

Sermon 24th April 2022 - Theme: Love God

(first in our new sermon series on Jesus and the Ten Commandments)

Readings: Exodus 20: 1-21 and Mark 12: 28-37

Good morning! First of all, I want to start by asking you some questions:

- Who here, when cooking something new, uses a recipe book or an internet recipe?
- Who has bought flat-pack furniture and followed the instructions to build it?
- Who follows the instructions for setting up a new computer or laptop or tablet?
- Who stops reading and using the instructions when they think they have mastered the job or recipe?
- Who has had a disaster because they didn't use the instructions?

Well, this morning I want to look deeper into this whole area of instructions in relation to the ones Christ gave us for living in the way he would like and recommend.

Now as Alison my wife might tell you, I'm not so good at being told what to do. There's a stubborn streak in me that makes me want to do things my way. There is however one exception right now which set my mind thinking about how special Christ's commandments are to us.

I've always fancied myself as a car mechanic and last year bought a 1937 Morris 8 car to restore back to working order. It's even older and rustier than I am. I've learnt pretty quickly there are certain things you have to have in order to restore a car. The first is the set of instructions as to how you are supposed to make it work. Here it is - the original 1937 owner's manual. It's a bit like the ten commandments, the fundamentals of making it work.

And just like the ten commandments, it's not the final word because since it was published, lots of useful additions (and sometimes not so useful) have been made by all sorts of people. So now I've got a pile of other dos and don'ts, and commentaries, just like all the rules and regulations about living in the Jewish law from Ecclesiastes etc. There are people who even get quite cross when you don't follow all the rules and their numerous additions.

I also need the tools of the trade like spanners and personal protective equipment. (Draw out the analogy.) It's worth pausing for a moment to think about what tools God gives us to help us follow his instructions:

Scripture, Prayer, Worship, Fasting, Confession, Repentance, Healing, Compassion, Fruits of the Spirit, Encouragement from the family of believers. I'm sure you could add to the list from your own experience.

But even with all the instructions and tools, you are not going to be a successful car mechanic. Inevitably you will not follow an instruction somewhere, or do it in the wrong order, sometimes there's no straight instruction covering the problem so you have to make things up. To be a good car mechanic or good cook, or carpenter, or IT specialist, accountant or needleworker, healthcare worker or teacher or indeed almost anything – you have to have the innate feel for how things should work – for what the fundamentals are – and a love of the subject. It's about more than just rules and instructions.

And so it is with God's Commandments for Holy Living and why our gospel reading is so important. It's often said that Christ's two great commandments are a summation of the law of Moses, the ten commandments and other Old Testament instructions. Indeed, in our own liturgy for Holy Communion, there is choice before the confession of hearing either the Ten Commandments or Christ's 'Summary of

the law', as the Book of Common Worship calls it. Now I'm no great theologian, perhaps more of a car mechanic these days, but I reckon Christ's commandments are so much more than a summation of the law. They and Jesus Christ himself add a completely new dimension to our understanding and, importantly our practice of living in a holy way.

But first we must be clear that Christ's commandments **do not abolish or replace the law**. Jesus makes this abundantly clear. In Mathew 5 v 17-21 you will find him saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished,.....v 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

But isn't this being a bit harsh. Is he really saying we have to be better than the Pharisees at obeying the detailed rules of the law to go to heaven? The key to understanding this in the final sentence – unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees.

And that takes us straight to the Gospel passage where Jesus answers one such teacher of the law when asked 'Which is the most important commandment?) Context is important here. Jesus has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, has cleared the temple of money changers and traders. He has seriously annoyed the religious establishment. They are challenging and questioning His claimed authority as Son of the Father. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are trying to outwit and trick him on legalistic bits of the law. It's a bit like being told you can't really be a mechanic because you can't say which way round the circlip goes on the piston gudgeon pin in the engine.

Now in all fairness the question was being asked by a teacher who was impressed by Jesus's answer to those trying to trick him. So, it was probably genuine, but did he expect the answer he got?

What Christ was saying to him and us, is you can worry about the detail later but first you must understand the basics of what this is all about. If you want to be righteous, to live a holy life, there are two key things that give purpose, shape and content to all the detailed rules and regulations. Get those two things right and the rest will follow. You will be in the right place.

Firstly, love the one God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your mind and all your strength. And secondly love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus did not pick one commandment as an answer but instead made it clear forever in time that loving God is intrinsically linked to loving one's neighbour. And we know from elsewhere – the good Samaritan – how he defined neighbour.

But have you noticed the two common things in these commandments from Jesus? Firstly, the word 'love' is in both - and secondly both are positive statements about doing something. The word 'don't' or the negative does not appear.

This is a pivotal moment between Old and New Testament times. Don't forget that Christ was present as the son of God when Moses received the ten commandments; he has not changed his mind. But these two new commandments of Christ are firmly based at the centre of why he came to earth as Jesus Son of God and Man. They can't exist separately.

We are called to love God wholeheartedly as the first thing we do, the utmost priority, which of course means to love Jesus Christ who is that one God. To love is to embrace, to adore, to share, to listen, to obey, to talk with, to follow the example, to sacrifice oneself in his interests. To love as God loves us.

But this is not love in a vacuum and selfish only to God. The second instruction is to love our neighbour, those around us, in the same way.

So, if the pivotal nature of these commandments is to be found in Jesus Christ's being present on earth, then why did he come?

John 3 v 17, 17 – "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

This is the big change. Till then, Israel's understanding was they must obey the ten commandments and the law in detail. Inevitable failures to do so were punishable and a complicated system of atonement through sacrificial sin offerings was necessary. Righteousness was to be measured by how well you kept to the rule book, because you would be condemned if you didn't. Sticking to the rules had become more important than what the rules were for. When you broke them, you had to make atonement for your wrongdoing.

At this Easter time we know that the death of Jesus was the atonement, the sacrifice for our wrongdoing and the whole world's wrongdoing or sins if you like.

With Jesus, condemnation is replaced by divine love and forgiveness – if we aspire and do our best to follow him and his commandments with all our heart, all our soul, with all our mind and all our strength.

With Jesus, the rule book is important, but it is in the context of Love of God and Man and the application of forgiveness when things go wrong and are acknowledged to be so. His death is the atonement and punishment for when we get it wrong.

The application of these two broad commandments can only work within the framework of God's divine love for us in Christ and a loving dialogue with him to understand what he wishes to be done and the knowledge of forgiveness when we don't quite make it.

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the Truth and the truth will set you free." (John 8 v31).

As many have said before me, it's a matter of attitude of heart rather than legalistic rule-following.

The teacher who asked the question was told he had pretty much got it right with his endorsement of Christ's reply – but only that he was 'not far from the Kingdom of God' rather than he has made it. Why was this?

I suspect, but do not know for certain, it was because the knowledge of this divine love we have to emulate in these commandments is not enough; we also have to try and reflect it in the way we live with God and neighbour.

Knowledge without action is not a lot of use.

So, this is the point where we pick up the tools of our trade: Love, Scripture, Prayer, Worship, Fasting, Confession, Repentance, Compassion, Healing, Fruits of the Spirit, Encouragement and all those others you may think of – and get on with the restoration project of Holy Living.

Amen