

"More Than All the Whole Burnt Offerings and Sacrifices"

Many people today don't like doctrine or dogma. They think doctrine is divisive, just causing separations among Christians. Or some think that formulating doctrine can go against the spirit of love and thankfulness that we are supposed to have as Christians. Some think doctrine is more about "religion" than a "relationship;" having a relationship with Jesus. And yet when we look at our passage for today, I hope you see how that isn't necessarily the case. Doctrine doesn't need to be pitted against having a vibrant relationship with Christ. It doesn't have to separate us from the qualities of love and thankfulness that come in our relationship with Christ.

You see in our passage for today, we have a doctrinal formulation. Jesus is asked to make a doctrinal assertion about the Law of God. And Jesus does just that. In fact, the Westminster Catechisms use Jesus' response here to summarize God's law. Did you get that? Jesus response here is taken as is and placed into a book on doctrine! So Jesus is speaking doctrine here. But this is not something merely academic: cold and impersonal. It is not something that threatens to remove our focus from having a relationship with Jesus. Far from it! Just look at how this passage ends. This inquiring scribe is told that he is not far from the kingdom of God. This doctrine drove this man closer to Jesus!

Of course not all doctrine is equal. Both Jesus and this scribe are concerned here about right doctrine. But this passage shows us that right doctrine is not something to be afraid about. It's not something that distances us from the real important things about our faith. It's actually something that drives us closer to Christ and his kingdom. It's something that is at the heart of our love and thankfulness. And so let's look at this passage for today and see how Jesus' doctrine concerning God's law draws us to closer to Christ. And we'll also see how this is a fitting passage to consider on this Sunday before Thanksgiving.

And so let's begin in verse 28. We see a scribe coming to Jesus with a question. This is the third passage in a row where someone comes to Jesus with a question. First it was the Pharisees and Herodians coming to Jesus trying to trick him about taxes. Then it was the Sadducees coming to Jesus trying to trick him about the resurrection. Now this scribe comes along, and it seems in verse 28 that he is impressed with the answers Jesus has been giving. Now in Matthew's account of this story, we're told that this man was a Pharisee, and that he had also been sent to try to trap Jesus. And yet Mark gives us some insight into this man. Though he may have been sent to try to trap Jesus, it seems he is beginning to have eyes of faith. He became impressed with Jesus' answers, and it seems he's impressed with Jesus answer to his own question as well.

And so in verse 28 the man asks Jesus, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Basically, he's asking what's the most important commandment. That was a common question of the day. The scribes and rabbis commonly analyzed the law to the minute detail. They debated questions like this in great detail. They'd look at the nature of the laws and the sacrifices required when a command is broken in order to determine the weight and importance of the different laws. Sometimes this meant that the Jews divided up all the laws into individual categories. Other times it meant that they tried to synthesize the law, summarizing its different parts. And so the scribe wants Jesus to weigh in on this debate. Which commandment is the greatest?

Jesus responds actually with two commands. The first and greatest commandment Jesus says is to acknowledge the one God as the true God, and to love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second is like it; it's similar: love your neighbor as yourself. And so Jesus answers by summarizing the moral law. Jesus' answer isn't just one specific command. No, he picks two commands that together summarize the entire law. Simply put, he says that the commandments are about loving God and loving your neighbor. If you think about the Ten Commandments, that's how they are even organized. The first four commandments deal with loving God, and the last six deal with loving your neighbor. Together, they summarize our moral obligation to God. And so Jesus resisted the temptation to rank individual commands against each other. Instead, he summarized the entire law with these two inseparable commandments.

And yet even though these two commandments are inseparable, Jesus does rightly point out the primacy of the first. When he gives this chief of commandments in verses 29-30, he's actually quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5. There's nothing more important than seeing our proper relationship before God. We are not God. But there is one who is God. And this is the LORD who has reached out to us in love; that he is not just *the* God, but he is *our* God. And we are called to full obedience, submission, and allegiance to our God. That's why Jesus mentions these four faculties: heart, mind, soul, and strength. These four different words have a bit of overlap in meaning. It'd be easy to fall into a trap to try to isolate the unique meaning of each. But the overlap I think is exactly the point. All of our faculties are to be loving God. Every capacity in us, whether it is physical, spiritual, emotional, mental - you name it - all of us and every part of us is to love God. There is to be nothing held back in how we love God. In any and every way we can, we are to love God. And notice the word "all" in verse 30. It's repeated with each part of us. *All* of our heart. *All* of our soul. *All* of our mind. *All* of our strength. Not part. All. Every faculty of us is to love God, and the fullness of each faculty is to love God. There is not to be any division or split interest in our love to God. I hope you see how this sets us apart from God. He deserves our everything. No one else deserves that.

And yet in verse 31 Jesus says there is a second commandment that is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. This is quote from Leviticus 19:18. In the first commandment our place is rightly set before God. It said God is far above us and deserves our full and complete love. And yet we are also to love our fellow man. We are to love them even as our very selves. This second commandment sets out the equality of mankind. No human is worth more before God than another. We are all brothers and sisters. This doesn't even say love your fellow *Christians* as yourselves. But love our *neighbors* as ourselves. In the Gospel of Luke, it asks who is our neighbor? And Jesus answers with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, showing the wide range of who is our neighbor. We're called to love people that might seem to be our enemies.

And the beautiful thing here is that by loving our neighbor, it's an expression of loving God. We're called to love God as the greatest commandment, but then even though Jesus was only asked to tell the scribe the one greatest commandment, he had to tell him this second one as well. Loving God with our everything is inseparable from loving our neighbor. That's what the apostle John wrote, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (1 John 4:20)

So that is Jesus' response to the scribe's question. But look at the scribe's response. It's pretty interesting. For the most part it sounds like he is pleased with Jesus' answer and just parroting it back to him. But the scribe does add one

particular thing. At the end of verse 33 the scribe says that these two commandments are more important than "all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

You see when you look at the Old Testament laws, you find a number of moral laws, like the ones found in the Ten Commandments: don't take the Lord's name in vain, don't steal, don't murder, etc. Jesus summarized those moral laws with these two commands; this call to love God and to love your neighbor. We group these laws together and call them the Moral Law. The Moral Law. But the Old Testament laws also contained a number of laws about various sacrifices and offerings. We typically group those kinds of laws together and call them the Ceremonial Law. And so do you see what this scribe is saying? After agreeing with Jesus on what are the two most important commands, he says that they are more important than any of the laws about sacrifices and offerings. He's basically saying that the Moral Law is of greater importance than the Ceremonial Law. The scribe says that the Moral Law is greater than the Ceremonial Law.

That's a very interesting point the scribe adds in here, but it's not something he's just making up. That idea is firmly set out in the Old Testament Scriptures. There are a number of passages that echo the sentiment expressed through the prophet Hosea, where God says, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."

Another memorable passage on this same subject is Micah 6:6-8. It says, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah says that God is more pleased with obedience to his moral laws than with all the sacrifices performed according to the ceremonial laws.

You see the problem in Israel's history was this: They disregarded God's moral laws. They broke the commandments, and they thought they could just offer some sacrifices to be forgiven. Essentially they were trying to mock God and pervert his laws. The ceremonial laws were there to show God's forgiveness and grace. They were there to show the mercy and compassion of God. But they were there for the penitent. Not for the person looking to beat the system, so to speak; not for the people trying to manipulate God. King David expressed the heart of the Ceremonial Law when he wrote in Psalm 51:16-17, "For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart -- These, O God, You will not despise."

That's the kind of sacrifices God really wants - the sacrifices of a broken and contrite heart. That's the right attitude toward the Ceremonial Law. It's not that the Ceremonial Law was bad. No, it was God-given. But David expressed the heart of it in that Psalm. The sacrifices and offerings were to be genuine expressions of the heart. They were a tangible way for God to administer his grace in the Old Testament for those who genuinely came in faith and repentance. They were not supposed to be a way to have your cake and eat it too. God knows people's hearts, and those who sinned without remorse and then offered up a sacrifice, didn't do so in true faith. And so they didn't receive the forgiveness that the sacrifice signified.

And so this scribe responded well. He saw that God put more value on our desire to keep the moral law, than on our desire to just follow all the laws for ceremonial purity. Of course, wasn't that the common problem we see in the Pharisees in the New Testament? And wasn't this man a Pharisee? Yes, it is a common problem we see among the Pharisees. They often would keep all the rituals of the Ceremonial Law to the extreme letter of the law, while still secretly breaking God's moral laws in so many ways. And yes this man was a Pharisee according to Matthew's account. Yet it seems that this scribe is starting to get it. In light of Jesus' answer and in light of his understanding of the Scriptures, things are falling into place for this scribe.

And isn't that what Jesus then says to him? Verse 34, Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." These are wonderful words for this scribe! This scribe began showing a knowledge of God's heart toward the law. And yet, notice the profound significance of these words by Jesus. The man came to him with a doctrinal question about the law. But notice how Jesus suddenly changes the focus. What started out sounding like more of an academic exercise in understanding the Mosaic covenant, suddenly took on a much more glorious perspective. Jesus changed the focus. He turned it away from the Mosaic covenant to the coming kingdom. What might have appeared like a cold doctrinal discussion had profound implications regarding the kingdom. Remember, Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom. He's told us that kingdom is at hand. He's called us to respond to the kingdom and to seek to enter into it. Now he tells the scribe that he is close to entering the kingdom! And Jesus tells him that in light of how the man related the Moral Law with the Ceremonial Law.

You see, Jesus words are rather ambiguous here, aren't they? Mark doesn't record Jesus telling the man anything further. We're not told if the man asked a follow up question. We're not told if the man only stayed near the kingdom, or if he eventually entered into it. We'll have to wait and see when we get to heaven. But Jesus' few words here call both the scribe and us to reflect. What did Jesus mean here? What did this man need to understand or do in order to move from just being near the kingdom and actually come into the kingdom?

Well in an overall sense, of course, he needed to acknowledge Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The scribe came to Jesus thinking that he was the expert and testing Jesus' knowledge of the Word. The scribe's response to Jesus' answer almost sounds still like he is affirming Jesus, instead of the other way around - looking for him to find affirmation in Jesus. Of course Jesus turns it back around by telling him that he is not far from the kingdom. The scribe, and each of us, need to find Jesus as our Lord and Savior. That is the path to entering the kingdom of God.

And so that's true, generally speaking. But I'd like to think about this in more detail. Jesus tells the man that he is not far from the kingdom; and he says that in response to the man's statement that the Moral Law is of greater importance than the Ceremonial Law. How does the scribe's point relate to his being close to the kingdom? You see entering the kingdom in one sense can be seen through our understanding of these two categories of law: the Moral Law and the Ceremonial Law. People either get tripped up at this understanding, or they find eternal life. Let me clarify. I'll clarify by explaining first two wrong approaches to entering the kingdom, and then by explaining the right approach to entering the kingdom. And I'll do this using the categories of Moral Law and Ceremonial Law.

One wrong approach to entering the kingdom is through what we might call ritualism. We can falsely think that entering into Christ's kingdom is all about following the right rituals. We can live anyway we want, as long as we follow the right rituals. This is basically like saying, I can disregard the Moral Law, as long as I keep the

Ceremonial Law. I can break God's commandments because I can just find forgiveness through sacrifices and offerings. In the Old Testament that could be through all the sacrifices for sins; through the offerings of lambs, and bulls and goats. But it can also be done today in the New Testament church: on one extreme by just trusting in the outward acts of religion: going to church, taking communion, standing up and sitting down at the right times, etc, etc. That was a lot of the problem in the church at the time of the Reformation. But maybe for us this can be closer to home in this way: We can sin without remorse and just think, "Hey, I can just ask God for forgiveness." All of this is a dangerous attitude. God addresses this manipulative attitude in Galatians 6 and says that he will not be mocked. God knows the heart. Ritualism doesn't bring you to heaven. Trusting in the outward acts of religion won't save you.

But the other wrong approach to entering the kingdom is through moralism. We can falsely think that entering into Christ's kingdom is all about keeping God's laws. If we can just work hard enough, and show God how good we are, then we can earn our way into heaven. This is basically placing the Moral Law as supreme, but disregarding the Ceremonial Law altogether. But you see, the problem is that no one is perfect. Since man's fall into sin, no one can keep the Moral Law perfectly. We all fall short. But God has revealed to us that the standard for entering into his kingdom by works is 100% perfect obedience. If you can't keep all God's moral laws 100% of the time, every day, throughout your life, then you haven't earned heaven. You might have made a good try at it, but you fell short. God says in Romans 3, that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Moralism doesn't get you into heaven. Trusting in law-keeping only reminds you of your need for a savior, because you can't do it on your own.

You see, this brings us to the right approach to entering the kingdom of God. It comes through rightly understanding both the Moral Law and the Ceremonial Law. And it comes through understanding them in relationship to Jesus. Think about the Moral Law. We can't keep the Moral Law as we need to, in order to enter heaven. But Jesus did. Jesus fully kept all the laws of the Moral Law his entire life. He has never sinned. The Moral Law in our life, shows us our failings. It shows us how we can't keep it. We have need to keep it. But we can't. And yet Christ kept it for us. But there's more. Think about the Ceremonial Law. The sacrifices and ritual purity in these laws pointed to Jesus. They pointed how Jesus would be the once for all sacrifice for sin. We are purified and washed clean by the blood of Jesus. The ceremonial laws are fulfilled by Jesus on the cross.

And so the Moral Law and the Ceremonial Law find their true meaning in relationship to Christ. Jesus, in his obedience keeps the Moral Law for us. And Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for sin, for us. You see Jesus by offering to bring us into his kingdom, is the mediator of a new covenant: one where he kept the Moral Law through his perfect obedience and one where he fulfilled the Ceremonial Law through his sacrifice on the cross.

This might sound a bit doctrinal and academic. But again, I point you back to the text. We are talking about entrance into the kingdom. We are talking about our salvation. Maybe an easy way to sum it up this. Jesus began his ministry calling people to repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. He calls us to have a response of genuine faith and repentance. Not a faith in ourselves as if we can earn heaven. Nor a repentance that is not truly sorry but just trying to take God's grace for granted. No, we need a faith that truly looks to Christ's righteousness. And we need a repentance that truly seeks to turn away from our sins, even as we trust in the forgiveness that we find on the cross. That's the faith and repentance that this scribe needed. That's what he needed to not just be near the kingdom, but to actually enter the kingdom. That's the sort of faith and

repentance we need as well. All this doctrinal discussion of the law, though it may seem dry and academic at first glance, is actually touching upon the wonderful news of the gospel. That Jesus came to save sinners like you and me. That there is grace and redemption in Jesus Christ. That he says to you who trust in him, your sins are forgiven.

Saints of God, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, I hope you had heard again the gospel. I hope you have heard again the good news, that what you can't do on your own, Christ did for you. We can't earn our way into heaven, either by godly living or by sacrifices and penance. What we cannot do, however, Christ has done for us. That is amazing news! It is the gospel. And it is something to be thankful for.

So what then of God's law? If the Law has led us to Christ and the gospel, is there no further role of the law for us? Is that all we are to take away from this passage? No, not at all. Yes, the Ceremonial Law has been fulfilled in Christ. We no longer ought to offer the sacrifices and offerings outlined in the Old Testament. But as for the Moral Law; just because Christ has kept it for us, to earn heaven for us, that doesn't mean that it doesn't have any importance to us. Reformed Christians have always seen an ongoing use of the Moral Law for us. It is a rule of life for us. It tells us how God would have us to live as Christians. Christ saved us from our sins, and part of the work he is doing in our life now is to keep us from further sin. The forgiveness comes instantly. But the obedience is a process. It's a gradual work of his grace in our life. The Moral Law is now the standard for Christian living. It tells us what we should strive after as Christians.

And so one way Reformed Christians have thought about this is in terms of gratitude. One of the reasons why we now strive to keep the Moral Law is out of *gratitude*. That's the Christians life: guilt, then grace, then gratitude; guilt, grace, gratitude. This is a very fitting thing to think about as Thanksgiving approaches. We can thank God in so many ways for saving us. We can tell him in prayer. We can tell others as we share our testimony with them. But one of the best ways you can show your thankfulness to God is by endeavoring to keep his laws. Striving to keep his laws is a way you can show God how thankful you are. Obedience can show thankfulness. We all know that don't we? Actions speak louder than words. Let's show God our thankfulness.

And so today as you have heard a summary of God's law, I hope you are reminded of our approach to thankfulness. It's one summarized by love. Our thankfulness is expressed through a law-keeping that Jesus describes here in terms of love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. You can thank God through loving God and loving your neighbor, with all that that entails.

I hope you see how today's doctrinal discussion about the law is not something at odds with Christian love and thankfulness. It's inherently related to it. And if this response of thankfulness is to be expressed in love, what great encouragement we have. We're told in Scripture, "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). That means we thank God even by his grace. We can thank him by striving to love, but we can only love, because he first loved us. Isn't the gospel beautiful? Even in our desire to thank him, he equips us. To him belong all glory and praise, now and forever more! Amen.

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