

The 2nd Commandment Realized: Loving my Church Family

1. The Command We All Know

One of the most fascinating ways to contemplate the place of the church in the life of the Christian is to study the metaphors God uses of the church in the Scripture.

The church is the body of Jesus, the wife of Jesus, the family of Jesus, and the place where God dwells by his Spirit. Sounds pretty important, huh?

What we come to see in these metaphors is that you can't love Jesus, and not love his church. Love Jesus but not his wife? Love Jesus but not his family? It can't work.

The church lies at the very center of God's eternal purposes. It is not an accident of history; not an afterthought; not a missions strategy.....the church is God's redemptive work of calling out a people for his own glory.

The very fact that you have come to the retreat this weekend....spent the money...endured the drive....taken time out of a busy schedule, is a tremendous indication of your love for the people in this room....the people of the church. You are making a statement with your life, and money and time, that what is central to God's plan is central to your life.

Sadly, for many Christians, the church is more like a gas station than a bride, or a family.

- It's a place we stop in at quickly to get a fill up....spiritual fill up mind you.
- We always go to the gas station in thought of what it can give us....not for how we can contribute to the station's prosperity.
- And the gas station is never our final destination.....it just helps me get to the destination I have already set out for myself.

But such a way of living just does not match the Scriptural pattern.

Titus 2.14 says that, "[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."

So it is not just isolated, individual customers at a gas station that Jesus is working in and through. He is actually creating a people....a community of faith.

So our identity should have an individual dimension to it—I am a son of God; a daughter of God. But also a corporate dimension—we are the people of God....these are my people....together we belong to God.

By becoming a Christian, I belong to God and I belong to my brothers and sisters. It is not that I belong to God and then make a decision to join a local church. My

being in Christ means being in Christ WITH those others who are in Christ. This is our identity.

We could list many reasons why the church ought to occupy a central place in our lives.....why we ought to love the people of this church.

But chief among them is what we are supposed to be saying together about God.

John 13.31-35, "When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Do you see the logic of that passage:

1. Jesus incarnation.....his physical, human life on earth, made the invisible God visible. God was glorified in Jesus; he was seen.
2. Jesus is leaving, and Christians are staying...for now at least.
3. therefore: Love one another.
4. So that: the world can continue to see what is now once again invisible.

So it is our love for one another that puts on display the character of God. In the church, we make invisible God, visible to mankind.

If our love for one another is unholy and half-hearted, we are saying to the world around us that God's love is unholy and half-hearted.

If by the Spirit, there is holy love among us..... than God is seen for who he is.

That is sobering.

Now, even if I'm preaching to the choir on this point, we do experience real difficulties when it comes to loving and sticking with other sinners.

And I think we are being naïve and proud if we don't recognize that there are real hurdles in our hearts to loving our brothers and sisters in Christ in the same way that we love ourselves.

2. The Problem We All Face

I actually have 3 problems to point out that I believe most, if not all, of us face on the road to loving our church family.

1. The Problem of Consumerism

Now, consumerism, is not all bad. It's what our economy is built on, I guess. Though I can't say that I fully understand how that all works out.

Like, all of you, when it comes to shopping, I'm a highly trained consumer. I track down the best deals; I look for the best experiences. Convenience matters to me. Customer service counts.

Webster's of **consumerism**: a preoccupation with and inclination toward the buying of consumer goods.

I think what I'm talking about is the mindset that evaluates a product on the basis of what happiness it gains for me, at what cost to me.

ill.

But if we bring this consumeristic mindset into how we do church; how we think about the people of God....well, that becomes a serious problem.

Because when I'm evaluating experiences or products from a consumer's mindset, I rarely if ever take my eyes off of the various products being offered to me in order to investigate the appetites, and desires of my heart.

I never ask, "What do my appetites reveal about my heart?" "Am I desiring the right things?"

I only assess the product in terms of its value to my life, and the cost being asked to gain said value.

A consumer focuses on the object of desire w/o ever evaluating the merits of my desire.

When we bring that mindset to the church, we evaluate the various things that the church can offer us, rather than letting God's Word evaluate our hearts.

Are the teenagers there ones that will be good for my teenagers?
How is the ladies program?
Do these people look like me?
How's the music?

All of that, I suspect, happens on the car ride home. And I'm not saying there is no place for that. But the focus easily shifts to an evaluation of the product with little or no evaluation of my own heart.

Do you see how this is a complete failure to love my neighbor as myself?

I don't ask, "how could I encourage these brothers and sisters?" or, "how might God use me to serve these people?" I ask, "what is good for me here?"

Now, just think about your own heart for a minute here. As it relates to the people in this room.....the other Christians that call Grace Church, home.....

Do you more often think of ways to build them up, or what you can gain from them? Do you give more thought to how you may be failing them, or more thought to ways they disappoint you?

Even as it relates to the retreat itself. As I mentioned earlier....your attendance here this weekend commends your love for the other saints here.

But as you evaluated your attendance, and now as you are experiencing the retreat itself.....are you thinking like a consumer: what is this doing for me? Has this been good for my kids?

Or, have you thought like a Christian: what opportunities are there this weekend to serve others? To build them up?

Jesus is our great example here. Philippians 2.4-7, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."
It is so critical that we think of other brothers and sisters in this church in the way that Jesus does.

The consumer looks to their value in terms of exchange: if I'm friends with them, what can I get out of it. Do they have kids that are my age? Do their business relationships help me? Does him liking me, cement my own sense of self-worth.

But Christians ought to look at one another's valued based on Christ: precious blood was spilled to rescue that person. Jesus values them highly. I must as well.

2. Commitment Phobia

In our culture today, we are scared to commit. We often seek to gain as much benefit from a given relationship or circumstance w/o having to commit.

And actually, companies use this instinct to market the products to us:
ill. 30-day, no hassle, money back guarantee. If you are not COMPLETELY satisfied with our product, you can return it to us for a full refund.

We all hate service contracts on our cell phones, right? Why? Because we want to jump ship as soon as the next best thing comes along.

ill. Here's the exact thought process I had this week when I saw my mother in law's new Blackberry:

1. ooo, cool
2. I want one.
3. I can't have one because of that blasted contract I'm in.
4. argh.

There are so many examples of commitment phobia in American culture:

- Organizations that ask for face to face involvement and significant commitment of time are on the decline: unions, rotary clubs, bowling leagues....on the decline. On the other hand, organizations that just want an annual check in exchange for an occasional newsletter are on the rise: Sierra Club, Audubon Society.
- The age of marriage is getting pushed back all the time because people are hesitant to commit when they can enjoy the benefits of marriage apart from real commitment.
- Our longevity at our jobs is on the decline. The average worker between the ages of 25 and 34, stays at the same job for 2.7 years.

We worship the god of options. And commitment curtails our options. It seems to constrict our freedom.

But here's the question we are aiming at: how does the fear of commitment affect our obedience to the second great commandment....the command to love one another?

When we fear commitment, loyalty and fidelity cease to be a part of what love does.

To say it biblically the commitment phobe is, "NOT patient, he insists on his own way; he does not bear all things; he does not hope all things; and he certainly does not endure all things."

When a relationship ceases to be advantageous to me, convenient for me, too demanding, or is simply less advantageous than another one that is being offered....I scoot.

When commitment, and loyalty are removed from love, we rarely sacrifice for others.

Worst of all: the gospel is not portrayed.

ill. Lebron James.....the one thing I kept hearing was how LBJ, had to do what was best for LBJ. I mean that was the common, pervading wisdom. No consideration for his team, or teammates....not even his mother.

LBJ was principally obligated to himself and maximizing his life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. And we should not expect anything different from someone who does not know Christ.....

But, how at odds this is with the biblical picture of love.

Love, by its very nature, sacrifices.

Any commitment made to sinners, will be a commitment calling for self-sacrifice. The commitment that Jesus made to his people required sacrifice. If our love for one another is Christ-like, our commitments to one another will follow the same sacrificial pattern.

"Love one another as I have loved you," are the words of Jesus.

Therefore the on-looking world hears about Christ's love from us; but it sees little of that kind of love.

I know, I'm pressing this a bit. I recognize that this group is the choir.

I just ask you to evaluate honestly, and release whatever is unhelpful.

3. Self-Righteousness

The final problem I see that keeps us from loving one another is self-righteousness.

We find it hard to love people because we can't understand why they can't get it together.

ill. 17 year old at the invitation.....oh, I was so self-righteous

It made it VERY difficult for me to tolerate those who were not at my 'level'.

Example man in the men's Bible study with trouble memorizing verses, and who had the habitual sin problem. I despised him.

If you perpetually perceive the problems in your life as a result of some else's shortcomings, you are probably self-righteous.

If you don't let others into your life because you don't think you need help, you are probably self-righteous.

And if you are not close to at least a one or two people that don't quite have it together..... you are probably self-righteous.

When it comes to loving my church family, we must see one another as those for whom Christ died. Those for whom Christ died.

How dare we despise those for whom Christ died.

3. The Solution We All Need

Notice that when Jesus tells us to, "love your neighbor as yourself" he is assuming that we love ourselves.

And indeed we do. All of us. This inborn, deep, defining trait is a given in all of us. Jesus does not here command us to love ourselves. He assumes that we already do.

All of us have a powerful instinct of self-preservation. We all want to be happy. We all want to eat; to be safe; to have a place to live; to have friends who like us, and want to be with us.

And in and of itself, this is not bad. It's not bad to want to eat, to be warm, to avoid danger. God put that there.

However, the command to love our neighbor this much.....and as it relates to tonight's talk.....our brothers and sisters in Christ.....now, that is quite threatening.

It is threatening because we know that we love ourselves a lot.

The command is also threatening and actually quite overwhelming because we assume that if we ever began to do that, it would mean not just loving our neighbor as much as we loves ourselves, but to love our neighbor INSTEAD of ourselves.

So the command to love my neighbor as I love myself really feels like a threat to my own self-love.

I do believe Jesus wants us to feel this threat. He wants us to be overwhelmed by the radical nature of what he says.

But that is why the first commandment comes first. The first command makes the second command doable, and means that obedience to the second command is not suicide to our own happiness.

So the solution we all need is to make obedience to the second command, the overflow of obedience to the first command.

So, in this passage, Jesus is assuming the self-seeking in us. But what the first command is all about is making God the object of our self-seeking.

In your self-seeking desire to be happy, and satisfied, chase after God. Find that happiness in God.

In the person and work of Jesus is an object of love for our heart that has the potential to completely transform us.

I was thinking about this the other night while I was walking the dog. There are things about Jesus Christ—who he is; what he has done.....that make me want to serve him....to proclaim him.

There are things about his person....his character....his work that produce loyalty and love in my heart for him.

Occasionally the Spirit will just make vivid to me this idea that for my sake he became sin....by the Spirit, I get a sense of his beauty, his sinless perfection, and I think about how my sin was put into his person.....and my heart becomes full.

Sometimes the Spirit gives me a sense of his Victory....his defeat of death.....his triumphant return.....oh, and my mind and soul and heart are just aflame for the display of his glory in the world.

There is a satisfaction in God that is so profound that it will fill up your heart.

There is purpose in him that is so profound....so rich, so deep, that it overwhelms us.

Now, here is the thing. Most of us move in one of two directions instead of both. Some of us tend toward study...we hit the book, we dig in....and our hearts feel full of God.

Or maybe for you, you really love to worship....in the car; at church...that's what really gets you going.... and our hearts feel full of God.

But sometimes the study type and the worship types tend to struggle to love others. We stay isolated....we twist real experiences with God into self-righteousness.

Others of us, are naturally compassionate, merciful....we are doers. But there is a dryness in our soul....we are not digging into the Scripture....not trying to understand salvation....even though, those are the very things driving all of our doing.

Both of those imbalances need adjustment.

Love for others....and especially other Christians, is a test of our love for God. But love for God, is the power to love these fellow blood bought sinners.

Look, I'm not saying you have to be some superstar Christian.....but I'm saying....chase after Him. He is worthy. He is enough. He will fill you up. So, let's spend ourselves seeking to know and love him.

iii. wake up heart!!

And when Jesus becomes precious to us, that is going to overflow toward the people in this room.

Let's love him together.

Let's seek to picture his greatness in and through our love for one another.