

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Orlando Rodriguez

Reading: Mathew 22:34-40, together with Leviticus 19:1-18

The Pharisees try once again to trip Jesus into saying something against the Law. This time they ask him to state which is the most important commandment. Quoting (almost word for word) from Deuteronomy, Jesus answers that you shall love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. Then he links this commandment with a second commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In a way he says that this is all you need to obey; every other commandment is logically implied from these two. Luke and Mark record a similar proclamation, although in their case they add “all your strength,” also mentioned in Deuteronomy.

I wanted to see how these commandments are written in Leviticus, in the hope of gaining some insight into the meaning of this apparently simple instruction of Jesus. Leviticus 19 mentions the commandments Jesus refers to, but many others as well. Here is a sampling:

- Revere your parents.
- Do not worship false idols.
- Observe the laws of how to consume sacrificed meat.

But I’m concerned with those commandments that refer to how to treat your neighbor. Here are some examples:

- What you harvest does not belong only to you. When you harvest, leave the gleanings and fallen grapes for others. The poor and the stranger are specifically mentioned as the beneficiaries of what you don’t keep for yourself.
- Don’t steal from others or deal deceitfully with them.
- Pay your laborers right away; don’t wait until morning.

Of special relevance to Jesus’ words are the following:

- Don’t hate your kin. Admonish your neighbor if he has done something wrong, but do not revenge yourself or bear a grudge against her.
- And finally, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Some thoughts that I'm struggling with:

Who is my neighbor? In Spanish versions of the Bible, neighbor is translated as "prójimo", while the usual translation for neighbor is "vecino." Prójimo is defined in Spanish dictionaries as "humanity" or "human being," while "vecino" is defined as one who lives near others in the same town. The fact that in Biblical Israel, you had a duty to feed strangers (non-Hebrews) and poor people would seem to imply a generous definition of neighbor. It seems logical that that the commandment does not apply just to the person living in the apartment next to mine, but to every human being on earth. That is a difficult order to obey.

I can see that it's ethical and ultimately beneficial to love my neighbor, but am I also required to love God? In arguing for the commandments, Leviticus 19 clinches the argument for each commandment with the declaration, "I am the Lord, your God." That sounds a lot like, "because I said so," or as is stated in verse 13, "you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

I find a more consoling argument in verse 2, which says "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." I don't take it that I should be holy in the sense that others should worship me. But it makes sense to think that these commandments come from a righteous being who wants us to be righteous like God is. To reframe it: "I am the Holy one who is righteous, and I want you to be righteous, just as I am."

Do I also have to love my neighbor? Isn't it enough to just love God? Jesus said that loving God "is the greatest and first commandment." And then referring to love of neighbor he adds, "And the second is like it." Does "like it" mean that is just as great, or just as important? Or does it mean, it's important, but slightly less important than loving God. Is it possible that the two commandments are inextricably intertwined, that you can't love God without loving your neighbor, or love your neighbor without loving God? That if you love God, you have no recourse but to love your neighbor; that in loving your neighbor, you are loving God?

The intensity required of us in loving God and our neighbor. You have to love them with your mind, your heart, and your soul, and it has to be industrial-strength. So the order requires that you accept it intellectually, and that you apply it to all possible situations. Since the heart is involved, it means that the love in question is emotional and committed. So it should involve the types of emotions associated with love: putting the other first, joy in obedience, for example. Since it has to be with all your might, it means no holding back, no restraint.

Most difficult of all, it has to be with your soul. When you think about it seriously, it is difficult enough to locate your heart and your mind. But where do I find my soul, where this love of God and neighbor is supposed to take place? I have to accept that there is a special part of me where God and my neighbor are present and communicate with me, a part that lies outside my ability to sense and feel.

But what if I hate myself, or maybe just not like myself that much? Jesus quotes Leviticus *verbatim* when he says “love your neighbor as yourself.” Is there a simple assumption here that our nature is to rationally look out for our self-interested survival and well-being? So are God and Jesus just saying that it’s fine to look out for your own well-being, but you must extend the same consideration to humanity? Do unto others as you etc, etc, etc. We know that there are a lot of people out there who hate themselves. Else why do so many of us harm ourselves in the course of harming or being harmed by others?

Are God and Jesus saying that you, as well as the self-haters, should disregard, discard their experiences and accumulated hatred and love themselves? Does then love of oneself lead to loving others? Does love here mean to cultivate a beautiful body and a keen intellect, or to follow some kind of psycho-babble about most of all being kind to our inner child?

The only answer that makes sense to me is that God wants us to think of ourselves as being holy, just as God sees God’s self as holy. If that’s the case, hating ourselves is out. We can reprove ourselves, as Leviticus 19 says, but we can’t hate ourselves, if through hate we harm ourselves and others.