

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, October 29, 2017

613 Commandments

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Acts 10:1-16

I have never repeated a sermon in the same church since I first became a pastor eight years ago. However I have decided to break that rule this morning and repeat a prior sermon, at least in part. I talked about this subject when I first came to Conley Memorial almost six years ago but it bears repeating, particularly due to the divisions within the Christian churches on interpretation of scripture. The Bible is not literally correct, inspired by God yes, but not infallible. It is an error to believe that and the Bible, in fact contradicts itself often. The problem is the culture of the time when the scripture was written and that the New Testament effectively negated many things in the Old Testament. The Law of Moses, the Torah, was replaced by the New Covenant given to us by Christ.

One of the big problems with Biblical interpretation is proof texting, primarily with the 613 commandments in the Torah but also with things in Paul's epistles.

Proof texting is the use of a few words out of context from scripture to support an argument or belief without regard to the actual meaning of the entire scriptural passage.

In the New Testament, various theological debates based upon proof texting of Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians have divided Christian churches time and time again.

Even more divisive are disagreements based upon interpretation of Jewish law as expressed in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The Torah contains not only the Ten Commandments we all agree with but 603 other commandments. Devout Jews like Peter would scrupulously endeavor to obey all 613 of these commandments.

Some of the commandments are positive, like the one to rest on the Sabbath day. The majority however are negative. 365 commandments are prohibitions. Things that were to be avoided.

Some made great sense such as the prohibition against eating meat from an animal without a cloven hoof. The purpose of this was for health. Animals without a cloven hoof often carried disease organisms. Pigs in particular can carry trichinosis, a

worm which if not killed by proper cooking can cause severe medical problems in humans. Considering that in those days there was no assurance that meat would be properly cooked, the Jews' answer was to simply prohibit any meat which might present a problem. Many of the commandments existed for similar reasons, reasons which made sense back then but which would be meaningless today. In fact, except for Orthodox Jews who still strictly observe the dietary laws, many Jews today do not.

Other commandments made no sense at all, at least not today, and probably were in the law for religious discipline purposes, not for any health or other reasons. For example, eating fresh grapes or raisins was prohibited.

Other commandments were to promote social welfare. For example, farmers were to leave a part of their crops unharvested for the poor.

Every seven years, other commandments required farmers to leave their land unplanted and for loans to be forgiven.

Other commandments are almost laughable today. Tattoos were prohibited. Men could not cut their hair or shave. Loans could not require payment of interest. Meat could not be eaten if cooked with milk or dairy products. So much for a cheeseburger or a Big Mac.

There are numerous commandments about sexual practices --- more than 20 of them, some of which make sense in today's world and some of which are nonsensical. For example, a member of the clergy was prohibited from marrying a widow or a divorcee.

It would take me all day to list all of the many commandments and that is not my point this morning.

In Christ, people were freed from most of these strictures. Jesus gave us guidance in how we should live. Basically, he gave us only two commandments to live by, that is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Effectively Jesus told us to follow the Ten Commandments as they really are incorporated in his two specifically stated commandments. Each of the Ten Commandments fits into either loving God or loving others. Jesus loved everyone and welcomed everyone. He didn't exclude anyone from his love and he didn't profess obedience to that huge array of commandments in the Torah.

His disciples plucked grain from the fields on the Sabbath, a violation of the

Torah. The Pharisees took exception to this and Jesus rebuked the Pharisees. Jesus ate with sinners and gentiles. He broke commandment after commandment except for the original Ten Commandments. Why then should we as Christians get hung up on those obscure 603 commandments in the Jewish law? Those commandments were from the covenant God gave to the Jews at the time of Moses. Christ gave us a New Covenant which replaced all of that yet, even today, Christians get hung up over those old laws which no longer apply. If some of us get hung up over these old laws, can you see the quandary Peter got into in our scripture reading this morning? He followed the old laws, for the most part, although he was slowly moving away from them.

In our scripture reading, it is stated that he was staying at the house of Simon the tanner, which in itself was a violation of Jewish law. A tanner worked with bodies of dead animals. Thus Simon was permanently unclean. For a Jew to accept hospitality from any unclean person was unheard of. According to William Barclay ⁽¹⁾, *"It was his uncleanliness that made it necessary for Simon to dwell ... outside the city. No doubt this tanner was a Christian and Peter had begun to see that Christianity abolished these petty laws and taboos."*

Peter was staying with Simon the tanner when the servants of Cornelius were sent to fetch him. Cornelius was a Roman army officer, a gentile, who was a devout and God-fearing man. Note that the scripture refers to him as "God fearing". We are not sure but the term suggests that he may have been circumcised as that term applied to circumcised gentiles who worshipped God. Cornelius had a vision in which an angel told him to seek out Peter. Cornelius was willing to be instructed and guided by Peter and his vision directed him to Peter.

As Cornelius' servants were approaching, Peter was on the roof of the house praying when he too had a vision, a vision of a sheet being lowered containing all kinds of unclean animals, reptiles and birds (except seafood, which of course needed water not to die). A voice tells Peter to slaughter the animals, reptiles and birds and eat. Three times the voice commands Peter to do this but this is too much for Peter. Staying in the house of an unclean person is one thing, but breaking the dietary laws is another thing all together.

William Willimon ⁽²⁾ commented that, only these laws stood in the way of the assimilation of gentiles into the church by the Jews. The laws "... *identified, demarcated*

faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith, drop one's particularities and become a good citizen of the (Roman) Empire. A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated. We must not read this story from the safe vantage point of a majority religion ... (but) ... from the minority point of view, people for whom a bit of pork or a pinch of incense or a little intermarriage was a matter of life and death for the community. The dietary laws ... are a matter of survival and identity for Jews. And yet, can it be that these laws are being supplanted by some other basis for survival and identity? No wonder Peter is left baffled."

Peter was a Jew as were the other apostles. The twelve would think just as Peter did yet here Peter has a vision telling him to forget all of that. The old laws don't apply to Christians. The old taboos and prohibitions are gone. Much of what Peter had always observed was no longer applicable. He refuses to break the dietary laws and the voice tells him, "*What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*" The sheet and animals disappear back to heaven.

Peter was on the roof of the house and about then would have stood at the railing around the roof and seen Cornelius' messengers approaching. Why would there have been a railing? Simply because one of the 613 commandments required a railing, a sensible thing for a flat roof. Not all of the laws were unreasonable. A railing makes sense for a flat roof where people often slept. The roofs also often had a sheet over them to shield people from the sun. Peter's vision may have been prompted by such a sheet. In any event, Peter greeted the messengers and that was the start of his acceptance of the first gentile Christian, Cornelius. I want you to recognize that Cornelius was seeking Peter, not the other way around.

If we as Christians wait for others to come to our door and seek to become Christians, or if we wait for non-Christians to walk in the door of this church to join with us, few, if any, new people will come to Christ. Cornelius was the start for Peter and after that Peter reached out to gentiles. We need to reach out to others in as many ways as we can. We need to reach out to the poor, to minorities, to sinners no matter what their sins are, and offer them the grace and salvation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

1. William Barclay, The Acts of the Apostles, revised edition, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1976.

2. William H. Willimon, Interpretation: Acts, John Know Press, Louisville, 1973

Note: Scripture quotations are from the NIV Bible, 2011