

Readings

Ex 22:20-26

Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

1 Thes 1:5c-10

Mt 22:34-40

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After silencing the disingenuous questions of the Sadducees, Jesus addresses the Pharisees whose question about the law was equally insincere. Although it is not expressed here, the follow-up of his response about loving God and neighbor is a warning to his hearers not to follow the example of the religious leaders, but to listen to the spirit of the law, understanding what is at its heart rather than having undue concern about following the letter of the law. We associate the heart with compassion, and in the Exodus reading it is clear that God's directives convey the sense of looking out for those whose circumstances in life make them vulnerable. Orphans and widows, exiles and immigrants, are the easiest targets for exploitation, having no voice or power. So God directs his people to be attentive to their plight and not to abuse them. Paul's message to the Thessalonians acknowledged their sacrifice in taking a stance contrary to the values of their society in order to embrace their faith in God and Jesus Christ. This, however, could place them in great danger.

It is the call of those who hear the Scriptures, both Old and New, to stand for values that are counter-cultural. Being compassionate does not get you ahead in society or make a lot of money for you in a world that worships power and wealth at any price. Thinking about the welfare of others before considering what's in it for you is considered foolish and naive.

The people led by Moses into the Promised Land were told that they were chosen by God as his own. They stood out as different, worshiping one God in the midst of societies bowing down before multiple idols. They were promised a relationship with their God, based on love and compassion from one who did not need their praise, the sole requirement being that they be faithful to the covenant. But God's favor was not bestowed upon them only for themselves, but so that they should use this gift as agents of behalf of others who did not know this.

Over the course of the centuries, the law of love given by this generous God became more focused on fulfilling the letter of the law than on compassion. Jesus preached the love of God and the spirit of human compassion in contrast to the legalism of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He was scorned by those who believed that they could earn God's favor by fulfilling rote procedures. His emphasis was always on looking for the meaning of the law and its relationship to the spirit of the covenant.

When we view these two great commandments through the eyes of authenticity and compassion, we find that everything boils down to their simple directives. Whatever we do in our relationship to God and neighbor, should be done for the motivation of what is right and just. If that is our starting point, all that we do can only be good.

This is the basis for Saint Augustine's famous saying, "Love and do what you will." Although some might tend to misunderstand this as a self-indulgent hippy rationalization like "Do your own thing" or "If it feels good do it," Saint Augustine's exhortation goes to the heart of the matter that if we do what is right and just in faithfulness to the covenant, intent on the common good and the welfare of others, it can't be wrong. If love of God and love of neighbor is our starting point, then whatever follows can only be good.

Love God and love your neighbor and mean it, Jesus says. If we follow this simple behavior, these commandments based on common sense provide the lens through which we evaluate all that we do, and we will have fulfilled the law. Everything else will fall into place.