



**Sermon: - 10<sup>th</sup> July 2016**

## **Love God and do what you like**

*Doing God's will can be difficult,  
but maybe that's because we approach it all the wrong way.*

A Sunday School teacher was telling her class of four- to six-year-olds about the Ten Commandments. After telling them the story of how the commandments came to be written, she began to list them. When she got to the fifth commandment, she said. "This one tells us to honour our fathers and mothers. Can you think of a commandment on the list that tells us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" One little boy promptly raised his hand. "Yes, Johnny", she said, "What do you think it is?" Without missing a heartbeat he replied, "Thou shalt not kill."

For thousands of years the Ten Commandments have been the guide to right living. Not only did they form the basis of the law for the Israelites, and still today for Jews, they also form the basis of our judicial system. They are concerned with matters of fundamental importance in both Judaism and Christianity. So the first to the fourth commands deal with humanity's greatest obligation (to worship only God). The sixth with the greatest injury to a person (murder), the seventh deals with the greatest injury to family bonds (adultery), the greatest obligation to family (honour to parents), the greatest obligation to community (truthfulness), the greatest injury to property (theft). So, precepts for organising the whole of life in a supportive and constructive manner is laid out in these 10 commands of God. They are written, however, as a summary of fundamental principles of human relationships and so have room for varying interpretation. They are not as explicit or detailed as rules or many other biblical laws and commandments, because they provide guiding principles that apply universally, across changing circumstances. They do not specify punishments for their violation. Their precise significance must be worked out in each separate situation. Sounds good; helpful principles to enable us to live together in community and in harmony. And yet they have proved impossible for us to keep, so Jesus, in an attempt to clarify things and focus on what is really important, reduces them to just two.

The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 'The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' It's not difficult to see why these are the most important commandments. It's not difficult to see that if we were to keep these two we would keep them all, because if we were to truly love our neighbour as ourselves then we would never lie, or cheat or steal, or commit adultery, or murder... or... or ... and just in case you were getting too comfortable and thinking that keeping the commandments is easy ... we would never covet anything that belongs to our neighbour... !

And of course Jesus tells us elsewhere that if, for example, a man looks on a woman with lust he has committed adultery – the point being that it's not just our actions which cause us to sin but our thoughts as well... and also that if we break just one we are guilty of them all... It's difficult isn't it?

### ***No other Gods before me – do we always put God first?***

Don't worship idols- is there something we have that we couldn't part with? A car, a piece of jewellery, a painting, some furniture, our home? Something on which we lavish care and attention? Something it would break our hearts to lose?

***You shall not murder – but have you ever felt hatred towards someone?***

You shall not covet – but our whole culture is built round coveting what we don't have... bigger cars, nicer homes, more clothes, holidays, and ever more and more choice. I think it seems not just difficult, but impossible.

But Jesus tells us that it can all be summed up in just two....

So if we keep those two commandments then we might be getting somewhere... "Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself" But wait a minute, isn't that harder, not easier! Can we honestly say that we love our neighbours in the same way that we love ourselves? Do we care about them as much as we care for ourselves? Do we take account of their priorities? Do we give them the benefit of the doubt? Are we prepared to forgive them when they make mistakes, or hurt us? Or do we gossip about them, get angry with them, wish that we had more than they do, envy them their car, or their house, or their foreign holidays?

And what about all those people who are not our geographical neighbours, but who Jesus tells us are our neighbours anyway?

How do we love the drug addict?

The terrorist? Do we even want to love them, or do we wish that they would go away and leave us in peace.

Don't you think that suddenly it seems harder, not easier, to keep the commandments. At least it does to me...

Then I think of that quote by St. Augustine of Hippo who lived about 700 years ago: "Love God and do what you like," he said. That sounds easier, doesn't it? Let's just do that. Forget the commandments, forget loving our neighbour, let's just love God!!!! And then we can do what we like?

But it can't mean what it seems to mean? It sounds like the recipe for a life of selfish ease, and that can't be what God wants for us. Nothing in the bible suggests that, nothing in the life of Jesus suggests that.

And of course that is not what it means. And there is an infinite chasm between the imitation of that quote and truly living it. Between what it means at face value and what it truly, deeply, profoundly means.

So what does it mean... to love God and do what we like?

As they say in quiz shows – the clue is in the question. What does it mean? What comes first? When we love God, what we like is what he likes, so by loving God and doing what we like we cannot fail to please him.

It's about a heart committed to God in love that therefore wants to please him.

A friend of mine tells a story about an occasion when his wife asked him to paint their garden fence. He'd had a busy week, his first day off in quite some weeks and the last thing in the world he wanted to do was paint a fence. He knew however, that his wife had also had a tough week and that she had a number of household chores to do. He painted the fence all the while thinking "I don't want to be doing this but I'm doing it because I love you". This chorus in his head became a song with the real-life chorus:

*The ones that you love*

*The ones that you love*

*You do the things you have to*

*For the ones that you love*

He discovered that when you love someone doing what they want becomes doing what you want.

Slide: Bible As a young Christian I tried to do all the right things, go to church every Sunday, read the bible and pray daily, help others, give a tenth of my income to God, and all of these were good things to do, because they instilled in me good habits and a sense of what is important. But on the other hand, trying so hard to be a perfect Christian all the time became such a burden that it began to be a barrier between me and God, rather than opening the way up to God. In many cases I was trying to do something which did not come naturally to me, and although there is good reason to discipline ourselves, ultimately it has to come from the inside, not the outside. I was trying to make myself fit a mould of what I thought a Christian should look like, instead of trying to be the person God wanted me to be.

Slide: text In Psalm 37 v 4 we read this: Submit yourselves unto God and he will give you the desires of your heart, or, to put it another way, love God and do what you like!

When our heart is in the right place and focused on the right things, all the rest will fall into place. The disciplines of prayer and worship will be welcome because we want to be with God.

The emphasis becomes giving our hearts to God, rather than right actions, duty done, correct forms of worship, even worthwhile acts of service to the community. These are things which we so often substitute for true discipleship. Of course, when our hearts are committed these are the things which result, but they by themselves are not what commitment is about. That comes from deeper down, where God's Spirit touches ours.

Slide: quote When the scribe asked Jesus his question, Jesus led him into a new world where there is no law to follow, no prescribed course of action. Rather, what he commands in us is the passion of love, of God and neighbour.

It demands all of us, heart, soul, mind and strength. That sounds impossible but in first loving God, we find the strength to love our neighbour. In loving God, we will find that love of neighbour springs as naturally from us as water from the earth.

We can try all we like to be good Christian people, but until and unless that is truly the desire of our heart, we will continue to struggle to please God, we will fail to keep the commandments.

St Augustine tells us to "Love God and do what you like". The more we love God, the more what he wants is also what we want. If we put all our efforts into loving God – in whatever way we can- we'll find all the rest happens along the way, anyway.

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