

“When the Pharisees heard that [Christ] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’”. ~ Matthew 22:34-40 NIV

David Kalas, in *Emphasis*, suggests that Jesus offers us here a two-bubble builders’ level by which we can align and guide our lives. Christ commands us to pursue personal holiness and social holiness; to walk with God and work with God; to seek an inner transforming relationship with God and to live an outward life of compassionate caring for the needs of others, even those we consider our enemies! My own heart and life desperately need this two-bubble level: to line my heart up with God’s loving heart and to line my life up with God’s acts of mercy and forgiveness, even to those that reject him.

We live in a world that encourages us to ignore Christ’s simple level. We are manipulated by fear to demonize those who disagree with us, to hate our neighbors by identifying them as enemies, even to kill and torture them if we are convinced that by so doing we are defending our country.

(Has defending our nation become a “golden calf,” an idol we worship instead of the God of Love, the Christ of the Cross?)

Christ, whose incarnation reveals the very character of God, calls us to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven”. (Matthew 6:44) Christ lived this out with a loving, healing touch in the Garden of Gethsemane after Peter’s impetuous act of violence to one of Jesus’ captors. He acted on these words from the cross when he prayed for his tormentors, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” If we tend to dismiss these words and actions of Christ as impractical for today’s world we should be asking ourselves “who or what then do we worship and follow, if not the Christ of the Gospels?”

It was this same Christ whose encounter with Saul on the road to Damascus transformed him from a violent persecutor, in self-righteous defense of his faith and his nation, into the Paul who could write the following words of practical love and forgiveness to the church at Colossae:

“As therefore, God’s picked representatives of the new humanity, purified and beloved of God himself, be merciful in action, kindly in heart, humble in mind. Accept life, and be most patient and tolerant with one another, always ready to forgive if you have a difference with anyone. Forgive as freely as the Lord has forgiven you. And above everything else, be truly loving, for love is the golden chain of all the virtues. Let the peace of Christ

rule in your hearts, remembering that as members of the one body you are called to live in harmony, and never forget to be thankful for what God has done for you.

Let Christ's teaching live in your hearts, making you rich in the true wisdom. Teach and help one another along the right road with your psalms and hymns and Christian songs, singing God's praises with joyful hearts. And whatever work you may have to do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, thanking God the Father through him".

~ Colossians 3:12-17 J.B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English

In a world polarized by issues, personalities, latent racism, and often torn apart by emotional disagreements and violent confrontations, we need to be reminded of Christ's call to love God and to love our neighbors, at whatever cost to our own sense of security and comfort. Paul encourages us to "Let Christ's teaching live in [our] hearts, making us rich in the true wisdom" when he issues his impassioned plea to the church in Rome, which was certainly undergoing severe persecution at the time from its "enemies" :

"With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity". ~ Romans 12:1,2 J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English

My prayer is that our congregation will allow Christ's two-bubble level to act as the judge and guide for both our private and public lives ~ that we will be constantly transformed, re-molded, into the kind of active followers of Christ whose lives demonstrate that Christ's teachings **are** the practical solution for our hurting world's most pressing needs ~ that we will put Christ's words first and not let the world squeeze us into its mold. Love God and love your neighbor!

Under God's Mercy,

Howie