

613 Rules = Love

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Psalm 133 ¹How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God's people to live together in harmony!
- Romans 13:8-14 ¹⁰If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law.
- Theme: If you love someone, you will never do him [or her] wrong.

In twelfth-century Spain there was a Jewish rabbi known as Maimonides. He is still revered as one of the wisest, most insightful rabbis ever. His writings are the frequent source of quotations. I'm sure you're familiar with the adage "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Yup... Maimonides. Daniel Plan followers especially will appreciate another observation by Maimonides. He said, "Let nothing which can be treated by diet be treated by other means." And everyday folks and leaders of nations should take inspiration and direction from Maimonides when he vowed, "I will destroy my enemies by converting them to friends."

In his study of the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew scriptures – what we Christians call the Old Testament – it was Maimonides who is credited with noting that they contain 613 laws or rules. Those laws deal with a variety of topics including marriage and divorce and family, how to relate to people who don't believe what you believe, what makes for proper religious observance, how to treat employees and servants, and of course, how to think about and worship and serve God.¹

613 things. That's a lot to remember. Even if we were to decide that some of them are rather nitpicky or outdated and don't really make much of a difference, we might be left with – what, 500? Still a lot to remember. A lot to try to obey as you go about your day's activities. A lot to keep in mind as you're going to work and feeding the cats and doing the laundry and mailing the birthday card to Aunt Shirley.

Five-hundred rules? If only there were an easier way to remember, a simpler way for us to gauge whether we're on the right track.

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Most of what we know about the early days of the growth of the Christian faith is because of the writings of Paul. Addressed to various new Christian communities scattered throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Paul's letters were so treasured that they survived through the centuries. The one we call "The Letter to the Romans" was Paul's way of preparing the Christians in Rome for a trip he planned to make there. Though he hoped to go from there to preach and teach in Spain, Paul never made that trip because he was arrested and taken to Rome as a prisoner of the Empire. "The book contains his most complete statement of his message."² Paul tried to explain the practical implications for living with trust in God by following the way of Jesus.

¹ "The 613 Laws of the Old Testament Called the Mitzvot," at http://www.hisglory.us/DOCUMENTS/613_biblical_laws.htm, accessed 9/7/2017

² Introduction to "Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version*. New York: American Bible Society, 1976. NT p. 201.

Having received a strict and thorough upbringing in the Jewish faith, Paul knew the Hebrew Scriptures as well as any rabbi. He knew the 613 laws and rules dictating so much of the daily life of observant, practicing Jews. But in his letter to the Christians in Rome—which included some Christians who formerly had been Jewish—Paul made a bold statement. He proposed that those 613 laws and rules—including some of the best-known ones like “Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else”—all those laws and rules could be condensed and simplified. Paul wrote, “...All these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law.”

“...To love, then, is to obey the whole Law.” 613 laws and rules that would overwhelm even the greatest minds could be condensed to one guideline—one guideline that anyone could remember. According to Matthew’s gospel Jesus had said something quite similar. Whether Paul was familiar with this incident we can’t tell because the gospel was written after Paul’s lifetime, but in Chapter 22 Matthew writes of a time when a leader of the Jewish Temple tried to trap Jesus with a question:

³⁶ “Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ Jesus answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and the most important commandment. ³⁹ The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ ⁴⁰ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”³

Yes, even before the apostle Paul, Jesus himself sought to condense the laws and rules and commandments.

So what’s involved with “loving your neighbor as you love yourself?”

Well, first we need to reclaim the meaning of the term “to love.” Over the decades romance novels and the glitter of Hollywood have hijacked the idea of “love.” To them, “love” is either shallow, saccharine sentimentality without any foundation, or “love” is the passionate but fleeting attraction stimulated by biochemical instinct. They would have us believe that love is merely an emotional state of being.

But a Bible scholar has cautioned that

“That is not what the New Testament means by ‘love.’ That God loves us hardly means that [God] gets a warm feeling inside when [God] thinks of us. We know God loves us not because of the way [God] *feels* about us but because of what God has *done* for us: [God] gave us [the] son for our redemption.”⁴

Guided by what it means that *God* loves us, we realize that love is not so much about emotion as it is about action. “To love someone is actively to promote that person’s good.... Love acts for the good of another.... Such love means to cease actions that harm another person and to do what promotes that person’s good.”⁵ If you love someone, you will never do them wrong.

That’s a tall order, because while emotion is not at the heart of what it means to love, emotion can get in the way of loving neighbors as we love ourselves.

³ Matthew 22:36-40 Good News translation

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Interpretation – a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Romans*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1985, 209.

⁵ *Ibid.* 209.

Emotion could have gotten in my way last Thursday. We have people doing some work at our house, and the foreman had called with a question. I told him I could be there in five minutes, so I grabbed my jacket and hopped in the car.

At the top of the driveway hill I checked traffic. Except for a gray minivan down the by cemetery entrance the way was clear, so I pulled onto the road and accelerated to the speed limit. That's when I noticed that the woman driving the gray minivan had closed the gap very quickly – obviously driving considerably over the speed limit – and was, in fact, almost on my bumper.

My righteous anger instantly arose because, just like you, I *know* that my impeccable skills behind the wheel are the envy of driving instructors everywhere. I have pulled out of this driveway thousands of times; I know how much distance to allow in order to enter traffic safely without cutting off a vehicle. My mind started racing. *Who does she think she is, to impugn my driving skills by aggressively tailgating my vehicle? How should I defend myself? How should I put her in her place? Should I speed up? Turn off my route to get away from her? Gently tap my brakes so my taillights flash a warning to "Back off"?*

But as I set out on this brief errand I had just left my desk with this sermon still being developed. So it was that in this moment there was that one rule that inconveniently pushed its way into my consciousness: love your neighbor as you love yourself. In the fifteen seconds that had elapsed in this rear-view-mirror encounter with the driver of the gray minivan, how was I to put into practice the aim Maimonides proclaimed when he vowed, "I will destroy my enemies by converting them to friends"?

I doubt I converted her to a "friend," but here's what my brain processed within the span of seconds. I recognized that I was emotionally on alert, feeling defensive and insulted. I acknowledged that I had no idea who she was or what was going on in her life. Was she speeding to the hospital? Was she late to pick up her child? Had she just left her attorney's office? I didn't know. But I realized that it didn't matter whether she did or didn't harbor ill will toward me; there was no reason for me to respond with anger or revenge. I gave her the briefest "prayer-thought" apologizing if I had offended her and wishing her calm and safety on her journey. I went on my way and she on hers.

Remember, we know God loves us not because of how God feels about us but because of what God has done for us. In that moment, the issue was not how I felt but about what I could do to show love, for as Paul counseled the Romans, "...if you love someone, you will never do him [or her] wrong."⁶

Both Jesus and his powerfully-influential advocate Paul condensed 613 laws and commands and rules down to one. That brings to mind a song my wife Mary and I used to teach kids when we directed summer church camps for middle schoolers. The words of this song are very easy. We didn't need a songbook or a program. We'd have them sing with us

♪ Love, love, love, love. The gospel in a word is "Love."

♪ Love your neighbor like sister or brother.

♪ Love, love, love.⁷

To love, then, is to obey 613 laws and rules and commands, for if you love someone, you will never do him [or her] wrong.

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⁶ Romans 13:10a Good News Translation

⁷ American folksong, at http://files.cccmy.org/Resources/SongLyrics/Love,_Love,_Love.html, accessed 9/7/2017