

## The Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 33:7-9
<i>Response</i>	O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 13:8-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 18:15-20

The twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A takes us to Romans 13, to one of Paul's most famous statements on love and law. So the second reading is from Romans 13:8-10. And as I've mentioned before, chapters 12 and 13 is part of the letter that's very focused on what we would call ethical teachings of Paul or his teachings on morality and spirituality...on life in Christ. And in that context, in Romans 13:8 he says this about love and the fulfilling of the law:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so a couple of things here to clarify this. When Paul talks about love—*agapaō* in Greek or *agape* is the noun—he is not just referring to an emotion, which is what the English word typically connotes. So when we talk about falling in love or love in English, we'll often use it to refer to the emotion or of affection

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

or regard for someone. And that's part of *agape* to be sure. There's an emotional component without a doubt. Love is rooted in the heart. But there's also action implied in choosing the good for another person.

The greatest example of this is in Jesus' statement in the Gospel of John:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

That sacrificial dimension of life, laying down one's life, isn't just an emotion; it's an action. It's a choice that's made. Now you have to look at that in each of the different contexts if you want to see how the word love gets used. It has a variety of connotations. But here, Paul is talking about choosing the good for another person. And so he's saying, don't owe anyone anything except to love one another. For whoever loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

Now when Paul talks about "the law" here, as a first century Jew, that is a reference to the law of Moses. You might have lots of Roman laws and things like that, but "the law"—*ha nomos* in Greek or the Torah would be the Hebrew word—is a reference to the law of Moses...and not just the law of Moses, but in particular to the law of all laws, which is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments that are given by God to Israel in Exodus 20...the famous story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.

Now, I know that you are already familiar—likely already familiar—with the Ten Commandments, what they contain. But I want to make a couple of points about them from a first century Jewish perspective that will help you to understand what Paul is talking about here when he focuses on the Commandments. Because you'll notice, when he mentions the Commandments, he doesn't quote all of them. He just quotes the second part of the Ten Commandments, and there's a reason for that.

So if you look at the way the Ten Commandments are given in Exodus 20, you could divide them into two tablets. So the first three commandments are focused on God. So the commandment against idolatry (you shall have no other gods), the

commandment against blasphemy (you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain), and the Sabbath worship (remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy) —all three of those commandments are focused on the love of God.

Now you can actually see this much more clearly if you look at the actual text of Exodus itself, because in Exodus 20, although this isn't clear from standard summaries of the Ten Commandments, in the original, God actually says in the original commandment against idolatry...in Exodus 20:5, he says:

...visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...

Namely, those who commit idolatry.

...but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So notice, in Exodus itself, in Exodus 20:6, God reveals that the essence, the motivating factor of keeping the commandments is love of God. It's about love. And those who refuse to obey the commandments and commit idolatry, actually they're not just in error, they actually hate God, according to God's own words in Exodus 20. So what that reveals is that the first tablet, those first commandments are about love of God. And it follows—you can infer from that—that the rest of the commandments, which are focused on neighbor, are also about love...but they're about the love of neighbor. So the commandment to honor one's parents, the commandment against murder, the commandment against adultery, the commandment against theft, the commandment against false witness, and the commandments against coveting one's neighbor's wife—or coveting one's neighbor's property...the last set of commandments, the second tablet so to speak, is all about love of neighbor.

So from a first century Jewish perspective, there was a very distinct awareness of the fact that the two tablets of the Mosaic commandments, the two tablets of the law in Exodus 20, were focused on two kinds of love. The first three

commandments are about how to rightly love God, and then the last seven commandments are about how to rightly love one's neighbor.

And this is actually clear from the Gospels, because when one of the scribes asks Jesus, "What is the first and greatest commandment?" you might think He would say, "You shall not commit idolatry"...following the Decalogue. But what He actually says 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. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37, 39-40)

He basically says these sum it all up. That's not a new thing on Jesus' part; that's actually part of Jewish tradition. And at the risk of giving too much information, it is interesting that Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, says something similar about the Decalogue. You have to kind of infer this, but it's clear in his writings that he considers the first commandments to be about what he calls piety, *eusebeia* in Greek. And then the second set of commandments is about righteousness or *dikaioynē* in Greek.

This is a very clear distinction in the minds of first century Jews, about the love of God and about the love of neighbor—about piety toward God and justice or righteousness toward your neighbor—being the kind of the summary or essence of the Ten Commandments. So when Paul's writing Romans—to get back to Romans—and he says:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

He's reflecting a very Jewish understanding of morality, that obedience to the commandments is not purely an issue of legalistic formalism, like following the rules. Obedience to the commandments is how you love God and how you love your neighbor. That's why he can say...you'll notice when Paul keeps going, what does he do?

The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet..”

Those are all the ones focused on love of neighbor, second tablet. He says:

..[they} are summed up in this sentence, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And again, sometimes Christian readers of the Bible will think, oh, he’s quoting Jesus there, because Jesus said that in the Gospel about love of neighbor. And he is, except that Jesus Himself is quoting Leviticus, because that is a quotation directly from Leviticus 19:18:

...you shall love your neighbor as yourself...

So that’s one of the commandments of Moses given in the book of Leviticus to the people of Israel. So this is a very Jewish—very deeply Jewish—understanding of morality. And it’s important that Paul is emphasizing this, for two reasons. First, even in his own day, Paul was sometimes accused of being an antinomian. What antinomian is, is somebody against the law. You could say Paul was accused of being lawless.

Why would someone say that about Paul? Well, because remember, he’s going around the Mediterranean and baptizing pagans, bringing them into the new covenant with Christ and not requiring that they be circumcised. It’s one of the controversies that Paul got into. It’s mentioned in the letter to the Galatians. Paul says you are...

...justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law...

And so some people were saying, “Aha! Paul is lawless. He’s a breaker of the law, because he’s not requiring his Gentile converts to keep the law of Moses. He’s not requiring them to be circumcised.” And while it’s definitely true that Paul has a whole series of arguments about why circumcision is not necessary for salvation, at

the same time, not all laws are created equal in the Jewish Scriptures. In fact, the Jewish Scriptures themselves make that very clear. There are different levels of legal authority.

Ezekiel 20 talks about how God gave the Israelites laws by which they might have life, namely the Ten Commandments. And on the other hand, laws that were, he says, not good. So there were some laws actually in the Old Testament that are concessions to Israel's sinfulness. The best example of this is...Jesus talks about the permission to divorce in Deuteronomy 24. Jesus says in Matthew 19:

For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives...

It wasn't meant to be permanent. He says:

...from the beginning it was not so.

It was a concession to Israel's hardheartedness and sinfulness. But from the beginning, God made them male and female:

What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder. (Matthew 19:6b)

Classic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. So the point is, not all laws are created equal. And although Paul does not require Gentiles to be circumcised to be saved, that doesn't mean he's abandoning all of the laws of the Old Testament. In fact, there are certain laws that he says must be followed by Christians. And the example he gives here in Romans 13 are the Ten Commandments.

So the second reason this is important to emphasize is because to this day, there are some Christian groups that will argue that if all a person has to do is believe in Jesus as Savior, to have faith in Jesus and it doesn't matter what they do. They don't necessarily have to keep the law anymore, like they don't have to keep the law against stealing or the law against adultery or the law against theft.

Now in practice, most groups will say you shouldn't do those things, but you're not obligated to do it, and you won't lose your salvation if you do...if you do happen to break one of the Ten Commandments. Well, that's not Paul's view, as I've mentioned in earlier lectures. Paul says in Galatians 5:

...do not gratify the desires of the flesh. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.  
(Galatians 5:16b, 21b)

He talks about sexual immorality and envy (covetousness, breaking the 9th and 10th commandments) or idolatry (breaking the first commandment). These are grave sins. These are violations of the law. And people who do them won't inherit the kingdom of God.

But in Romans 13, he's trying to articulate here a positive understanding of the law. And he's telling Christians, you don't have to do anything except love your neighbor. Love of neighbor fulfills the law. But of course by saying that, which commandments is he pointing to? Keeping the Decalogue, keeping the Ten Commandments. So even though Christians aren't under the law—all the laws of Moses, like circumcision in the covenant—they still have to keep the Decalogue, because the Christian vocation is to love, and the Decalogue is all about love. It's about how to love God and how to love neighbor correctly. And so he says:

...and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor...

Ah, see, notice that. Love *does* no wrong. It's not about an emotion; it's about an act. It's about a choice. So if love does no wrong, then for Paul, love (*agape*) means to choose the good rather than the evil for one's neighbor. To do good to one's neighbor is the essence of love.

...therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:10b)

So see what he's doing here is he's (in a sense) defending himself against the criticism of being lawless, by saying, "No, no no...as a disciple of Jesus, as a

believer, you have to follow the law. But the only law you have to follow is the law of love, because it fulfills all the rest.”

Now I’d like to close here with a reflection from St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Commentary on Romans*, which again, if you want to dig in and read a commentary on Romans that’ll go into much more depth than I can do in these little videos, you want to read Thomas Aquinas’ classic 13th century *Commentary on Romans*.

Anyway, Thomas, when he was reading this (like other interpreters), puzzled over an apparent difficulty, because it seems like Paul’s leaving out half of the Ten Commandments. How can he say that love of neighbor fulfills the law? Shouldn’t he have said love of neighbor *and* love of God fulfills the law? How can he just focus on the second half of the Ten Commandments?

And this actually is a problem for Jesus too, because you’ll remember when the rich young man comes to Jesus and says:

“Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?”

What does Jesus say?

“If you would enter life, keep the commandments.”

This is just standard teaching of Jesus. But then Jesus only lists the commandments against theft and adultery and that kind of thing. He doesn’t say anything about that first tablet of idolatry, blasphemy, and Sabbath keeping.

Now you could say, well, He doesn’t have to, because He’s talking to a Jew. But why doesn’t Paul? And is it true that love of neighbor alone fulfills the law? Well, this is Thomas Aquinas’ answer to it. And I’ll close with this. It’s significant.

Thomas says:



[L]ove has two acts, namely, the love of God and the love of neighbor... Therefore, it does not seem that one who loves his neighbor fulfills the whole law.

In other words, it seems like you're only fulfilling half the law if you love your neighbor.

*The answer is that love of neighbor pertains to love and fulfills the law, when it is a love by which the neighbor is loved for God. So the love of God is included in the love of neighbor, just as the cause is included in its effect. For it says in 1 John: "this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:21). Conversely, love of neighbor is included in love of God, as the effect in its cause; hence it says in the same place: "if anyone says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:21). That is why in Sacred Scripture sometimes mention is made only of the love of God, as though it is enough for salvation, as in Deuteronomy: "and now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him" (Deut 10:12); and sometimes mention is made of love of neighbor: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12)... Thus, even the precepts of the first tablet are included.<sup>2</sup>*

...when you command the second tablet. I'm adding that part at the end. So that's Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*. So what Thomas is saying is, true love of neighbor is love of neighbor for God's sake, and it includes love of God. And true love of God implies and includes love of neighbor. And the New Testament makes this really explicit elsewhere.

Now, why does that matter? Well, this is just me. That was Thomas Aquinas—you can take his word for it. But for me, I think it's interesting. It seems to me that in contemporary western civilization, which is based and founded on Judeo Christianity—Judeo Christian tradition—but departing from it in a whole host of

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, no. 1049, 1058

ways, that the myth of post Christian secularism is that you can have a society based on love of neighbor *without* love of God.

So think about it...when people talk about the Ten Commandments today—and there are controversies about the commandments being displayed in various public spaces or whatnot—what people usually mean is the second half of the Ten Commandments. Don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't murder—those kinds of things that keep human society together. But the reality is, you can't really have a society that's *just* based on love of neighbor without love of God, because without being anchored in the love of God, you won't know how to love your neighbor rightly.

So think about it. Secularism will often hold out as an ideal: “Well, of course we should love our neighbor.” But is it okay to dishonor your parents? Well, sure. What about to kill? Well, if you have a good reason. Think here of abortion. What about committing adultery? Well, it depends on what your preference is and if there's consent...then that's okay as well. What about theft? Well, you know, it's okay sometimes to steal from those who have more. Think about corruption within government. If you're stealing from the government which has so much money or if you're stealing from the rich, that's okay. There are all these excuses that are often made. What about lying? False witness in a courtroom. There are all kinds of justifications made for violating those Ten Commandments, even when the ideal of love is held out as a kind of abstract ideal.

But the reality of the fact is that the second tablet of the Ten Commandments really is founded on the first tablet, which is the love of God. He's the foundation for the morality of the second tablet. So once you dispense with piety and love of God—think here of idolatry, blasphemy, and honoring God through worship, Sabbath worship—what happens is, when you abandon those principles of love of God, invariably the second half of the tablet unravels. And we no longer are able to love our neighbor well when we don't love them, as Thomas says, for God's sake and in God...because we don't actually know how to choose the good.

We can no longer discern what's good and what's evil in order to love someone rightly. Because love of neighbor, choosing the good, has to be rooted in the truth

about what is good and what is evil...what is healthy and what is harmful, what is right and what is wrong. And you can't do that in a relativistic setting. You can't do that in a secular relativistic setting. So I'm kind of pontificating and preaching here, but when we look at contemporary secularism and western civilization, at least for me, it seems that we can learn a lot from Paul's words here. Yes, love of neighbor is the fulfilling of the law, but we're not going to be able to love our neighbors rightly if we don't keep the whole law, which means we also have to love God. In other words, love of neighbor as practice in human society and in Christian morality ultimately has its foundation in tablet number one of the Ten Commandments, which are rooted in the love of God.