

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis**  
**Class Notes 5/10/20**

(I. The Third Love Command, cont.)

Jesus affirms this fundamental teaching of Torah to love the foreigner. When asked about Leviticus 19:18— “Who is my neighbor?”—he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, someone who acts with love towards a member of a hated nation. The Samaritan is actually in Judean territory and yet does not ignore the needs of a stranger. I think this parable is a kind of midrash in which Jesus interprets verse 18 in light of verse 34, not limiting “neighbor” to those who are like us, but insisting that we recognize as our neighbor all those who are in need.

Jesus recognizes that loving the stranger is more difficult than loving your neighbor, yet insists that it is an essential part of discipleship, that it is part of what it means to be children of God (Matt. 5:43-48). Jesus says that even unethical and godless people (tax collectors, unbelievers) love those who are close to them, the people who are like them, people from their own in-group. Our natural tendency is to love people from our own social circle and look down on those outside it. Because of this, xenophobia (literally “fear of strangers”) has always been a problem for the nations of the world as immigrants and foreigners become easy scapegoats for all the ills of a society.

The hard case is to love those who are other, outsiders, those who think and act and look differently. Because of this, I think Torah repeatedly underlines this third love command, the commandment to love the foreigner as yourself, in order to make sure we get the message. And Jesus affirms what Torah affirms, that in loving not only people who are easy to love but also those who aren't, we are indeed being godly, following in the way of the Lord, who gives blessings even to bad people. By doing so, we are being perfect, complete, achieving the purpose for which we were created, to bear the image of God for the world to see and welcoming God's presence in the world, even when it comes in the form of the stranger.

J. Love is Not Enough

“All you need is love,” sang the Beatles in 1967. This has been the mantra of many Protestant Christians as well. Christians have claimed that the teachings of Jesus are all about love, in contrast to the harsh rules and regulations of Judaism which he came to overthrow. Love does not just fulfill the Law, it abolishes it. We have a superior religion because it is all about grace, not following a bunch of commandments. Yet we have seen that in speaking about love, Jesus is simply quoting and affirming the heart of Torah, not inaugurating a new religion. What is surprising is where the commands to love your neighbor and the stranger appear—right in the middle of a book full of those strict rules and regulations that are supposedly just the opposite of love. If all you need is love, what is the purpose of all those other pesky laws?

Rabbi Sacks notes that we have already seen the word love a number of times in the Genesis narratives, but there it is a much more problematic term. We are told that Abraham loved Isaac (22:2), but not Ishmael; we are told that Isaac loved Esau (25:28), and also

loved venison stew (27:4, 14 KJV), while Rebekah loved Jacob; we are told that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29:30), whose heartbreaking efforts to win her husband's love are in vain (29:31-35); we are told that Shechem loved Dinah, even though he may have raped her (34:3); and we are told that Jacob loved Joseph more than his other children (37:3). In all of these cases, love leads to conflict, division, estrangement, and tragedy. Ishmael and his mother are cast out into the wilderness; Rebekah conspires with Jacob to steal Esau's blessing, which causes Esau to seek to kill Jacob. Because of Jacob's preferential treatment of Rachel's son Joseph, his brothers try to get rid of him. And Shechem's love for Dinah leads to her brothers slaughtering him and his whole town.

Why does the Bible begin with love as a problem? Rabbi Sacks reaches a surprising conclusion. Love, he says, the passionate commitment to another person or persons, is not a sufficient basis on which to build a society, because it can divide as well as unite. "Love is not enough, for it leaves the less loved feeling unloved, and the result is conflict and sometimes tragedy" (*Genesis*, p. 200). He notes that Torah actually weaves together two central concepts: love and justice, and each needs the other. "In Judaism love and justice go hand in hand" (*Deuteronomy*, p. 97). We have already seen how justice in the Bible is to be tempered and shaped by compassion, by a loving concern for the other. Here, Rabbi Sacks says, love must be accompanied by justice, by fairness, by a sense of how your love impacts others outside that relationship. "For without justice, love is blind; and without love, justice is impersonal and cold" (*Genesis*, p. 201). We need both. Love is not enough.

R. Sacks cites a particular law that illustrates this point. If a man has two wives, one loved and one not, and each has a son, the man is prohibited from favoring the son of the loved wife over the son of the unloved wife (Deut. 21:15-17). The language of these verses directly echoes the language in the story of Jacob and his wives and may well grow out of that situation. Jacob, in fact, does just what this law prohibits: out of love he favors Joseph (Rachel's son) over Reuben (Leah's son, the firstborn). He gives a double portion of his inheritance to Joseph's two sons, who become tribes in Israel (Gen. 48:5). It was Jacob's favoritism to Rachel and Joseph that led the other brothers to resent Joseph and eventually seek to do away with him. Torah insists that love must be conditioned by justice, by following the law.

Biblically, the two concepts of law and love are united and intertwined in the idea of the covenant, the committed relationship between God and God's people. Covenants were part of the Ancient Near East political world, mutual agreements between nations to the benefit of both parties. Each party had a set of responsibilities to the other that were spelled out as laws that they agreed to follow. But it was more than just a contract. Secular covenants would use the word "love" as an indication of the loyalty between the nations that was an expected part of this covenant, a loyalty that went beyond merely following a set of rules but which also included faithfulness to those rules.

Torah uses the idea of covenant to define the relationship between God and humans and to establish the moral character of the covenant community. The laws essentially set out what this community should look like and in part function as a way of distinguishing Israel from other nations. As he prepares to give Moses the Law on Mt. Sinai, God tells Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles'

wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:4-6). Here the language of obedience and love, holiness and mutual responsibility, are intertwined. God’s grace and love are reflected in God’s law; they are not mutually exclusive ideas but are necessarily bound together in the covenant relationship. And obedience to that law makes Israel a nation set apart, different from all the others, a special treasure in God’s eyes. The covenant is, as Rabbi Sacks suggests, a partnership between God and humans, a partnership defined by both law and love.

This is no less true of the new covenant proclaimed by Jeremiah and appropriated by Christians.

*“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.*

*“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD.*

*“I will put my **torah** in their minds and write it on their hearts.*

*I will be their God, and they will be my people. (Jer. 31:31-33)*

Note that the New Covenant is still about Torah, but also note that Jeremiah emphasizes God’s loving care for his people, taking them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt. There is no conflict in the Bible between love and law, grace and obedience. They are two complementary aspects of the covenant relationship. So the standard Protestant understanding of the Bible—that the Old Testament is a covenant of works and law while the New Testament is a covenant of grace and love—is simply wrong. Biblically, covenants are always about grace and love and always about works and law.

Jeremiah sees the covenant as a marriage between God and the people (“I was a husband to them”), an image developed at length by the prophet Hosea. The idea of marriage helps us better understand the necessary relationship between love and law. Marriages involve mutual commitment, loyalty, faithfulness and self-sacrificial service, but each marriage also has to abide by a certain set of rules, stated or unstated, about how that relationship is going to work. Those rules are not in conflict with the love that is at the heart of the marriage; they are an expression of it and a means of establishing the unique character of that relationship, of that community. Marriage itself is a legally binding commitment that some people see as incompatible with their idea of love. I would argue that love is not enough to sustain a marriage; it needs that legal commitment. That piece of paper matters.

When Paul develops the image of a marriage between the Messiah and the church (Eph. 5:21-32), he is speaking of a covenant relationship, one that must certainly include what elsewhere he calls “the law of the Messiah” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). The *torah* of Messiah establishes the ground rules of this marriage between the Messiah and his body, laws which Paul indicates are characterized by love (Rom. 13:8-10). This passage is often quoted to suggest that Paul is somehow nullifying or overturning the Law of Moses. But to say that love is a fulfillment of the Law does not mean that the Law is overturned or cancelled by love. Paul is simply affirming here, along with Jesus, that love is at the heart of the Law and shows us how to obey those laws.

The idea that love fulfills the Law in this passage cannot be understood as overturning the Law for several reasons. First, to define love negatively as doing no harm to the neighbor is only the beginning of what even Paul considers to be love. Certainly a fuller discussion of love would include positive acts of kindness and self-sacrifice. So love as defined in this passage is incomplete.

Second, Paul’s statement that loving one another fulfills the law is only partially true. The greatest commandment in Torah is to love God, which Paul does not mention here. Part of loving God in Torah is to do what God commands, which includes things like caring for the planet and animals, which goes beyond the idea of loving your neighbor. The same chapter in Leviticus that commands us to love our neighbors also prohibits wearing clothing made of mixed fabrics, tattooing your body, harvesting the fruit of newly planted trees, and consulting mediums. Loving your neighbor may be a central principle in Torah but it is not everything.

So loving one another is an essential part of the Law, but to say that love fulfills the Law cannot mean, “completely carries out all of God’s requirements for humanity.” Love is central to God’s law, but it is not the only thing God asks of us.

We see this clearly in Galatians 6:2, where Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ, the *torah* of the Messiah” Again, this cannot mean, “just do this and you will be doing everything Christ asks of you.” For example, Jesus tells his disciples not to pray long, ostentatious prayers full of pious religious clichés (Matt. 6:5-8), which is hard to connect to loving your neighbor or bearing their burdens. Or there is the story about Mary and Martha, where Martha seems to be the one bearing the burdens while Mary is ignoring her responsibilities (Luke 10:38-42). Yet Jesus commends Mary’s behavior, which has always bothered me a little, since I identify more with Martha. Bearing one another’s burdens is an important part of what Jesus asks of his disciples, and so in that sense it fulfills the law. But saying that something fulfills the Law does not mean it exhausts the meaning and purpose and extent of the Law or replaces what the Law ordains.

Elsewhere, Paul says that you can speak in tongues and prophesy and give away your possessions to help others, but if those things are not done in love, they have no value (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Clearly that does not mean Paul thought those things were replaced or cancelled out by some vague idea of love. Love simply gives us a proper perspective on how to carry out all that God has commanded us to do; love is the starting point for obedience.

Paul too is perfectly happy to give people all sorts of other types of commandments: anyone unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10); Christians should not tolerate the presence of believers in the church who are sexually immoral, greedy, or dishonest in business (1 Cor. 5:11). Women should cover their heads when they speak or pray in church (1 Cor. 11:2-16). He even says, in a quite mysterious passage that seems to contradict what he has just said, that women should be silent in churches, out of an attitude of submission ordained by the law (1 Cor. 14:34)! Paul is not telling people, “Do whatever you think is right as long as you think you are doing it out of love.” He is saying that in this new covenant relationship we have entered into, there are laws, rules, principles of behavior, that govern that loving relationship and we agree to abide by those rules as part of our commitment to that covenant.