### “Love ‘m Both?” by S. Finlan, at First Church

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**Leviticus 19:15–18**

15 You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the Lord. 17You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin. . . . 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

**Mark 12:28–34**

One of the scribes came near and . . . asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.” 34When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Instead of choosing one of the Ten Commandments, Jesus goes for the underlying foundation of *all* the commandments, in fact the *essence* of spiritual living itself. To highlight love of God and love of neighbor he draws upon Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19. But we call this the Great Commandment, not “commandments.” We treat it as one unified command.

In our lives, however, there are times when one or another part of this dual commandment can seem difficult to practice. Let’s start with the “love your neighbor” part.

It can be difficult to love people who are selfish, rude, or unjust. But love is not a feeling, love is a *commitment* to doing what is best for the other person. It is not a commitment to *like* them, nor to meet their desires, but to care for their *long-term* interest. Now, there may be very little you can do for them, but you can still keep an attitude of good will, and that counts as love. Can we be *merciful* without being indulgent, *just* without being cruel?

There are two attitudes that need our attention: dedication to the other’s well-being and growth, and attention to our own inter-personal interactions. As we become more mature, we become more *giving* of our attention, and more generous in allowing others to have space to grow.

But what about dealing with people who are even worse, who are *willfully* evil, who have *contempt* for God’s way, and who mistreat others? They’re even *harder* to love.

And if it becomes necessary to arrest someone to protect society from him, the question of love seems completely irrelevant.

But once society is protected, the question of love returns. If you were a prison chaplain, you would want to visit that person and see if he has any remorse, see if there is still a *spark* of spiritual life left in him. There might not be. There are some people in whom the spark has faded and finally died. But we can’t assume this. We have to present the offer of forgiveness and salvation. The individual is free to choose to reject or accept it. And we have to be wise when we minister. We need our truth-o-meters to be on full alert to detect falsehood and to not be taken advantage of.

But there will be opportunities to love, in the sense of doing good to others. The Jewish doctor who treated the Pittsburgh shooter gave him the same quality of medical attention that he gave everyone else, even while the shooter was still spouting bigotry.

When we have trouble with loving, or with wisdom, or with making choices, we can always pray for God’s help with whatever we think we need, even for clarity about *what* it is that we need. And even if we are not feelingparticularly loving towards someone, we can certainly follow the rule in Leviticus: “You shall not hate. . . . You shall not take vengeance” (19:17–18). Do you hold yourself to this standard? And do you notice when other people humbly refrain from hating, and refrain from vengeance? Are you learning to *notice* spiritual living in others? It takes sensitivity.

Now, it is an entirely different kind of problem when you feel your love for God challenged. This could happen when you or someone you love is suffering, and you find yourself getting angry with God.

If you have a strong instinct for God’s goodness, then you will still *love* God, but you could feel anger or frustration. Why is God letting these people suffer so much? Why are there so many horrible diseases, and so much injustice? Maybe it is your own suffering. You could complain to God, or lodge a protest, like Job, who says God is “arrayed against” him (6:4), and asks “Why have you made me your target?” (7:20). The key thing about Job is that he did not utter his complaint and then close his mind. He *kept* seeking an answer until he *got* one. He didn’t *stay* in the place of complaint.

Jesus was confronted by questions about whether God causes suffering. His disciples, seeing a man born blind, asked him “‘who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him’” (John 9:2–3). First, Jesus refutes the idea that the blindness is a punishment. Birth defects are *not* a punishment for sin. Then Jesus directs their attention away from the complaint and towards what God can do with this person. The reader, also, is moved from complaint to awe and worship.

Jesus heals the man, and the man soon after bears surprising and important testimony before the Sanhedrin, discomfiting them with his answers (see 9:27–28, 34). It is easy to see the love of God in the actions of Jesus, and to be amazed at the far-reaching effect of Jesus’ actions.

But what about *our* world? Can we still have this worshipful amazement in a world where this person will have to live with his blindness? I think it is possible. We still can move *away* from complaint and *toward* awe and trust. The man himself could develop a trusting spiritual attitude, believing the promise that he will receive a spiritual body in the afterlife (1 Cor 15:44), in which everything is restored. Further, the man might connect with support groups and friends, and find ways to live with energy and enthusiasm. If we witness this, we will be moved from complaint to awe.

We can develop a better philosophy of living, one where we do not fall into the trap of believing that every painful thing, every problem, is a punishment from God. God is not personally doing these things to us. *Life* is doing these things, but life does not have an attitude. Rain falls on the just and the unjust alike (Matt 5:45). These things are not punishments, nor is good fortune a reward from God.

So my point is that we can fulfill both halves of the love commandment, if we are persistent and thoroughgoing in our spiritual walk. It’s alright to find it difficult to love people, sometimes, but hang in there and remember that you don’t have to be filled with warm fuzzy feelings, only with an honest *intention* of good for the other person. And it’s alright to sometimes feel anger or confusion about God, but don’t linger in that place. Push forward and ask for God’s help, even if you are struggling with God. God’s work can be revealed in you wherever you are in life.

If you *really* believe that truth and justice reign in heaven, then certainty about the triumph of good is the only really *rational* belief. You have been given an eternal destiny. Stake your life on this. Live as though already in the kingdom of heaven!

That’s my final thought. Ask God’s help in really believing the gospel message about God’s love and goodness, and about the triumph of truth and fairness—in heaven, and eventually on earth as well. Then, hopeful faith is the only truly logical attitude! Break through to the higher logic. Then you will be “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).