

If We Have Love, Why Do We Need Law?

May 10, 2015

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Readings: Acts 10.25-26, 34-35, 44-48;
1 John 4.7-10;
John 15.9-17**By Edward Peters**

The Church has placed a beautiful set of readings before us today.

As so often happens when we pause to think about a given passage of scripture, we sense that there are many important lessons in these readings, but a homily is not the place to try to tease out all those ideas. Instead I want to spend a few minutes with you looking at just one very important question, and, having made that question our own, considering together Christ's answer to it.

The question is this: "If we have love, why do we need law?"

That very good question has been asked since practically the dawn of Christianity. Especially today, when law is so often misunderstood and ignored, we hear it being asked once again. After all, we know that God is Love. Jesus spoke repeatedly of the love that flourished between him and his Father. He invited his followers to join in that love, and he wants nothing else for us than that we come to share it with one another and with the whole world.

If God is what (or better, whom) we have when we love, then, what more could we possibly need beside love?

In one sense, of course, nothing!

To have love is to have a share in God himself. St. John drives this point home in the passage from his letter that we heard in the second reading today: "He who does not love, does not know God, *for God is love.*" The greatest of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine, famously exclaimed, "Love! And do what you will!" And Jesus himself, in the gospel of Matthew, approved of the young man who answered that the greatest commandment was to love God with one's whole heart, and mind, and soul, with our Lord adding to that young man's answer only that such love must be shared with neighbors.

So yes, in the final analysis, love really is all we need, and it is only love (not faith, not hope, but love) that we bring with us into eternal life.

Why We Need Law

Ah, but there, I think, is precisely the point where we can begin to see the connection between love and law: We are not in heaven yet, we are still here on earth. We are still subject to temptation, misinformation, mistake, and misdirection. We still need to learn how to love, and we need to know what love's first steps look like. Jesus tells us what those first steps of love look like. In fact, he shows us, by his own divine example, how to begin taking them.

The first step of love – not the last step, not the highest step, but nevertheless the first step toward love – is keeping the commandments of God. We have this Good News from Christ himself when he says: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. . . ." In fact, in case we missed it, Jesus repeats this directive several ways in today's gospel: "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love . . ."; and, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . ."; and, "You are my friends, if you do what I command you."

Those words, “Do what I command you,” confront us today. Jesus does not say, “Do what I command you *some* of the time, or *most* of the time, or when it’s convenient, or only when you understand my reasons for commanding”; instead, all of the time, he calls on us to keep all of God’s commandments, beginning with the Ten Commandments, of course, and including today the laws of his Church, and culminating in the two greatest commandments: Love God and neighbor.

Now I know what you’re thinking when you hear that we are called to keep all of God’s commandments all the time – you’re thinking exactly what I am thinking, namely, that such a command is impossible. I’ll come back to that in a moment, because it’s a real problem and we need to face it. But first, I want us to be clear that this directive from Jesus to keep his commandments is not simply something he imposes on us from the outside, by what legal theorists might call a “purely positive precept,” as if whatever Jesus commanded were to be obeyed with no more understanding than a robot might have.

Law Is a Sign of Love

No, Jesus does not regard us as robots or servants who must obey or be destroyed. Instead, how he sees us is set out in today’s gospel, when the Lord calls us “friends” and not “servants.” He wants us to know *why* we should do what we should do.

God’s teaching the people his law was, for the Jewish people, one of the greatest signs that God loved them. Remember what Psalm 147 proclaims: “He declared his word to Jacob, and to Israel he taught his ordinances and decrees. He has not dealt thus with other nations, he has not taught them his laws!” One of the great proofs of the singular favor that Israel enjoyed in God’s eyes was the fact that God taught them his laws. Israel knew what God, in that time, wanted from his people, and how they could move closer to him, precisely because God had taught them his laws. In other words, they knew how to start loving.

Of course it is easy these days, when so many people are confused about what law is and what purposes law serves, to make a caricature of any connection between law and love, and to accuse those who see the connections of reducing faith to a set of rigidly applied rules. But such caricatures have nothing in common with what Christ called us to when he bade us to show our love for him precisely by keeping his commandments. And it is certainly not what recent popes such as Paul VI or Benedict XVI had in mind when they said things like “justice is the minimum of charity.” They know that, as the foundation of charity, justice and respect for law are only the first steps – essential steps, to be sure, but only the first steps toward love. And thus, these popes, echoing the teaching of Christ, caution any who think that, as long as we tell ourselves that we love God in our hearts, we can short-change our actual obedience to him and his commandments in our daily lives.

Does God Demand the Impossible?

Which brings us back to the concern I mentioned earlier, about the difficulty, some would say impossibility, of obeying God in all respects at all times.

Let me ask you something: Do we Catholics believe that God *ever* demands of us something that is impossible? Of course he does not. But if Christ demands of those who would love him that they keep his commandments – and he says nothing about keeping them only in part, or only at certain times – are we not to conclude that Jesus means exactly what he says, namely: “Keep my commandments”?

I think we are called to conclude exactly that.

Granted, if in fact we fail to keep his commandments – and we all fail sometimes – and that failure is sinful (and as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches in paragraph 1847, we all sin), then yes, we must immediately express our sorrow to God for that failure and in due course get ourselves to confession with the firm resolve of starting over. But we don’t start off by approaching God’s commandments as something impossible for us to keep, and so excuse ourselves in advance of really striving to keep them precisely as he called us to keep them. Not unless we think Jesus was kidding when he said in Matthew 5, “Be ye perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I'll take this point one step further: The implications of our actually *doing* what God commands are enormous. In the first reading we heard today, from the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, St. Peter himself exclaimed (and yes, perhaps even Peter himself was taken aback at how clearly God manifested his pleasure here): "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, and that among any people, those who fear him and *who do what is right* are acceptable to him!"

We know what those words "do what is right" mean; we know that to keep God's commandment is to do what is right. And St. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us what happened to those who did what was right. What happened was that right there, before the eyes of St. Peter and all those watching, on those who did what was right, the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, the divine witness of the love between the Father and the Son, fell and filled them, and St. Peter ordered that they be welcomed into the Christian community.

Love is what happens to those who keep the commandments of God.

A Final Thought

Finally, let's very briefly ask ourselves, is Jesus content with simply *telling* us to keep his commandments? Or does he not go the extra step and *show* us how to keep his commandments? I think that's exactly what he does. He *shows* how to keep his commandments. How? Just as he has kept his Father's commandments. He says it directly: "If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and so remain in his love."

Jesus asks nothing more of us (and in fact, he asks infinitely less of us) than what his Father asked of him. But Jesus obeyed the Father in absolutely everything. And he now invites us to that same complete surrender of ourselves to himself, in love, beginning with our acceptance of his commandments.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, "Angelus" (February 13, 2011), available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1949-1986, available at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/>

John Paul II, Sacrae disciplinae leges (January 25, 1983), the promulgating document of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, available at: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul>

Mgr. Charles Pope, "God's Law Is Personal and Loving," available at: <http://blog.adw.org/2015/02/gods-law-is-personal-and-loving/>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Law is a sign of God's love.***
- ***Jesus expressly links our sharing in his love with our obedience to his commandments.***
- ***Jesus does not command the impossible, and he sets the example of obedience for us.***
- ***Obedience to the laws of God and his Church bring us into a closer relationship with God and his Church.***