

23rd & 24th Sunday After Pentecost, October 23 & 30, 2005, Liturgical Year "A"

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, New York

The Rev. Deacon John E. Commins, Curate Scripture: Matthew 22:34-46, 23:1-12

True Love is Grateful Obedience

I must say that both Father Ward and I are grateful for Bishop Garrison's visit to St. Bartholomew's last Sunday. The Bishop presented us with some excellent thoughts on loving our neighbors – but I hope you might consider this a part II – because there is so much more to the Gospel than just loving. There is also a need for obedience.

The words that we heard from Matthew 22 about the greatest Commandment were first spoken in Deuteronomy 6:5 where it reads this way: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*"

To better understand what it means to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, we need to know what those things meant to the ancient Hebrews.

To the Hebrew these three places in the human being had a particular meaning:

- **The heart** was the place of decision, of emotions, where thinking was done, where secrets were hidden, where one's desires came from. You could decide with your heart, feel with your heart, think with it, hide things in it, and desire with it.
- **The soul** was the place of decision, of emotions, where thinking was done, where secrets were hidden, where one's desires came from. You could decide with your soul, feel with your soul, think with it, hide things in it, and desire with it.
- This leads us then to the mind. We find that in the mind one decides, thinks, feels, hides, and desires. Heart, soul, and mind are used interchangeably in the Bible.

When Scripture commands that we are to love Almighty God with *all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength*, it means that we are to love God with all that we've got. It means complete and total commitment. It means total obedience to God – in short it means **Grateful Obedience**.

Parental Love:

Every conscientious parent recognizes how difficult it is to exercise his or her God-given authority over their children. The delicate balance of being "*tough yet tender*" is not easy to maintain. Many parents add fuel to the fire of a "rebellious" or "strong willed" child by being "dictatorial and harsh." Other parents "give in" when their authority is put to the test. When a strong-willed child resists, the pressure to give in "for the sake of peace and harmony" can become mighty tempting - if not overpowering.

- There was this mother who wanted to have the last word but couldn't handle the hassle that resulted whenever she said no to her young son. After an especially trying day, she finally threw her hands up in the air and shouted, "All right, Billy, do whatever you want! **Now let me see you disobey THAT!"**

Franklin Graham preaches that "Sin entered the world through one act of disobedience." Through a parent's eyes – can you imagine how our Heavenly Father feels when we outwardly disobey? Then how much more are we blessed when we follow God's will through grateful obedience?

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So what is the Cost?

The greatest Command of loving God with everything you've got - means that we've got to be willing to follow our freely chosen Master to whom we give total and complete allegiance, attention, and adoration. When the command to love God this way was first given, it was surrounded by a context that demanded obedience.

In **Deuteronomy 6** we are given the words most often called the *SHEMA*: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*"

You see **love means obedience**. There are some who will tell you that since Jesus came, love means something different; a touchy-feely emotion, some warm and fuzzy feeling. Like the Beatles said- "*All You Need is Love!*" Well I'm not going to tell you that, **I can't**. To Jesus, love meant the same thing it meant in Deuteronomy, and in John 3:16.

How are we to react?

And what is our reaction to be?

- **Is it all about love?**
- **Is it only about love?**

Jesus said it clearly in John 14:16: "*If you love me you will keep my commandments.*"

Jesus indeed calls us to love, but there is a necessary response to that love – keep His commandments and then from His words in John 15:12; "*My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.*" Our response is one of obedience – because of the love that Christ has for us – we want to show that love to others – in an attitude of gratitude. I think it is better simply put as "Grateful Obedience."

It would seem to me that the words of Scripture remind us that a most special way to love God is to love God's children.

When Jesus was asked which the greatest commandment is, he didn't hesitate. His words equate to "**Love God with everything you've got.**" But then he added something which wasn't asked. He told the questioner the second greatest commandment.

There were hundreds of commands from which Jesus could have chosen. But the one He chose was the one that requires us to love God's children. I think the reason He chose that one is because it's the best way of loving God himself.

In the words from 1 Corinthians 3: 16 - 17 Paul explains:

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."

The Great Commission as well:

Jesus also, in His last words before leaving this earth, further clarified our mission as Christians. We are not just follow the Great Commandments, but to also follow His Great Commission: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the*

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*Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to **obey everything that I have commanded you.** And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:19-20)

We are called to GO, MAKE Disciples, BAPTIZE and TEACH them to OBEY everything that I have commanded you. This is non-negotiable! The 5 verbs that Jesus uses are VERY powerful words that require a response.

In order to teach someone to obey – it must mean that you, as the teacher, are obedient in the first place. That is what today’s Gospel, from Matthew 23, is all about. Are you who you say that you are?

Noted Anglican writer, theologian, and Bishop of Durham – N.T. Wright, who also writes as Tom Wright, was shopping for some camping equipment. He went to the camping store – It’s England, remember. The man suggested that he take the tent that would bear up under all weather, and added maps, socks, waterproof clothing, boots that would be dependable through just about any kind of terrain. Next it was time for the cooking equipment: a stove, fuel, utensils, storage boxes, packs of nourishing food and drink, including several bottles of fresh water. Next was the sleeping bag, then anti insect repellent, a torch and emergency first-aid kit. To top this all off, he needed a back pack that would hold all of this – it was enormous! And it was waterproof and had a carrier to sit on the shoulders. After it was filled up – he could barely lift it, let alone put it on his back. As he struggled toward the door, wondering how he would get out of the shop – let alone a hundred miles through the mountains – he asked the expert salesman “What sort of vacations do you have?” He answered “Oh, I just go to the seaside – bad back, I could never carry stuff like that!”

How many experts like this do you know? Big talk about what you should do, and how you should do it – but their lives resemble nothing like their advice.

Jesus knew the scribes and Pharisees – who walked around telling the Jews what kind of packs they had to carry for their lifelong journey – but would never dream of carrying such things themselves. The Pharisees were concerned with outward show – with large prayer cases - called ‘phylacteries’ - made of leather, and worn on the arms and the head, which were easily seen by others as a sign of piety. They also wore prayer shawls called “tallits” that had long tassels. It was all for show – and Jesus takes issue with them. They talk the talk, and walk the walk – only when others are looking – and don’t live it. Do as I say, and not as I do. It is all ritual – all show – a hollow obedience.

Many have taken this example as part evidence that Jesus abolished ritual law. Hollow ritual is just that – a shell – an empty offering. For that reason – Jesus did indeed point that many rituals were no longer followed, but that moral law was unchanged. There is no expiration date on morality – there is no expiration date on obedience.

True followers of Jesus do things from the heart – with all they’ve got, without question, and without show. True followers of Jesus genuinely love Almighty God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and then carry that love wherever they go, sharing His joy, His peace and His love with others. Not because they have to – but because they want to – more than anything – not for show, but in grateful obedience to God.

Are you who you say you are?

In Matthew 25 Jesus said it this way; when you feed the hungry, you feed me.

- **When you house the homeless, you shelter me.**
- **When you visit the imprisoned, you visit me.**

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For some reason that we cannot seem to understand, God wants to know us so closely that our pain becomes His. When we are loved, He is loved. We are his body, He is our soul.

I think sometimes we have a difficulty comprehending that God identifies with us. I know that there are some of us just can't believe that God would want to be so intimate with someone so, so ... what's your adjective?

- Dirty?
- Shamed?
- Broken?
- Worthless?
- Hopeless?
- Unlovable?

James says that the word of God is like a mirror. (James 1:23) We stand before it soul-naked and see ourselves as we really are. We can have no pretence, no mask. There is nothing to hide the wounds and scars of sin.

One might very well be asking him or herself:

- Could God really love me like this?
- Would He really allow me to come into His presence?

SO - let me ask you this.

- Why would Jesus tell us that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with everything we've got, if God doesn't first love us with everything He has?
- Why would God call us to love each other, if love isn't what He already feels about every one of us?

God loves you in spite of the way you are:

Even in your sin God loves you. Even in your brokenness he comes along side and offers a shoulder to lean on. Just as you are he invites you into his everlasting arms where he will hold you forever. Remember, Jesus loves you the way you are, but in fact, He loves you so very much that He won't let you stay that way.

And that's what He invites you to do this morning.

- Do you need a place to lean?
- A place to find comfort and stability?
- **Lay your burdens down – in grateful obedience - at the feet of the one who first loved you.**

I ask you this morning that in a few minutes, when we come to a time of confession - come before the Lord and ask Him to change your heart – for Him to transform you - and for Him to let you see yourself as He sees you. Ask Him to use you as His hands and His feet – to love and serve one another in His name – in grateful obedience.