

Trinity 14

I take as my text today from the collect:

Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

It is interesting to note that last Sunday and this, the Collects have centered around the “promises of God” while the Epistles have centered around the truth that the Law was powerless to make men righteous.

This week, the Collect and Epistle come together to bring a sense of clarity to what course we must take to attain that which God promises.

Truly, God’s promises are not rewards, not something we earn. They are freely given to us and, indeed, through our “free will” we can reject his “heavenly promises.”

The Jewish leadership in the time of Jesus, however, believed the promises of God could be attained by adherence to the Law. To them, the Law was a guarantee of “righteousness” — the “be all and end all.”

But our Lord was quick to point out that the Law was about externals; it had become a yoke. He had come to fulfill the Law and remove its yoke.

What do we mean when we say the Law was about externals?

In a word, it governed actions — what you could and could not do; how to do or how not to do something.

Think about the Ten Commandments. They are very specific ordinances governing our actions. For instance, there are eight “thou shalt not’s,” such as “Thou shalt not steal” or “Thou shalt not covet.” And there are two Commandments that concern keeping the Sabbath-day and honoring one’s father and mother.

From the Ten Commandments, over time, the Law — the Mosaic Law — had developed into a convoluted regulatory system. It covered hygiene, food, worship, and on and on. It governed virtually every action of daily life.

So, here we have the Law, even when stripped of all its minutiae, a divine legal system to promote order and harmony in a civil setting but lacking the power to make a person righteous through its obedience.

Can you not thus imagine the reaction of the Pharisees when Jesus confronts them with the notion that righteousness is not derived from adherence to the Law? That righteousness could not be earned; that it was not a reward? That the promises of God do not come through the outward observance of his commands?

Their reaction was severe and predictable. Their whole way of thinking had been challenged. They found this unacceptable.

If the Law was not the way to righteousness, then what was? What is the answer?

The answer lies in the beauty, the simplicity, and yet the difficulty of one word, one concept — love.

**....that we may obtain that which thou dost promise,
make us to love that which thou dost command.....**

Jesus was explicit about God’s command:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

If we again think back to the Ten Commandments, they do not mention “love.” Yet, they prepared the way for our Lord and He changed their negative precepts into positive principles of love and duty.

How, then, can such beauty and simplicity as love be fraught with so much difficulty?

Because it requires giving up of self; it requires changing the center of our world. It means taking our intellectual concepts of love, of faith, of God, and moving them from the head to the heart. It requires us to expose, to share our innermost feelings. And it is self-initiated as the heart cannot be opened from the outside.

If we let the Spirit of Christ into our hearts, everything changes.

St. Paul says in his Epistle to the Galatians: “...if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.”

He goes on to say:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

No doubt the Law is a deterrent; and while it may prevent someone from murdering their neighbor, it, on the other hand, cannot make them love their neighbor. It is only the Spirit of Christ, the Love of God residing within us, within our hearts that can do that.

Christianity is not all about externals; it is all about internals -- what is inside. If our hearts are filled with the Love of God, permeated with the Holy Spirit, and the abode of Jesus Christ, that will become externally evident.

The Law — the Ten Commandments — will read a little differently when “love” is added to each and the way to “righteousness” will become a little more evident.

For instance, the First Commandment:

“Thou shalt have none other gods but me; thou shalt not **love** them but **love** me as I love you.”

How about “Honour and **love** thy father and thy mother.”

Or “Thou shalt do not murder; that is, thou shalt not take a person’s life or kill his spirit but **love** him as one of God’s creation.”

And, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor or covet thy neighbor’s good fortune, but **love** thy neighbor as thyself.”

You can see — adding the element of love to the Law brings to it a whole new meaning that was alien to the Pharisees and Jewish leadership in Jesus’ day.

**....that we may obtain that which thou dost promise,
make us to love that which thou dost command....**

There is the story of St. John when he lay dying. His disciples asked him if he had anything to say, perhaps a message to leave. He replied: “Little children, love one another.” He repeated this over and over. Finally, they asked him if this was all he wanted to say. In his last breath he said: “It is enough, for it is the Lord’s command.