

"Basics of Faith"
by Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday October 29, 2023

Matthew 22:34-40

Today is **Reformation Sunday**. It is the Sunday that we remember who we are as part of the reformed and reforming church, where we have come from, and the guiding principles for us as Reformed Christians.

I titled this message "Christian basics". The Reformation, held 5 basic tenants of Christian faith: "*Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone, through Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone.*" (the 5 solas of the Reformation). "Sola Scriptura" or Scripture alone, refers to the belief that our rule of faith and life comes from the Bible. The Bible, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, teaches us what we need to know to be a faithful follower of Jesus.

We don't need other special revelations. When we read other books, or listen to teachers, or if we have a dream or a special revelation, we test what they say over against scripture. Scripture - the Bible is the litmus test. We are people of the Book (the Bible). When Reformers, including Presbyterians, want to talk about what's right and what's wrong, we base our thoughts on what the Bible says.

This morning, from our passage from the Bible we read about Jesus being in conflict with the religious leaders of His time again. This time they sent a lawyer to question Jesus, we might compare this person to a Professor of Theology, or other such expert.

The question he asks is simple enough, which law is the 'greatest'. This is another question designed to have no right answer. There were 613 laws, so whatever law Jesus chose, the lawyer would have 612 reasons to argue that Jesus was wrong. The hope again was to discredit Jesus with the crowds.

Jesus' answer was about as orthodox as was possible. Sometimes we forget that the people called Jesus as 'Rabbi' for a reason. Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi - and in this case a very orthodox Rabbi. Jesus told his disciples that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it, to give the full meaning of it.

So which law is the greatest? Repeatedly during the day faithful Jews, including Jesus and that lawyer, would have repeated the Shema: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Jesus could have invited them to say it with him.

Attached to this part of the command Jesus added: "love your neighbor as yourself." This one command with two sides, held the pegs that supported all the 611 other laws.

I started to think about the Jewish laws I know about. There are ones about gleaning fields - leaving some crops in your fields. The purpose of the law isn't good farming technique, but for love of the poor neighbor. You leave a bit of food in your field so that the poor might gather it. It gave the poor neighbor dignity and care.

There are the regulations about keeping the Sabbath holy and dietary laws. Those laws are about loving God. God's people kept themselves separate from the world by what they ate and how they cleaned their dishes, and how they prepared their foods to be constantly reminded of who they are as God's people. They were to remember God, and love God.

The laws around not coveting, not stealing, and not committing adultery or murder guard our relationships with our neighbours, helping to guide how we live together.

Jesus was critical of how the Pharisees interpreted the laws precisely because the letter of law was often separated from the intent of keeping us in a loving relationship with God and with each other. The lawyer was silenced and walked away, he had nothing to add or subtract from Jesus' answer.

In our reading, the lawyer walks away silenced, but we are left wondering what to do with these commands, what it might look like to live them. Jesus' words are not at all difficult to understand, but what does it look like to live them?

One of the first things to notice is that Jesus doesn't invite us to the general principals of love. But rather He tells us to love God with all our being – our minds, our souls, all of our strength.

We are to have a long, lasting love affair, with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every love affair takes time, takes commitment, and takes intimate time together. Loving God with all our being won't happen in one hour Sunday mornings, or in a moment or two caught here and there.

It takes learning about the beloved and allowing the love of God to wash over us, for our love of God is always a response to God's love. God loves us first and more than we imagine.

Practically, remember the ways you have seen God act in love towards you, recall God's faithfulness, the times you cried out to God and God answered you. Remember all the blessings. Read and ponder Jesus' love for sinners, his healing love reaching out to hurting and broken. Ask God to help you love Him more and more. Worship, sing, pray, praise, read the words of others who love God deeply.

Henry Nouwen writes of Jesus:

"With a human heart big enough to hold all human loneliness and all human anguish. Your heart is not a heart of stone but a heart of flesh; your heart of flesh is not narrowed by human sin and unfaithfulness but is as wide and deep as divine love itself. Your heart does not distinguish between rich and poor, friend and enemy, female and male, slave and free, sinner and saint. Your heart is open to receive anyone with total, unrestricted love. For anyone who wants to come to you, there is room. You want to draw all people to yourself and offer them a home where every human desire is met, every human longing comes to rest, and every human need is satisfied. But your heart is gentle and humble. You do not force; you do not pull or push; you do not coerce. You want us to come freely to your heart and trust that we will find there the peace and joy we most desire." (Heart Speaks to Heart p. 22)

Loving God, like loving anyone, is a work of love that is greatly rewarded as we undertake it, learning to love more fully. We aren't just to love people in general, the command isn't to love others as a general principle, but to love our neighbours in the specifics of our day-to-day life.

That means Jesus want us to specifically love the people we meet, the people we work with, the people in our families, and the person who lives next door and around the corner. You can turn to Luke's gospel if you want more information about who your neighbor is, but I warn you it won't get any easier, and the list won't get shorter.

For a moment, let's remember what this love is that we're to practice. Thankfully we aren't called to like everyone, or be a friend to everyone, or to feel loving towards everyone. What we are called to do is to care, to show compassion, to do the right thing towards one another, towards everyone we meet, to will the good of the other.

Think of 1 Corinthians 13: *"Love is patient, love is kind, love doesn't keep a record of wrongs, love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things. Love never ends. Love is the right action we do, whether our emotions encourage us or not."*

This love of God and neighbour is shown most clearly in Jesus going to the cross. Jesus loved the Father, with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; and laid down his life in obedience to God. Jesus loved his neighbours, those who taunted him, those who tried and convicted him, those who denied him, and he gave his life for them, and for us.

That kind of love does not come to us naturally or easily. We do not love perfectly. We do not love our families, our friends, or even ourselves perfectly. But as we learn to love God, as the love of God fills our hearts and fills our minds, and changes us, we learn to love others. We start to bear the fruit of love.

Trusting in the love and faithfulness of God, we can open our hearts and our hands to the people around us. When we enter the heart of God, and love God deeply we find our neighbor, who is also deeply loved by God. The love of God compels us and teaches us how to love.

Our Bibles teach us of the love of God, the truth of how God has formed us and loved us from the beginning, and how God has pursued us relentlessly, never giving up on us, but sending Jesus in love to show and teach us the full extent of God's love that is made known in Jesus.

Our Bibles give us the word of Jesus to build our lives upon and show us the example of how to live as God's people, so together we learn to love God, and love one another.

Thanks be to God.