

The Rest Is Commentary

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Sermon for October 24, 1999

Lessons for Pentecost Proper 25 in Year A

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

We all like a good algorithm. This is a college crowd, so I'll say it again, knowing that you'll understand what I'm talking about. We all like a good algorithm.

We all like a good precise set of rules that we can apply to every situation without having to think or make any real decisions. It makes our lives easier, and frees our minds for other things. Certain algorithms not only make our lives easier, but they make it safer. The one that immediately comes to mind is the one about green, yellow, and red lights. We all know that green means go, red means stop, and if you're from Jersey, yellow means "floor it!" And yet, sometimes the algorithms end up being served by us instead of serving us. Sometimes we let the algorithms allow us to become lazy in our thinking. That same green, yellow, red algorithm I just mentioned made a slave out of one of my friends this past spring as she sat for a good ten minutes at a red light early in the morning on Nottingham Road, with not another car in sight. She couldn't bring herself to run what was obviously a malfunctioning traffic light because the rule said that you wait until it turns green.

Sometimes the algorithms serve us. Sometimes we serve them. And sometimes we use the algorithms to deflect responsibility from ourselves. If we can say,

"But the rules didn't say I had to do that!" or "the rules didn't say I *couldn't* do that!" then no one can officially pin any blame on us - even though in our heart of hearts we knew better from the beginning.

I don't know how true this is, but it's said that WC Fields, who, among other things, was a known to be an atheist, was found reading a Bible in his hospital room, near the end of his life. When asked what he was doing, he replied, "Looking for loopholes."

For you see, the algorithms not only tell us what we should and shouldn't do. But because they can't cover every possible situation, they also leave a great uncharted gray area where we can either assume responsibility or say it's not our problem.

In Leviticus we see a very detailed algorithm of what the Hebrews are and are not to do. A very detailed list of how they are to treat each other and how they are to come before God. And yet, with every detail comes another loophole, another way of following the rule, but not, another way to say, "OK, I only have to do this much, but not that much."

Each one of these rules can be followed to the letter but not its spirit. And over the years each one of these rules *has* been

followed to the letter while the spirit has been trampled on. And not just in biblical times, but in our day too. If you think about it, there's a very real difference between what's legal and what's just. What's legal follows the letter of the law, no matter how unfair it is. What's just follows the intent of the law regardless of legal technicalities.

All of the old rules can be followed to the letter, but broken in spirit if they're seen as being the essence of the whole thing. All of the rules except for maybe the last part of the last one.

And Jesus said to them:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Another rabbi once said:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. The rest is commentary.

The rest is commentary. I like that. It says that all the other rules, all the other algorithms that go along with this are not the law itself, but are there as examples to expand on it, to give you ideas about what it means.

As a teacher, I love giving examples. And as students you should know by now that

examples are just that - examples. Not an exhaustive listing of every single situation you might find yourself in, but examples of a few so that you might understand and learn the process by which you go about solving the problem.

The rabbi said that all the other rules were merely examples of ways to fulfill the great one. Jesus pretty much says the same thing: all of the Law and the prophets' teaching on the Law is based on these two commandments.

And what a difference that makes. What Jesus says takes us away from the comfort of being able to clearly say, "My problem, not my problem" or "I have to, I don't have to." He makes it harder for us to follow the letter of the law while trampling its spirit, and he does this by saying to love your neighbor as yourself.

And these words are important as much for what they say as for what they *don't* say.

He says to love your neighbor *as yourself*. Not *more* than yourself or *instead of* yourself, while ignoring your own needs. But *as yourself*. And it's important to understand here that he's assuming that you love yourself.

For some reason self-love has gotten a bad rap for years. We assume that it means selfishness or narcissism. We Christians have an awful history of putting ourselves down and saying how worthless we are - even though God thought we were worth dying for. Jesus says we should love our neighbor *as ourselves*, and that means that we should love and take care of ourselves too.

What Jesus says about loving our neighbor as ourselves casts a whole new light on the law. No longer is it a set of loopholes for us to try to thread our way through with the least amount of inconvenience, no longer is it a set of rules for us to follow blindly and mindlessly, while ignoring the very real needs of others that aren't addressed by the rules as written. We're no longer allowed to hide behind the rules. We're now called to love our neighbor as ourselves and look at those rules simply as examples of ways in which we can do that. And that changes everything.

Looking at one of the rules from Leviticus, the person who follows the rule to the letter while breaking its spirit could ask "How little space can I leave at the edge of my field when I harvest, and get away with it?" The person who loves his neighbor as himself might instead ask, "How much ought I leave at the edge of the field for those who have less than I?"

Jesus gives us greater responsibility. It seems at first like he's throwing more at us, but if you think about it, he's trusting us with more. He's saying, "You can handle this. You can do this - if you really want to."

A caution here. Although we're given greater responsibility, and aren't as able to

say, "It's not my job" as we might be if we only had to follow the old algorithms, there are times when we're allowed to say, "That's a problem that's not in my area of expertise, and I'd only mess it up more."

I know what jobs around the house I can handle, and I know that as a plumber, I'm a great accountant. Sometimes loving your neighbor as yourself means not getting involved when you know that you don't have the expertise to deal with the problem. And I'll be the first to admit that there are times when you're not sure whether getting involved will help or hurt the person. They're not all easy calls. But perhaps the important thing is loving your neighbor enough to *want* to help - if you only knew how, and even if the only help you can give is indirect.

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

All the rest is merely commentary. As has been this sermon.

Now go out and love each other.