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The Office of the Metropolitan Archbishop

**Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity,  
By Archbishop McLaughlin,  
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## Love Thy Neighbor

*A Sermon Regarding One of the Most Important Commandments  
Taught in the Scriptures: How to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous of our Lord's parables, because it illustrates one of the most important commandments taught in the Scriptures: that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This commandment was not taught originally by Christ—the requirement was found in the Old Testament, in Leviticus 19:15-18 (page 132 in pew Bible). Read. Thus, the commandment to “love one's neighbor” covered a whole group of behaviors enjoining fair-dealing, justice, and mercy. The application was widened in Lev. 19:33-34 to apply to “foreigners” as well as to Jews.

Thus the Scriptures teach that our relationship to God is reflected in, if not somehow determined by, our relationship to others. Jesus, of course, symbolized the commandment of love to God and to love one's neighbor as “pegs” upon which the whole Old Testament law “hangs.” And when we read our Lord's Summary of the Law at Holy Communion, we see first hand how this concept is central to Biblical religion. This is constantly affirmed, not only by Jesus, but also throughout the New Testament; it is the Royal Law of God:

St. Paul—“The commandments...are all summed up in this one commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God's requirements.” (Rom. 13:9,10 NLT) “For the whole law [Torah] can be summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Gal. 5:14 NLT)

St. James—“If...you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well.” (James 2:8 NASB).

Didache—(a first century Christian work ascribed to the Apostles) “The way of Life is this: First, you shall love the Lord your Maker, and secondly, your neighbor as yourself.”

So it is vital that we understand the full Biblical instruction regarding this commandment, because at the time of our Lord's earthly sojourn, there had developed clear lines of Rabbinic teaching on the bundle of commandments grouped under the general rubric to "love thy neighbor" found in Leviticus, chapter 19. Rabbinic teaching, current in Jesus' day, recognized that these commandments were nearly impossible to keep: how can one prevent one's emotions of hatred in the face of injustice or falsehood? How can God command one not to bear a grudge? How is it that humans were forbidden to take vengeance upon enemies, when God Himself is said to take revenge upon Israel's enemies in the Old Testament? Finally, how can the Deity command us to love? Surely, they reasoned, there must be more here than meets the eye.

Given the importance of our relationship with others as reflective of our relationship with God, Rabbinic teaching probed the spiritual concepts lying behind these commands, and asked how one could fulfill these commandments in a realistic way. Christian teaching completed this interpretation of the scriptural injunction to love your neighbor as yourself.

The first step to keeping these commands was to understand the harm done by hatred. Hatred is the opposite emotional and spiritual quality of love. The two are contrasted in Leviticus 19:18: "Do not take revenge on anyone or *continue to hate him, but love your neighbor* as you love yourself..." This follows verse 17, which in the NASB is translated, "You shall not hate your fellow countryman [brother] in your heart, you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him." The Septuagint concurs: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, so thou shalt not bear sin on his account." In other words, hidden hatred leads to sin: sin even if committed by another, if it produces hatred hidden in the depths of our soul will bring forth sin *in us*.

It causes sin first by making us hypocritical. Proverbs 10:18 (NLT) teaches us: "To hide hatred is to be a liar." Proverbs 26:24-27 enlarges this teaching: "People with hate in their hearts may sound pleasant enough, but don't believe them. Though they pretend to be kind, their hearts are full of evil. While their hatred may be concealed by trickery, it will finally come to light for all to see (NLT)."

I've noticed in my life that whenever I nurse a grudge against anyone, it never affects him! But it does do a great deal to sour my soul—it will separate me from God, because the focus of my life is centered upon the object of hatred rather than upon the Lord. Hatred, carefully hidden from others, is a grudge grown up, and the consequences can not only harm ourselves, but will eventually cause others to sin: the author of the Book of Hebrews wrote, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord; looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled" (Hebrews 12: 14,15).

Hatred toward another, then, causes us to sin by the bitterness implanted deep in the soul, thus separating us from God, and in its full form causes others to stumble as well. The commandment to love our neighbor isn't essentially for the benefit of our neighbors, but for the spiritual health of our own souls, and those closest to us. Far from being unrealistic in its demands, the commandment is made for our soul's health, and that of the people of God.

For the second step in keeping these commands is to be honest with those whom we perceive to be in the wrong. Notice in Leviticus we are instructed, (vs. 17) “Do not bear a grudge against anyone, but settle your differences with him, so that you will not commit a sin because of him (TEV).” The phrase “settle your differences” can also be translated as “rebuke” or “reproach.” The Jews eventually interpreted this command in a judicial sense, and used this verse to require that any who were brought to trial must be first reproached by another—here we see the first glimpse for the necessity of witnesses to crimes as necessary for the administration of justice.

But our Lord took this prescription, reversed its perspective, and then tied it to our relationship to God. In the Sermon on the Mount He taught, “if you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar [which we will be doing in a few minutes!] and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God” (Matthew 5: 23,24 TEV). Again, the Lord Christ taught the necessity of witnesses to injustice, to prevent sin, and to promote the love this command requires. In fact, He left us a carefully defined process of the application of this commandment in St. Matthew 18:15-17: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass [sin] against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

The eternal consequences of this process are shown in the verses immediately following: “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Here we understand the judgment of the Church—rendered by its Bishops, to whom the power of binding and loosing is given—has an eternal effect, and is indeed, considered to be an act by Christ Himself, who is present in the councils of the Church.

The command to love our neighbor is serious indeed. The Didache summarizes Christian teaching on our relationships with others this way: “You shall not hate any man [this is the soul-killing inner hatred], but some you shall reproach [that is, settle the differences between you], some you will pray for, and others you shall love more than your own life.”

Which brings us to the third and final step in loving our neighbors as ourselves. The Lord told us *how* we are to love one another in perhaps the most famous of all His precepts: “Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12 NLT). This is the positive, loving application of the precept found in the Book of Proverbs: “Say not, As he has treated me, so also will I treat him, and I will avenge myself on him for that wherein he has injured me” (Prov. 24:29, Septuagint). To do for others what we wish for ourselves fulfills the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan clearly teaches that “neighbor” is not to be interpreted in a narrow, legalistic sense, but is indeed a fundamental spiritual principle applicable to all by the Creator Himself.

This understanding is confirmed in the Didache: “The way of Life is this: First, you shall love the Lord your Maker, and secondly, your neighbor as yourself. And whatever you do not want to be done to you, you shall not do to anyone else.”

In light of this examination, Jesus’ prescriptions to love our enemies and pray for those who hate us can now be understood: those who hate indeed need prayer, for they are destroying their own souls. They are a dark example of what the People of God should avoid. Finally, love of others originates not in us, but is a gift from God, for “God is love.” And it is a gift that we can covet for our soul’s health.

Jesus told us to lay aside our grudges, our bitterness, and our antipathy toward others before we come to His altar. As we come today to the altar, as we confess our sins, let us reflect upon those whom we have wronged, and upon those who have wronged us, and release into the unfathomable love of God the accumulated hurts of our lives, that we may come before our Lord in the Sacrament of His body and blood, in peace of soul and in love toward our neighbor. Amen.