

6 May 2018

1 John 5:3 John 15:12 And his commandments are not burdensome. . .” that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Heavy Duty – Light Burden: The Commandment of Love

Imagine, for a moment: A religion that is a massive book of rules. Every facet of life would be shaped by a particular rule; how to dress, how to prepare food, how and when to pray and to worship. Over six hundred specific rules with extensive commentaries on them as well. The rules would be burdensome to most of us. We would spend an inordinate amount of our time making sure that we were following the rules or we might become experts at figuring out ways around the rules so that we might formally obey, but still be able to do what we wanted! That was Jewish religious life at the time of Jesus.

Of course, there must have been some who found solace in a life of rules. By trying to live by the rules they absolved themselves of responsibility for their own decisions. Rather like the modern people described by Eric Fromm in his book *Escape from Freedom*. Some people find comfort in an authoritarian or even totalitarian relationship or environment. These are people who flee from responsibility and who value psychological safety and predictability above all. This is not life in the New Testament – not life for today’s Christ believer.

Jesus gave us one commandment: “that you love one another as I have loved you.” We certainly don’t have a lot of rules to memorize – the burden is light indeed. But, it is a light burden with a heavy duty. A duty to conform our lives to the dictates of a love like Christ’s. While love should be the basis for all of our lives there are three areas where the duty to live in love is really heavy. Let us look at those areas for a moment.

Inclusiveness: Inclusiveness was really the first battle of the New Testament Church. The conservatives all said that the good news preached by Jesus was exclusively for the people of the law. Jesus pointed the way to the inclusiveness of His message while He was still walking the earth. After the resurrection, Paul felt especially charged by Jesus to be the apostle to the gentiles. We can read how the New Church, fought the oldest of battles: The battle of exclusiveness. Even after the battles had been waged in Jerusalem and other cities, exclusiveness tried to be raised again by saying that gentile converts had to observe the laws of Moses or that male converts had to be circumcised. Again, and again Paul had to fight the good fight of inclusiveness to admit gentiles without Jewish preconditions. Fortunately for the world Paul, in the name of Jesus, won the battle with the commandment of love.

The Episcopal and other main-line churches, have been recently faced with newer battles of inclusiveness. Should women be allowed to be bare headed in church? Should we have women priests and even bishops? Is there a place for homosexuals in the church (other than in the closet)! What should be the role of divorced people in the church – should they be able to take communion, to remarry, to become priests? Eventually, in the Episcopal church at least, these inclusiveness battles were dealt with in love remembering that Jesus worked with prostitutes and even had a meal with a tax collector! Wow, if we can include tax collectors in the Christian family than it is no problem to include everyone else! Of course, inclusiveness had some costs: My mother bemoaned the changing fashion that made her collection of prized hats obsolete!

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Forgiveness: A second heavy duty that we are to meet with love is forgiveness. Sometimes I forgive out of boredom (I really don't care that much about what you did), out of practicality (I am going to be working and/or living with this person for a long time, I better not carry a grudge) or out of forgetfulness (I am so old that I can't remember why that person made me annoyed, so I better get over it). That is not the kind of forgiveness that John is writing about. Jesus said "love one another as I have loved you." The only condition for that love is simple belief. In forgiveness terms that means to establish a loving relationship with the person who wronged you. Often times that is no easy task. It is a duty that is heavy indeed. Jesus obviously had this in mind when He included, in what we call the Lord's Prayer, the words, "forgive my trespasses as I forgive those who trespass against me." We have God's forgiveness in full and with loving redemption. We are charged by Jesus to do the same to those who have behaved badly towards us.

Action/inaction: If love is the basis for our relationship with God, then love must also be the basis for the actions we choose to take in life or in our decisions to take no action when confronted by a problematic situation. This is true of decisions and actions large and small. Does love play a role in our working lives? Of course, it does, but just how might seem to be really a stretch in many cases. Maybe it is love of money that alone motivates us in our work. I hope that we all have at the least, mixed motives in the workplace. If we find it hard to see love in our work, we should try to see love in our human relationships at work. Actually, that might be our real calling: To bring a bit of love and joy and feeling to work. Not a bad ministry!

As we get older we more frequently make decisions NOT to do something. Too hard, too expensive, too physically taxing, don't like it, – our reasons go on and on. Let us make sure that even these "not to do" decisions proceed from a love that is embracing others. If that is the case, some of our inaction might have to be turned into action. While aging brings many limits to what one can do, it does not keep us from growing in the love of God and in showing others that love.

First Corinthians 13 is frequently read at weddings, but what a great summary it is for any thinking about Christian love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. . . Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Amen!