

Come and See 2024: The Way of Love

Two Trees: [Watch on YouTube](#)

How do you assess a life? How do you assess your own life as you look back? What good have you done? What have you achieved? How will people remember you and speak about you when you're not in the room? How do you assess another's life and reputation? What scales can we use for something so complex and demanding? Yet without scales, without measures, how do we know ourselves what to aim for? How do we know how to live and to order our lives?

Jesus has another of his contrasts here, which the gospel of Matthew loves to draw out. In The Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about the importance of the Torah, the law of the Old Testament for all Christians, but he's also continuing reinterpreting Torah for his own day and for the church. The law is given once and for all but is also a living thing in two ways; the law needs to be lived out by real people in real lives and the law will also need continual reflection and reinterpretation in the life of the church.

In The Sermon on the Mount Jesus applies a stricter interpretation for some laws than the rabbis of his day. For two of the laws in the second table, you shall not kill, and you shall not commit adultery but elsewhere in the gospel there's a much more flexible approach to the Sabbath, making clear that the Sabbath is created for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath.

Keeping love at the very centre of the law is vital to this ongoing work of interpretation, hence the importance of the two greatest Commandments and the way of love. Love is our measure and compass, vital also, is Jesus great contrast and image of human lives as being like trees. You will know them by their fruits, are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles in the same way every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad trees bear bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree bear good fruit, every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire, thus you will know them by their fruits.

What kind of fruit are you bearing at this stage of your own life before God? How are you responding to God's great love for you in Jesus Christ? It's good to ask that question in relation to the Commandments in the first table and the first of Jesus greatest Commandments, how do you respond to the commands to have no other Gods, not to make idols, to honour God's name and to keep the Sabbath? What kind of fruit are you bearing?

But if anything, it's even more important and more helpful to ask the question regularly in terms of the second tablet of the law and the second of Jesus Commandments, to love our neighbour as ourselves. The six Commandments in the second table, all have love for neighbour right at the centre. You'd have noticed that some of the Commandments are framed in a positive, you shall have no other gods before me, and some are framed as a negative, you shall not commit adultery.

But when we think about the Commandments as a whole, in relation to our lives, it's always important to think in terms of a positive and a negative, each is a mirror of the other, as it were. The negative command about not making idols has a positive aspect as well, whilst it's not good to worship idols, it is vital to worship and love the Lord our God. Whilst it's important not to bear forth witness, put positively, it's vital to embrace truth and integrity in the whole of our lives.

The second table of the law rightly understood takes us to the heart of what it means to be human and also to a foundation and vision of a good society and for the whole of God's world. These are Commandments which have been found to be good and valid in many different societies across many different cultures over 3,000 years of history.

The sixth commandment, honour your father and your mother, stresses the ordering of family life across the generations with a particular emphasis on children offering respect to and taking care of parents. Families come in many shapes and sizes especially today, there will always be tensions and difficulties within those families and particularly, across the generations. The sixth commandment emphasizes what love means within these relationships, love must be grounded in honor and respect of one generation for another. The Commandment has far-reaching implications for the ways in which a society cares for the aged and infirm both within families and offers care through the state.

The kindred bonds of family are core building blocks of a wider society, to be reinforced and supported by our laws and not eroded by them. The seventh commandment carries within it a deep respect for life, you shall not murder. The Hebrew word here clearly should be translated murder not simply kill, every human life is sacred and important to God. The interpretation of this commandment is at the center of many different ethical debates in contemporary culture, from earliest times Christians have debated whether or not it's right for a Christian ever to bear arms and whether conflict can ever be justified. The early Christians were committed to pacifism and the pacifist tradition has always had an honorable place within the church, but the majority of the church down the years has stressed that war and conflict can be the lesser of two evils in certain circumstances and has developed criteria for a just war. Therefore, many Christians today find an honorable calling in the armed forces and in the defence of their country.

There's a vigorous debate around this commandment in relation to the question of abortion and the balancing of the the rights of an unborn fetus and the rights of the mother who is bearing the child. At what stage of the development of an embryo is it right to call that embryo a person? How does love help us navigate these questions in dialogue with the medical profession? Some Christians see abortion as always breaking the sixth commandment, others would see abortion as again the lesser of two evils but only in certain limited circumstances. Finally how does this commandment affect our understanding of the voluntary ending of life in the face of great suffering and extreme old age? There's pressure from wider society to allow legal euthanasia within the United Kingdom the majority of Christians hold to the principle that paliative care in the face of illness is absolutely right, but that euthanasia would have significant risks for individuals and for society as a whole, because of this commandment.

The seventh commandment as we have seen is reinterpreted by Jesus, you shall not commit adultery. This commandment sets marriage as well as family at the heart of a good society and a fruitful life, in line with the approach taken in Genesis 1, yet there are limits and balances to this. Not everyone is commanded to marry, Jesus himself remained single and there's an honored place in the church for the single life. Adultery fractures marriages and is always serious, the debates around the implications of marital breakdown have continued from the time of the New Testament to the present day particularly on whether it's possible for a divorced person to remarry. There's also a vigorous debate in the life of the church at the present time around same sex relationships and whether these can be blessed by God. Some argue that these can never conform to marriage others that there are many similar goods of marriage in a stable, permanent and faithful same-sex partnership, in mutual companionship and good fruit for society which is a view I take myself.

You shall not steal and you shall not bear false witness both have a broad implication in the contemporary world. Honesty, truthfulness and integrity are to be at the foundation of society and what it means to live.

Finally the tenth commandment is in many ways the most far-reaching of them all you shall not covet. Here the Commandments move from the ordering of our actions and words, to the ordering of our desires and motivations. What matters is what's going on inside us, this is where both harm and blessing have their origin. The good fruit and the bad are framed in the seeds of our desires, the living of a good life flows from a heart which is set right with God. The tenth commandment also demonstrates very clearly the need for continual and careful interpretation of the law because of the times in which it was written, the Commandment assumes and condones slavery, which we would never want to do today.

By their fruits you shall know them, says Jesus. How do we bear good fruit, not only by knowing what is right, but also by putting our roots down deep into the love of God, the second table is intimately related to the first. But what can we say about the Commandments in terms of a wider vision of the world and the challenges we face? Well that's for next time, come and see...