

“Love and the Nature of True Freedom”

Matthew 22:34-40  
Romans 13:8-10  
Galatians 5:6, 13-14

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Last week we explored what it means that we are saved by grace through faith. In studying Paul’s brief summary of the gospel in Ephesians, we learned that salvation is entirely God’s gift to us and, as such, is not dependent on anything we do. The appropriate response to God’s gift on our part is simply faith, that is, trust, which is the assurance that God is good and merciful to us. At the same time, we learned that, while we do not earn or merit salvation by our good works, God nonetheless “created us...for good works” which are “to be our way of life” (Eph. 2:10). This is the paradox of the gospel: God gives us salvation apart from works, but God expects works from us on the basis of our faith in God’s grace. The gospel is the good news of a gift, but acceptance of the gift brings with it a responsibility, namely, to love our neighbors.

In Galatians 5:6, Paul speaks of this responsibility as “faith working through love.” Although faith is receptive in relation to God’s grace, it is active as love in relation to our neighbor. Faith receives God’s gift of salvation and then is active in meeting the needs of our neighbor through love. Since the gospel assures us of God’s love for us, we who respond in faith by trusting in God’s love are freed from excessive preoccupation about ourselves so that we can truly be there for our neighbors when they need us. After all, this is what love is: being responsive to the needs of others. Indeed, love has always been the hallmark of Christian ethics. The good works for which God created us and which God intends to be our way of life consist in our love for our fellow human beings. As God has loved us through Jesus, so we are to love others as Jesus loved.

In the context of ancient Judaism God's will was discerned through studying the Torah, the law of Moses set forth in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. The rabbis counted 613 individual commandments in the law. It was common for Jewish scholars and teachers of the law to debate which commandments are more important than others, even though all of them were to be obeyed by devout Jews. And just as there are many conflicts among Christians today as to how we ought to interpret the Bible, so too there were sharp disagreements among Jews back then about how to understand the will of God as taught in the law of Moses. The Pharisees and Sadducees were competing groups within Judaism at the time of Jesus and they disagreed with one another over how to interpret the law. But there were other Jews who agreed with neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees, such as John the Baptist and Jesus. Sometimes there were so many different Jewish opinions that one rabbi humorously remarked, "Two Jews, three opinions." So, it is not surprising to read in Matthew's gospel of the question put to Jesus by a lawyer as a way "to test him" (22:35). It's not clear in what way the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus. After they heard that Jesus had silenced the objections of the Sadducees, did they hope that perhaps Jesus agreed with their own Pharisaic viewpoint? Or did they want to set a trap for him because they expected him to say something offensive? Or perhaps they just wanted to see how well he knew the Bible? Or did they simply want to learn what his own interpretation of the law was in order to compare it with that of other Jewish teachers? We simply do not know.

But we do know how Jesus answered the question, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He cited two verses, one from Deuteronomy (6:4) and another from Leviticus (19:18). According to the first commandment we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Jesus then explained that "this is the greatest and first commandment" (22:38). According to the second commandment, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. After

answering the lawyer's question, Jesus added that all of the law and the prophets depend upon these two commandments. That is to say, the entire purpose of scripture, the Jewish Bible or Old Testament as we call it, is to teach love of God and neighbor. That's its whole point.

The apostle Paul was also a Jew. Before he became a Christian, he was a Pharisee who held strictly to the minute observance of every commandment in the law. At that time in his life, he persecuted the young Christian movement because it had welcomed Gentiles (non-Jews) into the church without requiring that they convert to Judaism and live as Jews, obeying all the commandments in the law of Moses. But after his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul became a champion of what he had once previously opposed. As a missionary to the Gentiles, he advocated for the view that Gentile Christians did not need to convert to Judaism and live as Jews. Other Jewish Christians, however, were strongly opposed to Paul in this regard. In the Book of Acts, we read of some Christians who also came from a Pharisaic background. Against Paul, they argued: "It is necessary for them [Gentile Christians] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). In fact, the question of how the Gentile Christians should live was the biggest controversy dividing the early church.

Paul's view was radical. Not only did he believe that the Gentile Christians were not obligated to observe the law of Moses but he also believed that even the Jewish Christians were no longer bound to observe all the commandments in the law. Indeed, he maintained that Christians are free from the law (Rom. 8:2, 1 Cor. 9:20) since God has inaugurated a new age with the coming of Christ in which the distinction between Jew and Gentile is no longer relevant (Gal. 3:38). That's what he means in Galatians when he writes: "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision [being Jewish] nor uncircumcision [not being Jewish] counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (5:6). He is saying that it doesn't matter whether

one is a Jew or a Gentile. The only thing that matters is the faith that leads to love. This was very radical theology for his time. From the perspective of other Jews, including many Jewish Christians, Paul had abandoned and betrayed his Jewish heritage. Yet Paul was certain God was doing a new thing through Christ and he did not want Gentiles to subject themselves to the law. For that reason, he instructed his Gentile converts who wondered if they should adopt the law and live as Jews, “You were called to freedom” (Gal. 5:13). Therefore, “do not submit...to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1): do not become slaves of the law, because Christians are free from the law.

But in the very next verse, Paul explains that this freedom from the law is not freedom to do whatever you want. Rather, it is the freedom to serve our neighbors in love. He writes: “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves of one another” (Gal. 5:14). Surprisingly, the very same Paul who insists that Christians are free from the law and who warns against being slaves under the law uses the image of “slavery” to describe what he means by real freedom: “Become slaves of one another through love.” Paul’s Jewish Christian opponents feared that if Gentile Christians did not observe the law of Moses and live like Jews, they would be immoral. After all, the law provides a detailed list of what to do and what not to do. So, if the Gentiles are not under the law, what will provide them with the moral guidance they need for how to conduct their lives? If Christians are not bound to the law, what then is the basis of Christian ethics?

Here Paul draws upon the teaching of Jesus and his way of summarizing the law. Immediately after encouraging the Gentile Christians in Galatia that they should use their freedom to become slaves of one another through love, he explains why he said this: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

(Gal. 5:14). Recall that this was the second commandment that Jesus quoted when he was asked about the greatest commandment in the law. Whereas the first commandment Jesus cited, the command to love God, has to do with our religious obligation, the second commandment, the command to love our neighbor, has to do with our moral obligation. When the Gentiles embraced the gospel, they gave up their worship of many gods for the one God in whom the Jews believe. So, Paul cites the second commandment mentioned by Jesus, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” as the moral principle that should guide the conduct of Gentile Christians. What’s more, he claims that whoever loves his or her neighbor has actually fulfilled the purpose and intent of the law of Moses: “one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). This is an interesting argument he’s making, since he’s turning the tables on his Jewish Christians opponents who want to obligate the Gentile Christians to live like Jews by observing the law of Moses. To them, Paul is saying that if you love your neighbor, you *have* fulfilled the law in the sense of fulfilling the intent of the law. Hence, even though the Gentile Christians do not observe every commandment of the law, by their love for one another they have realized its larger purpose. As Paul says, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). Gentiles as well as Jews can fulfill the law in this sense. Whereas Jesus was addressing his fellow Jews, Paul took Jesus’ summary of the law’s purpose and applied it to the situation of non-Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians do not have to live as Jews observing the law of Moses so long as they use their freedom in order to love one another.

Paul’s point is that freedom from the law does not necessarily lead to immorality. If we correctly understand the purpose of freedom, we will use it as an occasion to serve our neighbors in love. Paul’s point is identical to that made much later by Peter Marshall, former chaplain to the United States Senate: “May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as

the opportunity to do what is right.” Properly understood, freedom is not only “freedom from” something such as the law; it is also “freedom for” something such as love. This is because freedom requires the ability to make responsible use of our freedom. As children grow older, parents grant more and more freedom to their children in proportion to their ability to act responsibly. As Christians, we don’t have a detailed list of things we should do and things we should not do. Instead, we have freedom to discern what the loving thing to do is in each new situation. Our fundamental moral obligation is to love our neighbor as ourselves, but what that looks like may vary from situation to situation because the needs of our neighbors vary. When I was a professor, I always tried to meet the needs of my students, but different students needed different things from me. So, I had to exercise care to make sure that each of them got what they most needed, even though I was committed to caring for all of them equally. The same is true for the freedom that comes with being a Christian: it is to be used responsibly so as to meet the needs of our neighbor in love, whatever those needs might be. Our only duty is to love our neighbors as ourselves, but exactly what this means has to be discerned in every new situation.

I think we can learn something important from both Jesus and Paul here. Just as ancient Jews were divided over the question of how to interpret the Bible, so too are modern Christians. Many Christians today would have us treat the Bible as a code of law to which we must subject ourselves. Yet Jesus and Paul interpreted the Bible with remarkable freedom. Both of them asked: What is the Bible’s main point? Whether we say with Jesus that the Bible’s main point is love of God and love of neighbor or we say with Paul that the Bible’s main point is faith active in love, we are affirming the same thing. A proper relationship with God leads to a proper relationship with our fellow human beings: loving our neighbors as ourselves. But if our interpretation of the Bible leads us not to love our neighbors as ourselves, then something has

gone seriously wrong. Who among us, for example, would insist that a battered woman should remain married to an abusive husband because of those verses in the New Testament that speak against divorce? Or who among us would forbid women to be ministers because of those verses in the New Testament that prohibit women from speaking in church and having authority to teach men? The ethical principle that should guide our lives as Christians should also be our guide to the interpretation to the Bible: “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10). For if we interpret individual verses of the Bible apart from asking about the Bible’s larger purpose, we fall into a new kind of legalism opposed to the freedom from the law to which the gospel calls us. Paul himself said of the Bible: “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

The Bible can become a tool in the service of hate. But when that happens, its main purpose is denied. Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, warned Christians not to think of Christ as another Moses, as another lawgiver. That was his critique of the Roman Catholic Church, i.e., that in the name of Christ they had set up a new law. So, invoking the authority of the apostle Paul, Luther sought to call Christians back to the freedom we have through Christ, a freedom from the law, which is not an occasion for immorality but, rather, an opportunity to serve our neighbor in love by discerning what our neighbor needs in each concrete situation.

And one more thing. Paul came to his radical understanding of freedom from the law through his attempts to come to terms with people who were different from him. As he sought to bring the gospel of God’s love to another group of people than his own, he reflected deeply upon the implications of how Jesus interpreted the law and its purpose. As a Jew reaching out to Gentiles, he realized that it is possible to fulfill the law’s purpose without being a Jew and observing all of the commandments. So too, in our outreach to fellow human beings who are different from us, who are perhaps members of a different group from ours, just as the Gentiles

were different from the Jews, we can learn from Paul's example that we do not have to insist that they first have to become like us in order to be full members of the church. We have the freedom to celebrate the diversity of all God's children just as Paul did when he affirmed that in the final analysis it doesn't matter whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, since the only thing that really matters is faith active in loving our neighbor as ourselves.