

Primary Forms of Love

I would like to begin this lesson with a prayer that can be found in the preface to the Geneva Bible, the Bible translated into English in 1550. Until the King James Version was published in 1611, this was the most read Bible in English-speaking countries. It had the great purpose of putting the Word of God into the hands of the people, in the language that they knew best. They appended this prayer to the preface that I think is good for us to pray as we study God's Word together. Let us pray together.

Oh gracious God and most merciful Father, who has most graciously given us the rich and precious jewel of Your holy Word, assist with Your Spirit that it may be written on our hearts to our everlasting comfort, to reform us, to renew us according to Your image, to build us up into the perfect building of Christ, and to increase in us all heavenly virtues. Grant this, oh heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

We have been talking so far about what goals we ought to pursue in life, and particularly the biblical vision of *shalom*, or the coming of the kingdom of God, so that our priority is to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We have been talking about the kind of persons we ought to be. What is character from the Christian's point of view? It is to be conformed to the person of Christ so that Christ is formed in us—His characteristic virtues are reproduced in us by God's grace and by His Holy Spirit. Beginning with this section, we turned more particularly to what practices we ought to follow. They are the practices that embody love. We have seen how the Scripture summarizes the way of life that is good and pleasing to God in terms of the twofold commandment of love: to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul specifically says, with respect to the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, that this is a summary, a fulfillment of the Law. This fulfills the Law in that it is the motivation that leads us to do the acts that are good for our neighbor. Also, it summarizes the acts that are good for our neighbor. Thus there is a sense in which you can say there is only one great commandment: the great commandment to love our God, and the second that is like it, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Everything hinges on these two commandments. They do summarize it all.

Love is embodied in certain practices. It is not formless. It takes a definite shape. We have seen how it takes a definite form in terms of character in that the person of Christ is reproduced in us. Likewise, in terms of practice it takes a definite form. So love is embodied in the practice of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The key text here is Matthew 23:23. Here Jesus is pronouncing a number of woes on the Pharisees who are resisting God's Word. They devote themselves to the tradition of the elders and set it above the Word of God. Thus they undermine and undercut the Word of God. In 23:23 Jesus takes up the issue of the way in which they go about tithing: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." In other words, there are certain things in the Torah, the Old Testament revelation of the will of God, that are of such preeminent and intrinsic importance that they call forth our determined practice. And they are specifically the practices of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. If we practice these then the minor things will fall into line. We should give ourselves to the things that are of supreme importance. This restores to the Christian life a sense of balance and what really is important to God.

These three practices, justice, mercy, and faithfulness, are first of all attributes of God. In the Old Testament these terms are used mainly to describe God. He is the God of justice and mercy, He is the faithful God. As these practices are called for in us human beings, we are called to mirror in our lives by

our practices the moral character of God. We are called to justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The text in the Old Testament that is directly parallel to Matthew 23:23 is Micah 6:8: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” “To walk humbly with your God” is not exactly faithfulness, but faithful walking with God, the walk of trust before God is very close. It is not an exact parallel, but it is sufficiently parallel for us to see what Jesus is talking about in Matthew by looking at the threefold revelation of the will of God in Micah 6:8. These are the preeminent requirements that God sets before us because they are the things that so clearly mirror God’s own moral character. The Ten Commandments give us specific ways in which justice, mercy, and fidelity or faithfulness are to be expressed. They cover the ten spheres in which our conduct is oriented. But we should view the Ten Commandments in light of what Jesus says about the weightier matters of the Law. The commandments are there to give expression to the practice of justice, mercy or kindness, and fidelity or faithfulness.

It seems to me that we ought to make more of what Jesus Himself specifies as the weightier matters of the Law. I think these are three irreducible principles. That is, they cannot be described in terms of each other. As we look at them individually we will see that justice has to do with the God-given rules that embody just human conduct. Faithfulness has to do with maintaining relationships that are established. So, justice has to do with specifiable rules and faithfulness has to do with responsibility within a relationship. But mercy or kindness is not constrained in that sense. It does not depend either on rules or relationship. It is the free, open-ended response to God’s grace in which we mirror the plenitude of His mercy in reaching out to us sinners and redeeming us. The three together really do provide us with a powerful summary of the will of God. It shows us more precisely the practices which embody love. Love is the motive, it is the summary command, and it is preeminently expressed in justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Let us look at these three practices in more detail. We will first look at justice. If you ask what justice is, the short answer is that it is to render to each his or her due. We saw in the last lecture that there is a common understanding of natural justice. That is, there is a natural knowledge of the moral law. And there is a natural understanding of this principle, that to each should be given his or her due. That reflects the law that is written in the heart. We all know that, in principle. We have to ask further, what is it that is due to a human being? And beyond that, how do we know what is due to a human being? That is the epistemological question. I think for conversation in our society we should not immediately raise the epistemological question. That is more in the area of apologetics—how do we know what is due to another human being? I think we can begin to specify what is due to another human being in a way that is scripturally informed without citing Scripture. But ultimately what we know is due to another human being is fully revealed in Scripture. It is Scripture that keeps us from self-serving definitions of what is due another human being. This is particularly true when you see in Scripture the rationale for what is due another human being. It is because of our creation in the image of God. Each person is created in the image of God and has a divine calling that he or she should be able to fulfill. The Scriptures are primarily concerned with our liberty to serve God. Our responsibility is to maximize that liberty among people in order that they can serve God according to their gifts and calling. The Christian faith has a powerful impact because of the fact that God created us in His image and created us to serve Him. That is the theological basis for our insistence on justice in society. Justice means primarily that every human being should be treated according to what it means to be human. And the full understanding of what it means to be human is one who bears the image of God and has a divine calling to fulfill. Thus the first principle of justice is to maximize that liberty. This principle of justice works out in many different circumstances. For example, this understanding of justice was the motivating power for the eradication of slavery in the United States. We are finally drawn to the Scriptures for our knowledge of justice. I think we may use our scripturally-informed knowledge of justice in order to

cooperate with others in the world. There is a book on justice called *Good News about Injustice* by Gary Haugen. Haugen seeks to frame a definition of justice, but he notes that it is difficult to get an all-inclusive definition. “To each his due” is the standard definition, but then you have to fill in a lot to see what is due. He looks at it this way: “Fundamentally, justice has to do with the exercise of power. To say that God is a God of justice is to say that He is a God who cares about the right exercise of power or authority. God is the ultimate power and authority in the universe. So justice occurs when power and authority are exercised in conformity with His standards.”

Haugen says of injustice, “Injustice occurs when power is misused to take from others what God has given them, namely their life, dignity, liberty, or the fruits of their love and labor.” That is a great summary statement: using power to take away from others what is theirs by divine right. That is a good definition, a good orientation. It has had an impact on Western culture, being the culture I know better, when that understanding has worked out in practice. Haugen is president of Justice International. It is remarkable the number of people they have secured justice for globally. It is an important development in our Western evangelical tradition. Notice that Haugen says injustice occurs when power is misused to take from others what God has given to them. Justice is the rightful exercise of power and authority. I understand the principle of the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother,” to be the rightful exercise of authority in God’s ordained structures. The worst form of injustice is when power and authority are combined in it—that is, government mandated injustice. This is the most hideous form of injustice because all the power of the government lies behind it.

Righteousness is a broader term, which is used in the Old Testament to refer to all three of these practices—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. That is the comprehensive term. In the New Testament when Jesus says, “Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” that is parallel to this use of the term “righteousness” in the Old Testament. Righteousness embodies justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Justice is the more narrow term that is a part of righteousness. It is the part that deals first of all with what we call forensic justice. Forensic justice is the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. That is the first lesson of justice. If the Judge of all the earth cannot be counted on to do justice in this basic sense, the idea of a moral universe dissolves into chaos. That is what provoked Abraham’s question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice, to make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked?” That is fundamental to the character of God, and it is also fundamental to the way in which we live before God. Proverbs 17:15 says, “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.” A society that violates this basic principle sows the seeds of its own destruction, as Isaiah warned in Isaiah 5:20-24. “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.” When we come to our discussion of capital punishment in a later lecture we will need to seriously address that issue. It is a scandal that last year in the state of Illinois there were more innocent people on death row than there were guilty. It has been demonstrated that 13 of the 25 were innocent, and the governor was right in calling a moratorium until they could get that fixed. We cannot condemn innocent people to death. If there is a rationale for the death penalty, it is for the sanctity of human life. If innocent people are being put to death then the whole rationale for capital punishment collapses. That is something that we will deal with in depth when we come to the application part of this course.

That justice may be done, the Bible insists upon setting aside all forms of discrimination that tend to cloud moral justice. Justice must be blind to status for the sake of seeing the truth, and close-handed to bribes. Over and over again those two requirements are repeated. Justice must not show partiality but seek the truth in judgment. Justice must not show partiality to the rich or to the poor. But justice also must not accept bribes. Now, typically the poor do not bribe. It is typically the rich who give and take bribes. The principle of equal justice under the law that can be found in some governments derives from that biblical insistence. There is a combination of what comes from natural knowledge of the moral law

and scriptural knowledge of the moral law. It is impossible to disentangle those two sources. Equal justice under the law is over and over again a principle that is affirmed in Scripture because of the character of God. In other words, Christians have the strongest motivation for seeking equal justice under the law because of the way God is.

There is a second form of justice in addition to forensic justice. For want of a better term I call this protective justice. These are the structural safeguards for human rights. It is not just remedial as you might find in forensic justice, to uphold rights that have been violated in a court of law. There is a structural element that seeks to protect the weak and socially disadvantaged from that exploitation in the first place. The reality of the fallen world is such that we must always be on guard to preserve and protect the rights of the socially weak, specified in Scripture as the poor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Protective justice is mandated in the Law of Moses and preached by the great writing prophets of Israel. Justice not only rectifies injustice by deciding cases. Justice erects the structural safeguards that provide for justice. Isaiah 10:1-2 points to that protective justice: “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.” There was a structural problem in Isaiah’s time. Laws were enacted that discriminated against the oppressed, widowed, and orphaned. Laws were enacted that did not give them protection but rather exposed them to the exploitation of the rich. There was no use in bringing their cases into court because the law was against them. I think Psalm 82 is the most powerful statement in Scripture of the function of the civil government. We tend to go to Romans 13 for the law and order side of government, which is certainly necessary as it pertains to forensic justice. But let us look at Psalm 82. This is talking about human judges who are called gods. That does not mean this is referring to heavenly beings, in fact Jesus specifically identifies them in John 10 as human beings. Psalm 82:1-3 says,

God takes his stand in his own congregation;
 he judges in the midst of the rulers.
 How long will you judge unjustly
 And show partiality to the wicked?
 Vindicate the weak and fatherless;
 Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.

Verse 2 here is referring more to forensic justice, while verse 3 refers to protective justice. Rulers have a responsibility to erect structural safeguards for human rights, particularly against those who in their power would take those rights away. This is a prominent biblical theme and Haugen is right in his analysis of it. What I find most impressive about Haugen is his call for action and he shows us how it can be done. You have to be equipped in this world in order to be able to further justice. Haugen spent his whole time of preparation becoming equipped for the work he has now as the president of Justice International.

The second primary form love takes is mercy or kindness. Love is embodied by the practice of mercy. The Hebrew word is *hesed* which, as C. H. Dodd points out, is hard to render in English. It is most often translated mercy, compassion, or rich in mercy in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. I think what Dodd observes about the relationship between *hesed* and grace is especially important. He says, “In the New Testament period grace would have been felt to have a close relationship with *hesed* and it is evident that the associations of that word have had an influence in ordinary Greek use.” This means that as far as the New Testament is concerned, mercy and grace partially overlap in representing the meaning of *hesed*. The closeness of the relationship between mercy and grace can be observed from Paul’s use of both terms in Ephesians 2:4-7: “But because of his great

love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved...

Do you see the semantic domain in which this word operates? It is not in the area of justice. It is a distinct area of mercy and kindness. It does not depend on any rules or existing relationship. It is out of God's grace that He establishes a relationship with us. He has been faithful to that relationship, but the relationship itself is established solely because of His grace and kindness. I emphasize that because much has been written that interprets *hesed* as an obligation. These commentators would turn this term into a kind of fidelity, a kind of covenant obligation. It seems to me that by doing this they would turn grace into law, which is a serious theological mistake.

Francis Anderson, an Australian Old Testament scholar, has done a study of every instance of *hesed* in the Old Testament. His study shows convincingly that the conjunction of *hesed* with grace and compassion is primal and constant. He presents numerous instances in which *hesed* denotes behavior that copes with an emergency for which custom and contract provide no norms. *Hesed* is not prescribed. Do you see the freedom of *hesed*, the open-endedness of it? A second conclusion of Anderson's study is that *hesed* is an expression of love and generosity which the person need not have been expected to do. *Hesed* is not obligatory in that sense. Of course, *hesed* is in the list of things required of us in Micah 6:8, "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." But it is not prescribed in the same way justice is prescribed. It is free and open-ended. A third conclusion of Anderson's study is that behavior described with *hesed* is surprising, ingenious. Stories are told of people acting in a way that is described by the term *hesed*, and they are exciting stories precisely because they are so unusual. Fourth, the act of *hesed* is supremely meritorious but the performer could not have been blamed for its omission. *Hesed* just does not fall into those legal categories.

The tendency has been to turn grace and kindness into an obligation of fidelity. I think this distorts the meaning. *Hesed*—mercy, grace, or kindness—is in a different semantic domain than justice. Justice operates in the area of specifiable rules. In the court of law they are very precise. Equal justice under the law must be done. And protective justice is not a matter of kindness or compassion. What the government does in securing the protection of those who are socially disadvantaged is a matter of justice. And the first thing love does is secure justice—both forensic and protective justice. We are not being compassionate when we arrange the structures so that there is a safety net for those who are deprived in a society. That is a matter of protective justice. But *hesed* is different. Mercy is not mercy if it is not free. Grace is not grace if it is not free. Mercy is not something that is forced. It is something that we freely offer as a part of our open-ended response that mirrors the way God has dealt with us.

The biblical example that most effectively shows us kindness in action is the parable of the Good Samaritan. It has been established in that narrative that the two most important commandments that summarize God's will are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. The question then arises, who is my neighbor? Instead of giving a technical definition of the term "neighbor," Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. At the end of this parable Jesus asks, "Which of these three was a neighbor to the one in need?" He changes the question from, "Who is my neighbor?" to "Whose neighbor am I?" or "Who do I act toward in a way that a neighbor acts?" You can almost hear the grudging answer, "Well, I guess it is the one who showed mercy on the Samaritan." Jesus then commands, "Then go and do likewise." The importance of this is that there was not any prior existing

obligation to which the men in the story were to be faithful, no prescribed rule like, “If you are traveling down the road from Jericho and you meet any men in the ditch, it is your obligation to stop and help them.” In fact, the only relationship that existed between the beat-up Samaritan and the Jew who acted as his neighbor was a hostile one because of the long-standing hatred between Jews and Samaritans. The kind of excellence the Jew showed in caring for the Samaritan who was beaten and robbed was to take full care of him. He bound up his wounds, took him to the inn, provided for him, and told the inn-keeper to keep a tally of any additional expenses and he would pay him back. This was out of his sheer kindness. You cannot put that in a rule. It is out of his sheer kindness that he had compassion on a fellow human being. And we are called to that kind of amazing response as we have received mercy. Matthew 5:7 says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” Luke 6:36 says, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” That is our Christian calling.

The third practice we are called to is fidelity or faithfulness. This is primarily presented in Scripture as a characteristic of God. This is one of the fundamental attributes of God. In Moses’ farewell song to the assembly of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:3-4, Moses describes God as our rock with all the stability of that metaphor. And Moses calls Him the faithful God, the God of faithfulness on whom our whole salvation depends. God is a God who makes and keeps His commitments. It is because of God’s faithfulness that we can have assurance of our salvation. Those who come to Jesus He will never cast out. A relationship has been established and God is faithful to that relationship. In the New Testament the expression, “God is faithful,” appears in several perseverance texts. In 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 Paul says, “He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul explains that we will be faced with temptations, but when we are, God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able. He will make a way so that you will be able to bear it. If we succumb to temptation 1 John tells us that God is faithful and just to forgive our sins. The Bible even says in 1 Timothy that if we are unfaithful God remains faithful because He cannot deny Himself. God will bring us back if we are His children. God disciplines those whom He loves. Our whole salvation is our trust in the faithful God. Everything depends on that. It says in Habakkuk, “The just shall live by faith.” Paul makes clear that this does not mean the faithfulness of the person but rather their faith in the faithful God. We live by trusting in the faithfulness of God. That aspect of faith in which we commit ourselves to Christ and His faithfulness is not as much a decision on our part, but rather it is an open-handed, trusting response to all that God has done and all that He is to us in salvation. Understanding that our whole life depends on trust in the God who can be trusted should shape our lives in a fundamental way. We are children of trust; we are characterized by trust in the faithful God. And therefore we are people who can be trusted; we are people from whom fidelity in relationships can be expected.

One of the most powerful applications of God’s people being called to faithfulness is in Malachi. In Malachi chapter 2 Malachi is speaking of divorce and the emphasis is on fidelity to the covenant—first of all the religious fidelity to God and second the marriage fidelity to “the wife of your youth.” There were men in Israel who as they got older were abandoning the wives of their youth to marry younger women. That is wrong and it ought to be unthinkable for those who are characterized by trust. Thus this is the third primary characteristic of love: love is embodied in keeping commitments, in faithfulness to relationships that are established. This is a message we need very much in our generation. There is a serious weakness even among Christians in our ability to make commitments. I think we in the United States have imbibed much from our culture. Some of the statistics that are cited say that divorce in this country is even more prevalent among professing Christians than the population at large. These studies are hard to judge because many might call themselves Christians or “born again” but mean something very different than we do. But an even more startling statistic is that in the South and Southwest of our country where church attendance is the highest, the divorce rate is also the highest. In any case, divorce

is much too common in America and in many others around the world. Divorce is justifiable under some circumstances; I will argue that in a later lecture. But we have created a marriage-destroying culture and Christians are caught up in it. We need to understand that a primary form that love takes is faithfulness to people in relationships.

But we do resonate with the idea of being free from all commitments, not shackled by any bonds. For some this extends to the way in which they view church. They will come and go, switching from one church to another. As long as the music is to their liking and so forth, then they will stay in the congregation. But there is a restlessness and as soon as some better preacher comes to another church they will change over. This is wrong. Faithfulness is one of the primary forms of love, along with justice and kindness or mercy. These are the primary ways in which we reflect who God is. All of these need emphasis. These are the main characteristics of God that we are called to imitate. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness—practice these things.

One remarkable trend in American culture recently has been the renewed emphasis on the content of our character. In the 1990s there was shift in the United States toward affirming moral values. One program that was started around this time, called Character Counts, is rooted in the core belief in (quoting from their literature) “enduring, universal moral truths, principles of thought and conduct which distinguish right from wrong and define the essence of good character.” That is an affirmation that truth is noble. This organization, Character Counts, has on its list of desirable character qualities, “Respect others. Follow the Golden Rule.” The command from Matthew to “Do to others as you would have them do to you” is known in our culture as the Golden Rule. A public television program concluded their show one day by saying, “The larger issue is the need for the development of a public moral philosophy, grounded in the belief that moral truth exists and is accessible to people of reason and goodwill.” This is an example of how human beings have an inclination toward desiring equity and justice even though we are completely unable to enact that on our own. C. S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* comments on this phenomenon.

I think what we have been dealing with here in terms of character formation and practice is shaped within a particular community of those who believe in Christ as their Savior. Thus the way in which we understand trustworthiness is affected by our understanding of the biblical idea of faithfulness, and so forth. However, these things are not completely foreign and alien to the world around us. We can encourage unbelievers around us by our example to live more in accordance with those fundamental virtues that they know to be good. At the same time, we must emphasize to people that civic righteousness is not the same thing as the righteousness of God. To get into heaven you have to be more than a good citizen—you have to be perfect, and hence you need Christ. I think the basic dilemma we have is how to encourage justice, mercy, and faithfulness in society without losing our distinctive Christian edge, even our radical Christian understanding of what justice, mercy, and faithfulness really are. I think there is a way to do that. Paul Ramsey notes, “The chief problem for Christian social ethics is how to understand the relation between the law of nature and the righteousness of the covenant.” His understanding is love transforming the natural law. I think that is the right approach.

I think we have an illustration of love transforming the natural law in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was informed by these biblical principles of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. He talked about the context of love. But he was able to communicate to a wider audience, not just a Christian audience. He talked about the image of God—he took a theologically informed approach to natural justice. He would sometimes in his rhetoric make statements like, “The arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That is a natural law argument, that justice is the way it ought to be in terms of the kind of universe we live in and the kind of beings we are. More often he would say, “Let justice flow down like

rivers and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” He was quoting Amos, but he would not say, “As the prophet Amos said...” He simply incorporated those foundational truths that people should recognize as truth. Ethics in the modern world is fundamentally a discipline of giving public reason for action. Robin Luvin says, “To make a moral argument is to state one’s case in terms that require others either to concur in the choice or to offer better reasons for rejecting it.” I think Luvin has the right idea here. In our postmodern and religiously pluralist society in the United States we cannot simply cite the authority of Scripture. But we can use the truth we know from Scripture in order to construct arguments that are intelligible to people who are outside the faith. We can give public reasons on the basis of what humanity is as we understand that from public revelation, and we can make our case on that basis. I think that opens many doors for us that we should be aware of.