two. They belong together and neither is sufficient without the other. As the epistle of John puts it:

"If a man says, 'I love God', and hateth his brother, he is a liar."

There have been many theoretical schemes for improving the world based on the love of man, but they have left out the love of God. Communism is the shining example, but there are many others. These purely secular schemes which ignore God will always fail. They have sought to reduce the moral imperatives to one. There must always be these two--love God and thy neighbor as thyself.

Our love to and for God must be unlimited. Our love for our neighbor, however, does contain some limitations. If I really felt God wanted me to sacrifice myself as Jesus sacrificed himself, my love for God should demand that I do so. Not so with neighbor love. That love does not demand that I let my neighbor destroy me or others. I may give myself for him voluntarily, but I cannot allow him to destroy me anymore than I may destroy myself, an action which men have always and everywhere held to be wrong. Love of God is unlimited. Love of neighbor is limited by God's love for each of us and by our proper love of self.

The significance of the first commandment is that it makes us want to obey the second. If we ignore God, then we are quite likely to try to impose the second commandment. We will attempt to force men to love one another. At that moment the love ingredient is gone. Peter gave us a parallel in his epistle:

"Be hospitable to each other without secretly wishing you didn't have to be."

Have you ever been guilty of that?

A city fire department recently held a disaster drill which included evacuating a large office building. When asked about the results the fire chief said, "We emptied the place in six minutes. We thought that was pretty good, but at five o'clock when the quitting bell rang everyone got out in three minutes."

The occupants of the building were twice as effective in emptying the building when they wanted to get out as when they were forced to get out. That is precisely what happens when love is injected into men's relationships.

IV

Now let us try to make this sermon very practical by applying it to the situation which has existed in the Milwaukee area during the past several weeks.

I was accused earlier this week of preaching what suburbia wanted to hear. That may well be so. I do not deny it. But I assure you I would not intentionally preach what suburbia wants to hear just because I thought suburbia wanted to hear it. I preach what I honestly and sincerely believe to be the Christian Gospel. I hope and pray that I am doing that this morning.

Let us begin with the word prejudice, what does it connote? Prejudice is a compound word meaning to "pre-judge". As such prejudice is always wrong. To judge a person, event or thing before hearing all the evidence is evil and to be condemned.

Many people are prejudiced against persons with dark skins. Now you can dislike or even hate false pride, arrogance, stupidity, or any other of a whole list of human failures. But you cannot in good Christian conscience ever hate or dislike a human being because of the color of his skin. God gave him that skin and no Christian can hate what God made.

Just as it is wrong to be prejudiced against a man because of his color, so it is equally wrong to generalize about a race, or group of people because some of their number do that which is not to your liking. This too is a form of prejudice and condemned by the principle of Christian love.

As far as the Milwaukee race problem is concerned, it is a human problem and therefore we must all be concerned about it and seek to find solutions to it. I, as do many of you, disagree with some of the solutions which have been and are being tried and suggested. But we cannot therefore sit it out on the sidelines and say that it doesn't concern us. It does concern us and it will concern us a great deal more before it is resolved. Just what all the solutions are I do not know, but they are something which each of us must seek out of his love for God and his love for his fellowman.

V

Our first step, our first responsibility must always be to look to God and God's will--to love Him, and through our love for Him seek to discover how in our love for others we may do that which can heal the wounds and solve the problems of our sick society.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind and strength. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."