

A Sermon preached by Robert Sillars on February 28, 2012

THE TWO COMMANDMENTS

Jesus replied 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. On these two commandments rest all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:37-40

The title of this talk is “The Two Commandments” You might ask Two? Two Commandments? Aren’t there supposed to be Ten? The Ten Commandments -- it’s a phrase that evokes grandeur. To me, it brings to mind Cecil B DeMille’s epic blockbuster movie, starring Charlton Heston as Moses. *The Ten Commandments*, at least the movie looms large in my memory. I was a boy when it came out. It was a big event when my parents took my brother and me to the movies to see it. We did a lot of things together as a family but going to the movies wasn’t one of them unless it was a major event.

Of course, in our town, as was common in the 1950’s, there was only one theater with only one screen. The theater sat over a thousand people. As I recall the theater was full for that movie. It was hard to get tickets.

Often, the Ten Commandments play a role in our secular public life, frequently at the intersection of our secular public life and religion. We have all heard of controversy about where the Ten Commandments fit in our public life and in public spaces. I don’t want to dwell on those controversies today, but the important point is that the Ten Commandments continue to play an important role in our society.

The Two Commandments, as stated by Jesus in this morning’s reading from Matthew have a strong relationship to the Ten Commandments. A great many gallons of theological ink have been spilled in writing about the relationship between the Two Commandments and the Ten Commandments.

It is generally accepted that the first or great commandment, love the Lord your God, coincides with the first four of the Ten Commandments. Jesus’s second commandment, to love your neighbor, coincides with the other six Commandments.

Many see the Two as a summary or restatement of the Ten. Restatements of law are not uncommon. In fact, there are multiple versions of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. Exodus chapter 34 presents a different version of the Ten Commandments and Deuteronomy presents yet another. Each are at least slightly different in some ways from the more traditional version which we read this morning.

The Two Commandments are graceful in their simplicity. Jesus cuts to the core of God's law with just a few simple words.

In writing this, I found myself wondering if Jesus was cognizant of the little inconsistencies in the Old Testament versions of the Ten Commandments. By the time

Jesus comes to earth, the Old Testament is established in its final form. I am told that in the Jewish tradition there are over 600 Commandments contained in the Old Testament. This tradition often sees the Ten Commandments as a more concise statement of those commandments.

I've been a lawyer for well over 40 years. Trying to understand the law is something I have spent my entire professional life attempting to accomplish. Seeking that understanding sometimes seems to be an unachievable goal. It is kind of like the old conundrum about going halfway to your destination. You go halfway and there's a new shorter distance to the destinations, you go halfway again and you're even closer to the destination. You keep repeating the process, but you never quite get to the destination.

Lawyers know that much of the secular law is written down in statutes passed by the legislature. But there is another huge body of law, even more law that's built upon precedents. Precedents based upon decisions in prior cases that have come before the courts. For the most part, finding those precedents has gotten easier with the advent of computers and the internet. But summarizing the results of those cases and of the statutes can be difficult at best.

In the 1930s and 40s lawyers and legal academics in United States got together and created a series of what were called restatements of the law. These are books that restate the principles of different areas of the law. There's a restatement of the law of trusts, a restatement of the law of contracts, a restatement of the law of property and so on. But once again that halfway conundrum crops up. We never quite seem to get to the clearest statement or restatement of the law. For example, American law of property has its basis and its roots in rules and precedents that go back nearly 1000 years to feudal England. The first restatement of the law of property was written in the late 1930s. The current restatement of the law of property is the third restatement and a new and revised fourth version is almost finished. It has gone from one volume to four. The same thing has happened with most of the other restatements of the law.

I am told that in Shakespearean England lawyers were sometimes paid by the word. I hope we're not going back to that time, but at times I wonder. One might think, sometimes, that my colleagues and I are wishing for those days to return.

Looking at the Two Commandments, one cannot help but to be impressed by their brevity. This is another reason why Jesus' statement of the law contained in the two commandments is so incredibly appealing. No parade of "thou shalt" and no "thou shalt not". Just two simple rules. Just two simple rules that seem so easy to follow. Two simple rules that can be incredibly difficult to follow. I sometimes have described myself as a Two Commandment Christian. Yet applying those two rules can be incredibly challenging.

Perhaps an even more appealing aspect is the one little word that is common to each of the two Commandments. No "thou shalt" and no "thou shalt not". The common word from Jesus is love.

Love the Lord your God. It's something we try to do when we come to church, it's a thing we do when we pray, it's something we should at least try to do in all that we do. Recently Dr. Hall preached a whole series of sermons about Christian practices; each one of those practices are ways that we can show our love for God – in big things and in little things. More recently he gave us examples of luminaries, people who have shown their love in wonderful ways.

But why do we love God? Well, there is the commandment, “love the Lord your God”. But it's much more than that. Dr. Hall touched on it in his recent sermon about Martin Luther. The key part of Martin Luther's theology revolves around the concept of grace. In Luther's time indulgences were being sold by the church to raise money for the church. The theory of buying an indulgence was that you acquired a special ticket that would move you ahead of the line to get into heaven. The higher price you paid the better your chances to get to heaven and absolve your sins. Put in a modern context, it's like Led Zeppelin singing about buying a stairway to heaven. The concept was that your place in heaven was assured by your often ostentatious generosity and good works.

Luther believed that this concept was entirely upside down. He preached that you simply cannot buy your way into heaven. So, why should we do good works? Why should we do good things? Why should we give to the church? Why should we help the poor? What's the point if those things don't buy us a slot in heaven.

Luther believed the answer is Grace. God freely grants us grace as his gift to us. He loves us. When we act with gratitude and love in response to God's love freely given; then and only then do our good works and good deeds have meaning. The concept of Grace means that we respond to God's love with the love we share.

The other great commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. It's simply a restatement of the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have others do unto you. But it is also perhaps the best way to show our love for God.

The core of both of these Commandments is that one simple word - love. The Apostle Paul tells us what love means in his letter to the Corinthians: Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love is the common denominator of the two great commandments. It is telling us how to respond to God's love for us; the love shown by his grace for us. It's all about motivation – are we acting selfishly to move ahead of the line or are we acting with love in response to love?

These two commandments with their emphasis on love are all so simple yet so incredibly complicated. They provide us with a core; they provide us with a prism through which we can examine all that we do; all that we say, and all that we are.

Love is the Commandment.

Love is the key.

Amen.