

Commandments and Love

6th Sunday of Easter (Year A)

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Today's Gospel brings together two aspects of Christian living that are hard to reconcile: commandments and love. Some Christians put the emphasis on the commandments. To be a good Christian means to follow God's commandments whether one feels like it or not. It is our duty and there is no room for compromise. Some, on the other hand, put the emphasis on love. They say that the commandments are outdated. If one has love, one can justify all their actions to themselves. While both sides have a case to make, Jesus says, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments...whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me." According to Jesus, commandments and love should go together. A few verses later, he will make the strongest statement of all, 'this I command you: love one another.'

Fr. Nicholas Lohkamp, in his book *The Commandments and the New Morality*, wrote favorably of the developments in moral theology in the last 50 years. He was glad to see the Church move beyond a rigid 'thou shalt not' mentality. In his 'Introduction,' he writes, "we worried about the laws that were to promote and protect values more than we did about the values themselves." (viii) Implied in this comment is a clear criticism of those who focused too much on the letter of the law and left little room for love. They made the commandments the end-all-be-all. But also implied in his comment is actually an affirmation of laws and commandments. The commandments are there to promote and protect values. Because of this, we must be very careful not to come across as dismissing commandments altogether. To dismiss commandments can be to dismiss values.

To believe that our values will naturally be respected and encouraged without any kind of structure or support is wishful thinking. Human nature isn't always that purely motivated. The commandments, therefore, serve as a

necessary kind of boundary. From the outside looking in, boundaries can appear restrictive. From the inside, however, we see that they serve a larger purpose. For example, the commandment against bearing false witness is protecting the value of truth-telling, the commandment against killing is protecting the value of human dignity, and the commandments against coveting are protecting the value of gratitude. Without the commandments, these values would deteriorate in time.

As we strive to appreciate the commandments, it is helpful to remember that not every commandment carries the same weight. The Old Testament is full of hundreds of commandments from God, yet we only singled out 10 of them. The purpose is not so much to explain and defend every commandment or try to account for every situation. The commandments are there to give us a feel of how to protect and promote the values that are important to us.

One can both follow the commandments and love at the same time.

Perhaps we have been approaching the discussion on reconciling commandments and love in the wrong way. Some people will naturally like the commandments and some people will naturally like love. Maybe a better approach would be to ask this: what are the values that we are trying to protect and promote?