

It is all about doing the right thing, isn't it? We all do our best to always do the right thing in our lives. There are two problems with this. First, we are not always sure just what the right thing is, and second, even when we do, we often fail. So, this morning I want to talk a little bit about what it means for a Christian to "do right."

Jesus was frustrated with the Pharisees, but I don't believe he saw them in as negative a light as we tend to do. Among the Jews of his day, they were actually the most faithful. The truth is that they were completely focused on doing the right thing, and the right thing was whatever Jewish law said was the right thing. With the best of intentions, they applied the law to every aspect of life, and most of all, they were scrupulous about honoring the food which they received from God. God had brought them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and they gratefully took to heart what they believed the Lord had commanded them to do. They practiced God's word from Deuteronomy, "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and observe them diligently."

Sounds good at first, but something went terribly wrong. Jesus said the problem was what the prophet Isaiah said: "This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." In other words, the Law had become their god, a form of idolatry which missed the whole point of what God was trying to teach them. In effect, the Pharisees were trying to earn God's approval and love. They were trying to be worthy of being loved, and that is actually part of our human condition. We all want to be loved, and we try our best to be lovable. We want to do the right thing.

One of my all-time favorite Biblical passages is what Paul says in Chapter 7 of Romans, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do what I do not want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." He goes on to say that it is sin within him that is the problem, and that only Jesus Christ can deliver him. The way Jesus had delivered him was to assure him that he was loved as he is, sin and all, because of Christ's sacrifice on his behalf. He doesn't have to be perfect, and he doesn't have to try to earn God's love. He does have to do his best to follow the precepts of God's Law in his life, but he does not have to get it right because he can't.

And this is where we might say the rubber hits the road. This troubling human situation is at the heart of everything God has done through his Son Jesus Christ. In the Law, God calls us to live perfect lives, to get it right. But because of this present reality of sin in the world, there had to be a plan B, and that is why Jesus taught us that everything we say and do must be under the guidance of the Greatest Commandment. It does not eliminate the Law, but it represents the container for how we are to apply the requirements of the Law, "love the Lord your God with all of your heart, your soul, and your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." It puts the Law of God in perspective given the reality of our being imperfect people. It certainly does not give us freedom to ignore the law calling us to be good people, but it always asks, "What is the most loving thing to do?" That is often also the hardest thing to do.

We often diagnose the Pharisees' problem by making a distinction between law and gospel. The Pharisees, we say, practiced law, while Christians are free from the law. We are saved by hearing

and believing the good news of Jesus Christ. But really this is a false distinction. The Law in the Bible contains truth and is a good gift from God, and we are meant to practice it diligently. Both Paul and Jesus affirm that. But there is a condition. Like all of God's good gifts they are subject to use or abuse when they become the end in themselves instead of providing the roadmap to living the lives that God desires for us.

I suspect that there might be a little Pharisee hiding inside most of us whispering, "Hey, you'd better get it right." But if we are honest, as Paul was, we must admit that no matter how hard we try we can't get it right all the time, and that is bound to leave us frustrated, and feeling like a failure. We may seek reassurance by comparing ourselves to others, but that is very thin ice because we can only compare our insides with their outsides, and we almost always lose that competition.

OK, now that we know what God expects of the followers of his Son, exactly how do we go about that task? What is the biggest challenge facing us as we try to live the Commandment to love God and neighbor above all else? The proverbial "fly in the ointment" is probably the second part of the Great Commandment. That is without a doubt the most difficult, "to love your neighbor as yourself." The hard part is not loving the lovable, but loving the unlovable. That is where we squirm. The love God is referring to is not all shiny and rosy and flawless. God requires us to love others at their worst. Ouch. All relationships begin with us at our best, but as time goes on the reality of our imperfect humanity shines through, and sometimes we choose to accept that and at other times it is really hard to take, much less to love.

As a priest I had many occasions for pre-marital counselling with couples. I often had to resist rolling my eyes as I listened to them telling me of their undying love and how they never argued and never experienced any kind of conflict. I came to believe that those sessions would have been a lot more fruitful and helpful if the couple had come back in a year or so. Real love begins with the first burned pot roast or dirty underwear left on the floor or forgotten anniversary.

The truth is that we love others at their worst, or we do not love them at all. Love is never earned and, in reality, never deserved. It is a choice, a gift freely given to another. But there is a problem with trying to live by the Greatest Commandment, and that is the little phrase to "love your neighbor as *yourself*." As you love yourself. Whether we admit it or not, that is something we all struggle with as it is part and parcel of our human condition. So, how I love my neighbor is affected by how I love myself, and that explains why we are so ready to criticize, judge, dislike, and even hate other people. It is a function of how we feel about ourselves.

And this is at the very heart of the Gospel, the message God is sending to each of us in Jesus Christ. If we think about it, God sets the prime example of loving the unlovable which we all are from time to time. You and I are loved unconditionally and eternally just as we are. No, we do not always get it right, and no, we are not perfect, and no, we do not deserve it, and that is the whole point, and the key to peace and happiness. Observe a child who is in a loving, nurturing, encouraging family. He or she smiles easily, makes friends with anyone, and obviously just enjoys being alive. As time goes on, however, the world has this way of whispering, "You know, you really are not that lovable because there is a lot wrong about you." The smile is less present, friendships are less frequent, and there are many reasons to doubt that he or she really deserves to

be loved. Maybe it is an over-simplification, but I strongly suspect that all of the problems in the world have to do with how people feel about themselves.

I think it is all quite clear. The Ten Commandments tell us that God's desire is for you and me to be perfect. The Pharisees believed that and tried to do that. They failed at being perfect just as every human being does because of sin in the world. Why is sin here? Well, so far God has not explained that, but regardless of how much we may hate it, it is integral in our lives. So, God deepened his expectations of us by wrapping the whole thing in love by coming to us as one of us in Jesus Christ. He showed us what it looks like to live as God desires. He loved the unlovable. He forgave wrongs done to him. He took all of our imperfections onto himself to the cross. If we decide to believe that we are perfect in God's eyes, with Jesus as our mediator, we do get it right. Amen