

The Wednesday Word, Sept. 16, 2009: The Gospel and the Troubling Teachings of Jesus

Samuel Johnson, the great 18th century sage, was once asked if the hard to understand passages of the Bible troubled him; he replied, 'No'. He went on to say that, to the contrary, it was the things in the Bible which he did understand that caused him much alarm.

In the teachings of Jesus we find many things that are both troubling and alarming. For example, a learned lawyer once asked Jesus the question, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" In other words, what is the most important thing taught by God? Jesus replied,

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment" (Matthew 22:36-38).

I don't suppose any of us have at all times loved God with all our hearts and mind. That's troubling!

Then remember one day when another lawyer put Christ to the test, saying, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Jesus, knowing this was a set up, turned the question right back on the fellow asking, 'What is written in the law? How do you read?' The lawyer answered, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.'" Then Jesus responded, "You have answered correctly; this do, and you will live" (Luke 10:26-28).

Do this, and you will live! —That's troubling!

We sometimes forget that our gracious Savior loved the Law. In a prophecy about Christ, in the book of Isaiah, we read that, when he would come, He would magnify the law and make it honorable (Isaiah 42:21). When we magnify an object the object does not change, it merely becomes larger in our perception. The object now has more clarity. When Christ magnified the law, He, therefore, made its meaning clearer. But, with more clarity on God's standards comes more trouble and more conviction!

The first great commandment, about loving the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind" is troubling enough, but Christ magnified it by saying, "He who loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37). His words are an indictment against us all. According to Jesus, if family affections compete with our loyalty to Him we are not worthy of Him! This is radical to the extreme, but it gives a graphic picture of what it is to love God with all our heart! That's troubling! (See also the impossibility of serving money and material comforts (Matthew 6:24) and for the need of willingness in Christ's followers to forsake all (Luke 14:33).

Jesus, who knows the hearts of all men, knows that the nearer anything is to our heart, the more dangerous it can become as it rivals our love for Him. Christ allows no rivals! It is not that affections are evil things, but everything that ties us to this earth must pale to insignificance in comparison to our love for Him. That's troubling!

In the light of this, I defy anyone to say that they have ever kept the first commandment perfectly! Everyone has failed, everyone, that is, apart from Jesus. Jesus alone lived a life of perfect obedience to every wish and command of God. He declared,

"I seek not My own will but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 5:30) and, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me" (John 4:34).

These are the words of our substitute redeemer. And thank God for them! For Jesus, doing the will of God was as delightful and enjoyable as a good meal to a hungry man. His was a life which embodied and fulfilled the first commandment. He was the human demonstration of total love for God. He was both truth and love made flesh!

We as God's creatures are called upon to render the same kind of total love and loyalty to God. That's troubling, for none of us has ever been capable of giving God this kind of love or commitment! We are thus discovered to be lawbreakers and deserving of the death penalty. But, here's the good news. Jesus has both lived and died for wretched failures like us. He has taken responsibly for people like us whose best efforts at keeping that first commandment have utterly failed.

God does not bring any charge against His elect (Rom 8:33). This is good news! We are declared not guilty because of the blood of Christ. This is gospel! The very One who has the right to condemn us, chose instead to die for us and is risen at the Father's right hand to be our entire righteousness! By faith alone we embrace Him and receive His perfections as our own. Christ lived and died as the substitute for ruined sinners. And while yes it is true that we want to love God with all our hearts, we do not live in condemnation when we fail to do so. Furthermore, we are not trying to gain eternal life by loving God, but we love Him because we have already obtained full salvation through the doing and dying of our substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's the Gospel Truth!