

Life in a wholly new dimension

Romans 14:1-23

- I. Garrison Keillor used to close the monologue on his radio show with the line: “And that’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” What can I say, but that’s a good description of this congregation!

We are all like the lovely people of Lake Wobegon because we too inflate our own achievements and abilities. At the same time we come to church because we know that however fictional Lake Wobegon is, with humor it reveals an unpleasant truth about us. It reveals our sin, our pride. We all think more highly of ourselves than we ought.

This truth is brought home to us when we take stock of ourselves in light of the Ten Commandments. In our heart of hearts we know that we have not kept the Ten Commandments as we should. A few examples:

1. First Commandment: “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods.” But instead of loving the Lord our God with all our heart and strength, we’re all about me, me, me, me, me. We’d rather be god than have a God.
 2. Second Commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” We are guilty of using God’s name as if it meant nothing. Casually muttering under our breath. Cursing in anger. Exclaiming in surprise: OMG!
 3. Ninth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.” This Commandment exposes my envy of what my neighbors have, my brother has, and the like. I want that candy bar, those shoes, that house, those friends. More, more, more. It’s always something.
 4. In short, we have not lived as we ought. We have been timid when we ought to have been bold, permissive when we ought to have been tough, and harsh when we ought to have been lenient. As Paul writes: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom 7:19). We have not kept the Ten Commandments as they were meant to be kept.
- II. Did I lead a good life?
 1. The Book of Leviticus is a manual applying to the life of the ancient Israelites. It presents moral and ritual purity laws that separated the Israelites from the neighboring fertility cults. Leviticus 11, for example, deals with clean and unclean foods. It distinguishes those animals that can be eaten from those that cannot. Thus, the Israelites could eat animals that chew the cud and had completely split hoofs, such as oxen, sheep, deer, and goats. But not animals, such as camels or rock badgers, that either did not have split hooves or did not chew the cud. Such commandments seem strange to us today, but they developed over time in the challenges of that culture and time. They kept people safe from diseases and provided boundaries from their idol-worshipping neighbors.
 2. The New Testament takes up the law, its place, and its fulfillment. Recall the account of the lawyer who asks Jesus: What do I need to do to inherit eternal life? Jesus answers: “You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all our soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). This echoes Deut 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Lev 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

3. Obedience to and fulfillment of the law is absolutized in Matthew. Thus Matt 5:17-20: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; **I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.** For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, **not an iota, not a dot,** will pass from the law until all is accomplished. **Whoever then relaxes one of the least** of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, **you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**” At the time of Jesus “the law” consisted of 613 laws. Note also the five woes against the Pharisees in Matt. 23.
4. What is Paul’s answer to the place of the law in the Christian life? First of all, he holds that “the law” means both the moral and the ritual law. It is important to remember that Paul does not divide the law in order to say that the ritual law is over, but the moral law is forever. He does not say: Now that Christ has come we are free from food laws, but we are bound forever to the moral law. Moreover, in his letter to the Philippians he writes that he himself has led a blameless life according to the law: “If any man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more [including] ... as to righteousness under the law [I am] blameless” (Phil 3:6).
5. In Romans 14 Paul tries to help his fellow Christians settle conflicts among themselves about which laws and customs to follow. They had conflicts because some been Jewish and others had been Gentile. They had different mores and practices. What should they do now?

First of all, he writes: Think about your neighbor. Thus Rom 14:15: “If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.” And in 14:20-21: “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats. It is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble.” Paul’s answer: First think about your neighbor.
6. Concern for the neighbor = the law of love. In the previous chapter (Romans 13:8-10), Paul had already summed up the commandments: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this sentence: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.’” This echoes 1 Cor 13:13: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” [Here “faith” is a virtue, not “saving faith,” as shown in section III, particularly III.2, below.] Recall how the law is summed up in Luke 10:27-28: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (cp. Matt 22:34-40, Mk 12:28-31; Deut 6:4-5 and Lev 19:18).

III. **But:** At the end of Romans 14 Paul sets the Christian life **in a wholly new dimension:** Rom 14:23b: “[F]or whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” **Not love**, but **faith** is the wholly new dimension of the Christian life.

1. Because of the cross and resurrection we have **forgiveness**. As Paul writes in Rom 14:8-9: “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, **we are the Lord’s**. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” This is our base. The cross and resurrection.
2. What is this faith? Gal 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I **live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**”

Note that Paul does not say: Now that I am a Christian I live by love. To the contrary, I live **by faith** in him who loved me and gave himself for me. Faith precedes love.

This faith that precedes love is saving faith (Rom 14:23b), not faith as a virtue [see section II.6 above], created in us by the Word, not by us, whether adults or infants.

“Further, we are not primarily concerned whether the baptized person believes or not, for in the latter case Baptism does not become invalid. Everything depends upon **the Word** and commandment of God. This, perhaps, is a rather subtle point, but it is based upon what I have already said, that Baptism is simply water and **God’s Word** in and with each other; that is, when **the Word** accompanies the water, **Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking**. For my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it. Baptism does not become invalid even if it is wrongly received or used, for it **is bound not to your faith but to the Word.**” (Large Catechism IV:52-53; Tappert 443, Kolb/Wengert 463).

3. Therefore as **faith** itself is **hidden**, so, too, the **Christian life is hidden**. This means that even we cannot see and cannot judge the Christianness of our own lives. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 4:3b-4: “I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.”
4. We live under his mercy, his forgiveness. Col 3:17: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”
5. Therefore as Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15:57: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”