

Gospel: *Matthew* 5:1-12 Text: *Micah* 6:8 . . .what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

#### NEGATIVE V POSITIVE: TWO VIEWS OF GOD'S MANDATE

Religions almost always become corrupt when they use the power of the state to enforce religious beliefs. In ancient times the worst features of Judaism were carried out in the name of God, by using the state of Jerusalem. In the Middle Ages, the very worst features of Christianity were carried out by Rome and various Christian kingdoms. In modern times we see the Buddhists using the state of Myanmar to commit genocide of the Rohingyas, Hindus use the force of the state of India to turn Muslims into second class inhabitants of their country, and the Muslim religion being profaned through the activities of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and others. When the state is used to carry out religious ends both the state and the religion suffer. One of the great strengths of the United States is our long history of the separation of church and state. The last fifty years have seen a great change: The wall of separation between church and state has now become a picket fence. This has occurred during a time of the polarizing cultural wars in our country and the downturn of citizen membership in Christian churches. Today the fastest growing category of religious participation is "no religious affiliation."

One of the less important, but very visible, signs of this new religious war is over the placement of the Ten Commandments in public buildings. An Episcopalian friend, who shares my concerns for the separation of church and state, remarked that if Floridians were going to insist on placing religious sayings in public buildings he wishes that they would choose the Beatitudes instead of the Ten Commandments. That caught my attention. Hence, today's meditation; albeit after a bit of an introductory meander!

**A note on the Ten Commandments:** Moses told the story of the Ten Commandments twice. First in *Exodus* (20:1-17) and then in *Deuteronomy* (5:1-21). There are eight negatively phrased commandments: You shall have no other gods before me, you shall not make for yourself an idol, You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not give false testimony and You shall not covet. If we look for positively phrased commandments, we find two: Remember the Sabbath and Honor your father and your mother. Since the Ten Commandments were written sometime between 1500 and 1300 BCE, it is probably understandable that the emphasis is on the shall nots, rather than on the positives. They are, for the most part, fairly simple and straight forward. There are few arguments about theft and murder and the creation of idols. Most of us find no difficulty in keeping most of the commandments, most of the time. Well, I do admit to a few murders, but they have all been of the rhetorical variety. While most of us honor our mothers and fathers, honoring the sabbath, except in the most symbolic of ways, has long since passed out of the realm of probability.

**A note on the Beatitudes:** Now let us turn to the Beatitudes. Remember, the Ten Commandments were fleshed out with over six hundred rules for living by the time Jesus was preaching. He didn't bother to repeat the rules and to expound on them, instead he sat down, in front of his disciples and the crowd and taught them. He didn't harangue them like a prophet of old or today's tv preacher, neither did Jesus give his audience a list of thou shall nots, instead he talked about blessings and who would receive them. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the

merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. . .”

We can all sense the difference in tone and meaning between the Commandments and the Beatitudes. In the Old Testament we have God issuing commands. The same God who enforced His commands with the greatest brutality imaginable. In the New Testament, God bestows blessings on those most in need of blessings, either because of their personal state of affairs or because of what society is doing to them. She does not threaten to destroy Israel, but rather prepares Her Son for a sacrifice in order to bring these blessing about. The New Testament is indeed a new covenant. Humankind goes from obedience through fear of God to obedience through the love of God.

**Living the Beatitudes:** One can promise to obey the Commandments fairly easily. They are a series of nicely explicit don'ts. But living the Beatitudes is much more problematic. Most of the blessings are ones that we, as a community of believers, must participate in. How then are we to live the Beatitudes? The most important thing for us to do is to realize that we are the kingdom of heaven on earth and that the blessings must have their earthly realization through our action. Pious sayings are not enough. We need to respect the meek and those who mourn and the peacemakers and be sure to include them in our spiritual community. We should not wait for some fanciful miracle from God. We are God's instruments and if the meek and down trodden and those reviled are not blessed with support we are the ones at fault. As Micah so forcefully said so many years ago: “. . .what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? He said love kindness, but DO justice. We are not to sit passively by, but are to actively do justice for all.

**Conclusion:** And now we know why the Ten Commandments and not the Beatitudes are the subject of the cultural wars. Blind obedience will do for the Ten Commandments, but active love for your fellow human is required for obedience to the Beatitudes. Let us reject obedience through fear and embrace obedience to God through love. Amen.