

“Love is the Fulfilling of the Law”

In our New Testament reading for today, we have recorded Messiah’s description of the two greatest commandments of the Law:

“... thou shalt **love the Lord thy God** with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt **love thy neighbor as thyself**. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-30).

Again, he informs us elsewhere that “on these two commandments hang all the law and prophets (Mat. 22:37-40).

Apostle similarly describes the principle of love in relation to the Law:

“Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another **hath fulfilled the Law**” (Rom. 13:8).

“Love worketh no ill to his neighbor, therefore **love is the fulfilling of the Law**” (Rom. 13:10).

When we think of the underlying principles of the Mosaic Law, we would perhaps think of judgment, and punishment for sin. We might think of the offering up of animal sacrifices, and the continual burnt offering. But would we think of Love as being a primary principle? “Love is the fulfilling of the Law” according to the inspired apostle.

When we reflect upon the principles of the Mosaic Law, we find that there are essentially two underlying principles: 1) the regulation of relationships with Yahweh, and 2) relationships with fellow man. The sacrificial code taught reconciliation with God, and many of the judgments for sin were to do with issues between men and women. Accordingly, the love of God and the love of neighbor were the two great commandments upon which the entire law hung.

The Lord Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law:

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: **I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill**. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all be fulfilled” (Mat. 5:17-18).

Being that love is the fulfilling of the Law, our Master who fulfilled that law is an embodiment of Divine love: the love of God to man, and the love of Messiah to his brethren.

In Old Testament times, Love was a command: part of the Mosaic legislative code: “thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but **thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself**: I am Yahweh” (Lev. 19:18). This was part of the old law, whereas in the New Testament, we have a new set of principles. Interestingly, our Master taught love as specifically a new, not old commandment:

“**A new commandment I give unto you**, That ye love one another; **as I have loved you**, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (Jno. 13:35)

The question arises: if love was part of the old covenant, how is it “a new commandment” given by Jesus? There is a difference in the two: the Law was to “love thy neighbor **as thyself**”, whereas the New covenant is to “love one another **as I have loved you**”. One is loving as we love ourselves, whereas the other is loving as Jesus loves. The love of Jesus is greater: not only is it a neighborly love; it is a divine love, greater than the love of self, a love illustrated in his own saying: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jno. 15:13). The love of Jesus is greater than a love for self: his love is a sacrificial love, loving his brethren even more than loving himself. This is the love that should subsist between believers in Christ as a new commandment, based upon the example of our Master:

“Hereby perceive we love, because he laid down his life for us: **and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren**” (1 Jno. 3:16).

This illustrates what love is, in Bible terms. It is not a shallow emotion, a liking for our close friends and family, but it is a reflection of the love of Christ, loving fellow believers more than our own selves - to the extent that we would be willing to lay down our lives for each other. This is the united body of believers, a collective multitude of men and women who seek to show the love of Jesus to each other – and even, if it be necessary, to love their enemies, doing good to those who hate them (Luke 6:27). Indeed, if we do not love our brethren, how can we love God? As it is written: “if a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 Jno. 4:20).

FORGIVENESS

Biblical love involves forgiving those who trespass against us. So, it is written:

“above all things have **fervent love** among yourselves: for **love shall cover the multitude of sins.**” (1 Pet. 4:8).

Notice the emphasis here: believers must have “**fervent** love”. The word “fervent” suggests that love is an active thing, far greater than a shallow emotion. The word is only used on one other occasion in Scripture, in the context of an incessant prayer for one of the Apostles: “Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made **without ceasing** of the ecclesia unto God for him” (Acts. 12:5). The love of saints therefore is an ongoing active service: “without ceasing,” come what may. And this unceasing fervent love covers a whole multitude of sins. There are no grudges between true brethren (Jas. 5:9) for love and forgiveness abounds. And this is the essence of true fellowship.

We have seen that there are two aspects to the love of the believer: a love of God, and a love towards our neighbour – and the two are entwined and interrelated. The love of God must come first, with the love of man being a reflection of that love. But by the time we reach the time of Messiah’s book of Revelation, the love of God – the first love – had begun to wax cold: “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because **thou hast left thy first love**” (Rev. 2:4). How was this so? The believers at Ephesus were fervent in championing the Truth, and opposition of wrong doctrine:

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience and how **thou canst not bear them which are evil:** and **thou hast tried them** which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars” (Rev. 2:2).

Yet they had left their first love: the sacrificial *agape* love of God. There is an inherent danger that in standing against errorists, that we engage in battle out of hatred for the wrong, rather than for the love of God. The exhortation of Jude is instructive:

“Beloved when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ***ye should earnestly contend for the faith*** which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Here is the exhortation: “earnestly contend for the faith” – but those who are to so contend are the “beloved”. Being beloved of God, they must demonstrate that love in standing against the works of darkness. And notice the wording: the emphasis is not that we contend ***against*** particular things so much as ***“for”*** the faith. Our contention is a positive thing, not a negative. That is, when we contend against errorists, we must do so in love, contending for things that are true. Rebuking falsehood is a means to an end: it is so that the Truth may be seen with all its glory and majesty, and not simply to condemn those who are astray. This exhortation to earnest contention must be balanced against the other saying that:

“the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:23-24).

All things must be done in love, as brethren: “consider one another to provoke unto love and good works” (Heb. 10:24).

LOVERS OF PLEASURE

By contrast to those who delight in a love of the Truth, the majority of mankind fall into the category of being “loves of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Tim. 3:4). This is the same group as those who, like Balaam of old, “who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pet. 2:15). Our day is like the days of the Judges over Israel, when every man did that which was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25), seeking one’s own pleasure in prohibited ways. Devoted to making provision to fulfil the lusts of the flesh, the multitude of those who walk down the broad way are pleasure seekers, seeking after their own affairs – yet oblivious of the responsibilities they have to their maker. Some have a smattering of religion which makes them righteous in their own eyes, yet their religion is but vanity if it is not founded upon the bedrock of the Apostolic testimony and the love of Christ exhibited therein.

HE LOVED US FIRST

When we consider our love of God, we must always be humbled by the fact that He loved us first, before we were even born:

“we love him, because ***he first loved us***” (1 Jno. 4:19)

“herein is love, not that we loved God, ***but that he loved us***, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jno. 4:10).

We, therefore, have no scope to boast. It was not that in our righteousness we loved God, and in response, he loved us. He initiated love. He found us, and drew us to himself in his mercy. “God is love”, and he loved us when we were yet in our sins. “God commendeth his love toward us, in that, ***while we were yet sinners***, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Again, “when we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

We considered earlier how that in response to the love of God, Messiahs' brethren must reciprocate that love, in laying down their lives in service to each other, and before God. And here, we have another exhortation to do just that: Christ did not die for us who are righteous, but us who were "yet sinners". He did not lay down his life for the godly, but "for the ungodly". There is a logical outcome of this, which is seldom heeded: when we see our brother or our sister stumbling in their walk to the kingdom, when we see our fellow brethren and sisters succumbing to their mortal weakness, there is a very real danger that we can look down on them, filled with a sense of our own importance and righteousness: "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican" (Lu. 18:11). Truly it is written that "most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?" (Prov. 20:6). A far better approach is for us to constantly bear in mind that these are the category of men that Messiah died for: the weak, the ungodly, and the sinners. Those who would not lift up so much as their eyes unto heaven, but smite upon their breasts, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (see Luke 18:13). In our weakness, Yahweh's glory will be seen, in his willingness to forgive, as we forgive others who trespass against us. We must therefore exercise that love which covers sins to our brethren, not vaunting ourselves above them, but in all humility esteeming them to be greater than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). We must love them as Christ loves us, a sacrificial, forgiving love.

As we come before the emblems of bread and wine, we memorialize the fact that greater love has no man shown than Messiah who laid down his life for his friends. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jno. 3:16). We come "to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:19), extended to us. And as we take the bread and the wine, we have tokens of God's love towards us, for "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). We delight in the rich blessings of the Truth, and we therefore have a duty – and a desire – to declare the love of God to those around us. And we must patiently wait upon each other in all humility, looking to that time when the love of God shall be openly displayed in all the earth under the beneficent reign of His Son.

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