

Sermon 9-6-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Love Is What Fulfills (labor) Laws

It was a sticky August Monday, and I needed to wear a suit. In that county seat town, a jacket and tie stood out unless you were headed to a funeral, wedding, or court. The Chamber of Commerce Chair asked me to offer a prayer as we dedicated the new Chamber building. As I pulled into the freshly blacktopped parking lot, I did not spot a soul down by the pagoda or the funeral home tent. Too hot, I supposed. Opening my car door, a blast of acrid ammonia almost brought tears to my eyes. I held my breath and darted inside. The Chamber Chair apologized for the terrible smell outside and explained that a local farmer volunteered to plant grass around the pagoda. The day before, unaware of the dedication, a farmer cleaned out a barn and spread a load of chicken manure as fertilizer all over the grounds. Hence our unpleasant greeting! Chair invited everyone to stand for innovation. My spontaneous prayer found context in the Chair's remarks, "Creator and giver of life. Today, You reminded all of us that we live in an agricultural community." I had not intended my prayer to be particularly funny, but we paused for over a minute to let the ripples of holy laughter subside.

The context of the Biblical economy is agriculture. The law within Leviticus 19 speaks to a community rooted in farming. The stories of Abraham, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, and Ruth all farm. Nothing moved faster than a horse or pulled better than an ox. One in three people farmed. Peter's fishing boats, David's sheep, Lydia's purple dyes, and Jesus' parables come to people who know farming drives the economy.

Let's keep agriculture in mind as we hear, "The Lord through Moses, say to the whole community of the Israelites: You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy." What does a community connected to God do? What does it mean to be holy? Can people be holy? The Methodist movement began with a stated desire to spread scriptural holiness across the land. What is scriptural holiness?

John Wesley: "It has been the endeavor of Satan, to pull apart what God has linked together: to separate inward and outward religion from each other: to set faith and works against each other... Some well meaning people seem to place all religion in prayers of the church, receiving the Lord's Supper, hearing sermons, and reading pious books while neglecting the point of these spiritual and inward acts: the Love of God and neighbor. And this (faith alone) has led others to neglect and even hold contempt for the inward spiritual life." (Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount Discourse 7) James 2 says, "faith without actions has no value at all!"

Holiness is found in a context. Any spiritual life must flow into our everyday living. The love of God becomes forgiveness of self and then love of neighbor, stranger, and enemy. Holiness is not as much about Sunday worship and Monday's zoom meeting.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." We owe love to each other! Love fulfills the law.

Say to the whole community of the Israelites, “You must be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” What does scriptural holiness look like? What is the context for loving a neighbor? Amy-Jill Levine reminded us this summer that the Old Testament laws placed a hedge or warning track around the law, to ensure that the core of the law “loving God and neighbor” was upheld. Now in Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we have laid aside parts of Leviticus. We enjoy pork barbeque. We reject any system of slavery. We allow priests in wheelchairs and welcome queer clergy. And the law speaks to us about how to be holy.

1. Respect parents.
2. Keep God’s sabbaths.
3. Don’t worship the false gods of gold, silver, stock options, or BusinessWeek covers.
4. There was a Tabernacle sacrifice offered for Communal well-being.
5. When you harvest your land’s produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don’t gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Leave enough for the poor and the immigrant, “I am the Lord your God.” (Does the free market advocate for such inefficient business practices? Does the free market care if people without funds have enough to eat? Do market gods demand compassion, human dignity, and love?)
6. Do not steal.
7. Do not deceive.
8. Do not lie.
9. Do not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not withhold a hired laborer’s pay overnight. (Why does God’s law regulate the market? Do unregulated markets have any morality? Does capitalism care if people have a living wage? Does scriptural holiness mean regulating markets?)
10. Your building codes need to give consideration for the differently abled. Fear your God!
11. You must not act unjustly in a legal case.
12. Do not go around slandering your people.
13. Do not stand by while your neighbor’s blood is shed; I am the Lord.
14. You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge. Instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.
15. When you enter the land and plant any fruit tree, you must consider its fruit off-limits for 3 years. In the 4th year, all of the tree’s fruit will be holy, a celebration for the Lord. In the 5th year, you can eat the fruit. I am the Lord your God. (Notice how holiness is named as present within creation itself: the almond and orange are all holy! The law calls us to care for the planet. The earth itself reflects God’s image.)
16. Don’t mess with fortune-telling.
17. Rise in the presence of an older person and respect the elderly.
18. When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself, because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (It seems God seemed to know our tendency to love people like... and tells us to protect those who are different from us.)

That is what holiness looks like: not living for the profit margin... taking care of workers... protecting the immigrants... caring for the land... not slandering people... telling the truth... never oppressing people with economic policy.

At another small town ribbon cutting, I paid my respects to a church member who had founded a local business. Their eyes danced with joy and I said, "You must be so proud of this growing company." Without missing a beat, their smile deepened, maybe into their soul and they said, "Pastor, do you know what makes me most proud?" No matter how stressful the day, I lay down every night and pray, remembering that sixty seven people from my hometown have a job with good wages, health insurance, dental, a retirement plan, and along with free donuts, and time and a half if you have to work on Saturday!" Over the next few years I fact checked their assessment at ball fields, band stadiums, and church dinners. That founders employees spoke over and over again about how their boss was a Christian, not because of some Bible verse buzz words on a plaque in their office, but born out policies and practices that enriched the lives of those workers. I felt the same deep smile when standing on a busy factory floor with the owner of a company, as the related over lunch the increasing demand was stretching the company. When I asked about a third shift, he grimaced and said, "I am not going to ask my people to do anything I would not want to do." That is contextualized scriptural holiness.

Romans 13:8-10: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love is the fulfilling of the law." Do we not owe love to everyone? Love is not part of the market gods' spreadsheet.

How are we holy? What makes a family, a church, a business, or a nation holy? Check the margins. Check the spreadsheets. Check the bank accounts. See how they treat an immigrant, a waiter, a clerk, a co-worker, an employee, a boss. See if they are living for profits or people. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, that is wonderful, but if Jesus is not helping you love people in the context of your everyday living, then you are not that interested in scriptural holiness.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love is the fulfilling of the law. Amen.