

“Solid Relationships”

Matthew 5:17-30

Our souls are created to live in relationship with God and with our neighbors

It might strike some as odd that in a week on relationships, we are talking about the Law of Moses, the teaching given by God to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. But here’s the “secret”: all the Law can be summed up in two statements. We are to love God and love others. It is really that simple; all the rest of the Law is the working out of those two essential commandments. Both are relational in their substance. How could it be otherwise, for God is relational in God’s very being.

So no, we don’t murder or commit adultery or steal from others. We honor God and worship on one or no thing else. Simple.

Nonetheless and understandably, when it comes to the Bible, few topics are as puzzling to modern-day Christians as the Law. When did the Law begin? What is in the Law? What does it mean for us today?

When did the Israelites receive the Law?

After God rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they head directly for Mt. Sinai, where Moses had met God and received his mission to confront Pharaoh. When they arrive at the mountain, Moses ascends and brings down God’s Law. Though it is later elaborated upon, the heart of the Law is given at Mt. Sinai, three and a half millennia ago. We call it “Law” but that is only one way to translate the Hebrew word, *torah*; we could just as easily use “instruction” or “teaching.” God told the Israelites that he was going to live with them, and the Law was the means of enabling that to happen, for God is holy and his people were most unholy. Imagine that God came to live upstairs in your house; I’m sure some things would have to change.

What is in the Law?

You will usually find the Law described as having two components – ritual or ceremonial law (priests, food, etc.) and ethical or civil law (don’t murder, honor your parents, etc.) Over the years, I’ve found that this division is not very helpful, as it leaves too many unanswered questions. What’s the deal with not planting a field with two kinds of grains (Leviticus 19:19)? That just seems weird – neither ritualistic nor ethical. So, some have come up with a different three-part division of the Law:

1. Moral Teachings

There is a lot in the Law that teaches us how our relationships with God and everyone else can thrive. For example, we are to keep God’s name sacred and not pursue other gods and idols. We are to honor our parents, refrain from murder, and give up our unhealthy desire for what someone else has. Sometimes these teachings are broad, but some are quite specific: “When you happen to come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has wandered off, you should bring it back to them. When you see a donkey that belongs to someone who hates you and it’s lying down under its load and you are inclined not to help set it free, you must help set it free.” Exodus 23:4–5 (CEB) These relational teachings often seem odd to us, in large part because they come from a very ancient and very foreign world. But if you look through the specifics at the underlying moral, you’ll learn a great deal about the character of God. Return my enemy’s ox/wallet/car/homework? Really? And if you were to put all these moral teachings into a big kettle and boil them down to their essence, you’d be left with two: Love God and love your neighbor (Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19). The two greatest teachings, as Jesus himself said.



2. The “Splint”

When Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, doing the one thing God had told them not to do, their relationship with God was ruptured and broken. They were separated from God. But God loved them and set about to repair what had been broken. The giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai was an essential step in that process of repair, renewal, and restoration. Of all the world’s people, it would be the “people of God,” the family of Abraham, who would know in great specificity how they were to live with one another. And God was going to live among them as God lived among no others. But this presented a problem. How were these most unholy people to live with a most holy God? So, God gave them a system of priests, sacrifices, and rituals that would provide a temporary fix, sort of a splint, that would enable them to live in God’s presence. This priestly system wasn’t capable of fixing the problem, i.e., healing the ruptured relationships from the Garden, but it could serve as a splint, holding things together enough until true healing could take place.

3. Training Wheels

The splint, the priestly system, was a help but there was still much for the people to learn. Most importantly, they had to learn that they were unholy people, plagued by sin. And they had to grasp that their unholiness could not mix with the holy. It would be like you or me flying too close to the sun and being consumed by the heat. So, God included in the Law some instruction on the importance of keeping different kinds apart. The Israelites weren’t to make shirts from two types of cloth, they weren’t to plant two kinds of grain in the field. Don’t mix! The Israelites were even taught that they were not to live like everyone. Since only the Israelites were given the Law and taught how to live in a right relationship with God, the Law marked them out as a special people. They were the ones who knew to keep the Sabbath, to avoid idols, to avoid certain foods, to say the Shema, to circumcise their male children, and so on. Some of these practices became important symbols of what it meant to be a Jew, emphasizing their separateness. As time went on, they became boundary markers enabling one to tell a Jew from a Gentile. Sabbath-keeping, food laws, and circumcision became the “membership badges” in the people of God. They became what Paul would refer to as the “works of the law.”

Jesus and the Law

We use the metaphors of a splint and training wheels because both are temporary. They were good and needed and important, but temporary. That is how Paul saw the Law. Priests, food laws, sacrifices, and the rest were needed, but their time had passed with the arrival of Jesus. Paul speaks of the Law as a nanny – needed at one time, but needed no longer (Galatians 3:23-29). With Christ’s arrival everything had been changed. Not only had Jesus atoned for humanity’s sins through his utter faithfulness even unto death, the Holy Spirit had come to those who placed their faith in Jesus. God had once dwelt in the marble temple, but now God dwelt in the believers, individually and corporately.

Though God’s people had moved on from the need for a splint or training wheels, did that also mean the teachings about living in a right relationship with God and others were also swept away? Of course not. The moral teachings embedded in the Law express the character and purposes of God. So, it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus said he hadn’t come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. Or that when asked about the greatest of all the teachings, Jesus would point to a passage from Deuteronomy 6 (Love God) and Leviticus 19 (Love your neighbor).

It is one thing to say that we should love others, it is another to really know what that means, how it plays out in our daily lives. That is why we have God’s moral Law, to teach us and guide us in our call to love. Should we obey this Law? How could we possibly do otherwise? So, yes, the Law points us inexorably to solid relationships.

Now to those relationships

Relationships. We've all got 'em. They come in many shapes and sizes. We all have parents, many of us have brothers and sisters. Most of us marry, and most of us have children. We all have friends and hopefully at least a few very close ones. We have extended families and large, vast networks of acquaintances.

We use the catch-all word "relationships" to describe them all. A few of our relationships are deep, rich, and life-long; indeed, sociologists tell us that we are incapable of sustaining more than a handful of truly deep relationships. Others are thin and barely recognizable as relationships at all; I have 1000+ "friends" on Facebook, whatever that means.

The question for us is this: What do all the relationships in our lives have in common? We could talk about marriage or friendship or parenting, but think about all the relationships in your life. What could we say about all of them?

We ought not to be surprised that our lives are a complex web of relationships. After all, we are made in the image of God, all of us, believer and non-believer alike. And this God, the creator of the cosmos, is inherently relational, three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, comprising a loving community for all eternity.

It is our claim that God is Trinitarian (three persons/one God) that makes concrete John's claim that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love requires an object – you love someone, someone loves you. Jesus reveals to us that God is love in God's very being, God's essence. God simply is a loving community of three; God simply *is* love.

So, we are to love. Love God and love neighbor, Jesus said, are the two most important of all God's teachings. But how is this love manifested – across all our relationships?

Faithfulness

I believe that "faithfulness" pretty well sums it up. The Bible is one long story of God's love manifested in his faithfulness. God makes promises and keep those promises – that is the essence of faithfulness.

As I've written about often, the word "faith" in Greek is *pistis*, and the best synonym for it is "trust." Thus, faithfulness is grounded in the trust of the other person. It is to trust that the other person will keep their promises, will live up to their end of the bargain, will be true to a covenant made.

God is all these things. God is "faithful and just" (1 John 1:9). God made promises to Abraham and to his descendants, and kept those promises in God's son, Jesus.

All promises are not the same. I entered into a marriage covenant with my wife, Angee. We are to be faithful to those promises and to one another. But I can also be faithful to someone in a business context. The question is the same: do I keep the promises I make? What a great thing it is to learn to never make promises you can't keep. Why? Because breaking promises destroys trust and faithfulness. Keeping promises builds solid relationships among solid souls.