



Commandments Explained

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

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Conflict is all around us on a daily basis. In fact, respecting the driving code or parking in the correct spaces defined by category (e.g., handicap parking, resident parking, or even no parking); conceding the common courtesy of keeping the radio volume down when on the beach; playing ball in an area used by other people...may be examples of potential conflict if rules, regulation, and common sense are not used.

Conflict happens in the Church also. It would be nice to always be able to treat others with respect and kindness and never hurt one another. But hurt we do, not on purpose or with meanness mind you but just out of unskillfulness. This is obviously in the best of cases. Unfortunately, we also know that evil and sin can take over and we become blind to our own arrogance, pride, and self-righteousness. We can develop a thirst for revenge when hurt. We can end up doing things out of hate and spitefulness. We know how low we can fall.

Paul breaks down for us God's perfect law of love. We need to train in love. We all aspire to live according to the Ten Commandments so the community is protected from the evil we are capable of doing. When we do not extend love to our neighbors it is like we are kept in self-induced soporific slumber. That is not living; we need to awake from our indifference to other's pain.

There is no "perfect" Church because there are no perfect people. Church is a gathering of people called by Christ from our diverse background to follow him and learn how to love God and one another. Church is not made up of people who have seen the light and are already totally transformed. Church is made up of sinners, like you and me, on a journey of self-discovery and personal transformation as we engage in transforming the world. It takes time. It takes trust, prayer, commitment, and endurance. It takes also hope because what God has started, God will surely bring to completion. God is trustworthy and faithful. God is loving in all that God does. And God works with people who most of the time are willing but lack the skills and make mistakes. In the process of living, we hurt others.

And yet, we are also called "saints" made so by Christ. We are children of God growing into our humanity, the full stature of Christ. We are called to reflect the image of the invisible God, just like Christ: other Christs. Huge responsibility. Huge honor. When we contemplate God's compassion towards us made manifest in Jesus, we want to be at his feet, learning from him and doing acts of kindness, following his example. The more we are transformed in compassion, the more we act with compassion toward others.

Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). In these Sundays after Pentecost, we are repeatedly reminded that God has not abandoned us, and that Christ's resurrection and ascension are a beginning for us, not an end.

This surely gives us solace and strength. The grace and mercy with which we have been treated we want to extend to others.

The readings this week focus on the practical work of the gathered Christian community: turning from sin to repentance, from conflict to reconciliation. The question is as relevant today as it was for the disciples and the first Christians: how do we live together, work together, as the body of Christ? We have been saved by grace, liberated by God's love to love one another. What does it mean for us and for our community to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14) and to clothe ourselves in love?

The way we gather as Christians continues to be profoundly countercultural. We do not gather as a social club, drawn and kept together only by shared demographics and interests. If church is only a social club, there is no reason to continue to gather if conflict arises, if uncomfortable issues are raised, or if "the way it's always been" begins to change. If church is only a social club, there is no reason to do the hard work of reconciliation and forgiveness. In community we meet and become Christ's body in ways that are impossible for us as individuals; all the commandments are fulfilled in this call to love our neighbor (Rom. 13:9).

Within the Church we find companionship with other like-minded people. Hopefully, the "like-mindedness" is about Christ and not a certain political party or ideology. The "like-mindedness" we are called to have is the affinity to the mind of Christ. We have approached the Holy and have tasted the goodness of the Lord (Psalm 34). Disciples of Christ learn from Christ. Christ remains our Teacher. We, in all humility, assume an attitude of always learning. Our life journey is to learn to love as God loves and to see as God sees. The Ten Commandments are a good place for us to start just as it was for Jesus and the Jewish people since the time of Moses. With them we have bullet-point instructions on how to relate to God and to God's people.

Our mode of being is the availability to train in the ways of the Lord, humble and flexible to question our assumptions. We also practice the readiness to learn new ways of interacting with the world around us in Christ's name. Christians acting on behalf of Christ are constantly learning what it means to do things "in his name" since they do things in the presence of Christ ("Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.")

Jesus has given us directions on how to deal with conflicts in Church. What he suggested is not easy. Following Jesus is never easy. He invites us to follow on the way to the cross, remember?

The challenge begins with *recognizing* the other as a "member of the Church," a member of the same Body we belong. In our own physical bodies, we do not write off and exile parts of us which have offended or compromised us. On the contrary, we take better care of them.

In a world where we are quick to demonize the other and split people into different camps, Jesus' instruction requires humility, flexibility, and willingness to change. Change for what? For the coming of the kingdom. Are we ready to be authentic Christians and follow him closely?

Jesus' motivation is one of *reconciliation*. What he has in mind is the healing and wholeness of the body and not punishment. Brothers and sisters ought to make shalom their goal and do this with reverence for anyone's dignity (v. 15); with readiness to listen and to be willing to gain a different perspective (v.16); with urgency toward the wellbeing of the Body (v. 17a); with evangelical love (v. 17b); and with grave responsibility (v. 18). All of this is to be done in the presence of the risen Lord (vv. 19-20). All is aimed at a conversion of mind and heart of all those involved. Can we rise to that?

If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts!