

Sermon "Being "Christian:"
Kirk of St James
Sunday *October* 25, 2026
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There is a great deal of disagreement in our household over rules and why we have them. According to our children it is because we are trying to ruin any and all fun, we like making their lives a misery, and occasionally I am even "the meanest mommy ever" because being told to pick your clothes up off the floor is akin to being sent to the mines to toil (apparently). When we try to explain that rules help keep us safe, and eating cake for every meal will in fact make you feel unwell, and bedtimes help us rest our bodies, there is a great deal of skepticism. I suppose it is a right of passage to feel hard done by your parents' rules, and I am occasionally reminded by own mother that I was much the same at that age and not nearly as perfect as I remember myself being.

The book of Leviticus has a few more rules than most households do. In fact, if we were to take all the rules and laws from the Torah (the first five books of the bible) there would be somewhere in the vicinity of 619 rules and laws to be followed. They range from conduct, to diet, to even what material your clothes are to be made of. However, while books like Leviticus do have a lot of rules about what the Israelites were supposed to do, within this book we also find the heart of what Jesus tells us is the most important part. We heard it in both the Old Testament and the New Testament readings this morning. In Leviticus it states, "but you should love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord." Then Jesus, when the Pharisees are trying to entrap him sums up the most important commandments in the law as being, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" and the second being, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself." Out of the 619 laws and commandments, these two are what Jesus identifies as the most vital.

This is significant. In Leviticus between chapters seventeen to twenty-six we find what is known as the “Holiness Code.” As one writer points out, “It appears that this section is the work of priestly scribes who wanted to extend the holiness that they experienced in the Jerusalem temple throughout the daily lives of the people. In other words, activities in the temple had long been ordered by divine law, so that worship and sacrifice were conducted correctly and purity was observed.” These practices were then put in place for the Israelites in their daily lives. In many ways the intentions were likely good. We do these things in the temples to make sure we are doing things properly, so let's also do these in the lives of people to help them do things properly as well. However, I wonder if over time the original intentions were lost in amongst all the laws and practices? Jesus' response puts things back into perspective. The most important parts of what we do were never about following the rules perfectly, it was really about how we were supposed to love God and care for people. In other words how it shapes our lives.

Within the ancient world laws and commandments were not unheard of, in fact the Code of Hammurabi predates the Ten Commandments, not to mention other Near Eastern Law Codes that also existed at the time. These works had many points that overlapped with Leviticus and the ten commandments. There was concern for justice, fair judgement, not slandering others, not bearing false witness among other things. “Biblical law participates in nearly universal traditions of justice that would seem to be grounded in humanistic principles such as the protection of life and property, and the upholding of social stability.” The difference is in who is giving the law. For example, ultimately with Hammurabi it is the king who formulates and enforces the law. For Leviticus it is God who is the giver of the law, and we follow the law as a reflection of God and God's love for humankind.

The Kingdom Jesus talks about, the Good News that he shares, and the two commandments he sets above all others encompasses a neighbourhood beyond what we can imagine. It draws in the poor, the marginalized, and treats all with dignity and empathy. It is a kingdom not concerned with power, politics, or money. As one person said, “the pastoral work of the congregation can be seen as putting human feet on the relationship between self love, and neighbour love. “Our love does not bring God’s realm; it reflects it. As people who are made in the image of God, we understand all others, indeed all creation is made in that divine image...We love our way into the community that includes all God’s children.”

It was interesting to be working on a sermon based on Leviticus this week because the Presbyterian Church in Canada has also released a document for study entitled, “Statement of the Presbyterian Church in Canada on Christian Nationalism.” Not a fluffy topic by any stretch of the imagination especially in light of our world today. I want to read to you a couple paragraphs from this document to contrast it with what Jesus is telling us in both of our Old and New Testament passages today. It is worth noting that this is just a preliminary document going out for study and could be revised depending on the feedback from various courts of our church, but it is an interesting contrast.

“What is Christian Nationalism?”

Christian nationalism is a growing threat across the world and in Canada. It is characterized by the belief that one’s nation was founded as a Christian nation (and that God willed it thus); therefore, the nation’s laws and structures must be guided by “Christian” beliefs and values, or the nation will come to ruin. The ideology teaches that Christians must seek control or influence over all means by which power operates in a society, including the government. Additionally, its linking of national identity with Christianity devalues anyone who is not Christian—or even not Christian “enough” in the eyes of its adherents—as implicitly somehow “not Canadian” (or “not American” or “not my nation,” etc.).

Christian nationalism routinely demonizes people or institutions that do not align with its avowed values, and yet the values it espouses and demonstrates often fail to exhibit core Christian teachings such as love of God and neighbour or Jesus' teachings in the beatitudes.

There is a range of understanding of what Christian nationalism means even among Christian nationalists; thus, not everyone who embraces Christian nationalist teachings would embrace this label for themselves. This is in part because there is no single centralized structure to the movement, since it is an ideology rather than an organization. A common thread, however, is exhibiting a love of power and influence. Rather than pursuing the reign of God through the kind of ministry Jesus proclaimed at the start of his ministry (namely, such things as “good news to the poor,” “freedom for the prisoners,” “recovery of sight for the blind,” and setting “the oppressed free” (Luke 4:14–21), Christian nationalism calls for such things as humanitarian aid to be withdrawn, medical coverage to be stripped, detaining, deporting and imprisoning people seeking safety, and removing human rights protections from those facing oppression.

A Fascination with Violence and Control Rooted in a Love of Power

The means through which Christian nationalists pursue social and political power do not demonstrate the two greatest commandments as conveyed across Judeo-Christian teachings: love God with your entire self and love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:34–40, cf. Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

The document is a full four pages and ends with a suggested statement that rejects Christian Nationalism. I am not sure about you, but when I hear something being described as Christian, I expect that I will see the gospel that Jesus teaches us to be reflected in the practices of that group. Lately, as I have been watching global news, I really wonder at some of what I have been witnessing and hearing. The title or word Christian is being invoked, but I do not recognize anything of Christ or the gospel within it. For me personally I will always come back to the moment when Bishop Budde implored world leaders to be merciful during the inaugural national prayer service at the Washington National Cathedral and she received death threats—for preaching exactly what is in the gospel. Where do you go from there?

It is important for us to take time and consider what Leviticus and Matthew describe as the most important part of the kingdom of God and what that means practically. These commands are exactly what we want to live into as Christians. To look at our lives and look at our church and say, “how are we loving God and one another?” That is the metric we measure success by—how well we love. If there are things that we do, that do not reflect love of either God or one another, then it is likely not worth holding onto. I pray that we live into the expectations of Jesus which is a road marked with love. If we have moments when we stray from that, I pray that someone would hold us accountable. Friends, may we love fully and unreservedly just as Jesus taught us.

