

Anyone who has ever had children knows this simple fact: People don't do things just because they're told to. People do only what they want and need. We only keep rules if we see ourselves as benefitting from keeping them.

The road rules, for example. We all know what it's like to be in a hurry, and to sit at a red light fuming cos there's no cars coming in the other direction. Or we've taken a wrong turn and we know that we can fix it with a quick 'u-ey' but there's a 'no u turn' sign in the middle of the road. Sometimes, we might just take the risk. But mostly, we keep to the rules even though it feels costly, because we know that it would be impossible for our roads to be safe if people just decided that they'd drive however they like.

It's similar with other laws that govern us. We know the kind of world we want to live in, and we protect that by agreeing together that some actions make us all unsafe. Laws help us to trust that we can go safely out our front door knowing we probably won't be hurt or ripped off.

The people of Israel in the desert had recently escaped slavery in Egypt. The only law they knew was the oppressive law of Pharaoh, who had trapped and exploited them. In the wilderness they learned how to be a different community, to live out their new freedom, and to be guided by God. God not only had to take the people out of slavery, but then had to take the slavery out of the people. And part of that, is the giving of the law – starting with the ten commandments that we heard today.

You'll remember that Jesus, when asked which was the greatest commandment said this: “‘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 first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall **love** your neighbour as yourself.’” Love God, love people. This is the essence of the law, according to Jesus.

This is a great help when thinking about the commandments, because through this lens we can see the list of do's and don'ts as being ***a description of what love looks like***. Love toward God includes honouring God's name, not treating God casually, like one thing among other things, that we can either take or leave, like or dislike. Love toward God involves acknowledging that God is the Source, the one in whom all of us live and move and have our being. God is not 'out there' to be named – casually or otherwise – by us. We are in God, receiving our life and our own name, and our power to name other things, from God. Likewise, as soon as we compare God to something, or attempt to make a picture of God, we've reduced God to something that our language can describe and possess. And all such pictures are false – ultimately, idolatrous.

When it comes to loving other people, the demands of love include honouring those who gave us life; making sure they're not left destitute when they are elderly, or sick. They include not taking what is not ours – whether another life, another's possessions, or another's spouse – and also remembering that life isn't all about working to buy and sell. Rest and freedom are part of God's good design for ourselves and others.

When put like this, the commandments seem like a no-brainer. But a look at our Western society now tells us that these good laws of love – once foundational to our social existence – are being shoved aside in favour of 'me getting what I want when I want it.'

- elderly folk are mocked and belittled, and subject sometimes to family abuse and neglect
- our whole commercial world is based on coveting what others have – their houses and boats and good food and overseas holidays. Advertising would sink without coveting.
- adultery is considered normal – and while still acknowledged as hurtful, has become almost inevitable in people's thinking
- Consumerism *requires* that some people never have time off to rest from their factory or retail labour – in some cases, slave labour.
- we have become de-sensitised to the taking of life, especially in video games or crime dramas.

We are all caught up in a world that systematically rejects and denies the law of love, whether love of God, or love of neighbour. And just attempting to 'be good' and 'keep the rules' won't help us much when we're enmeshed in the values and patterns of a society that rejects them. It goes too far against the grain, and would require us to insulate and distance ourselves too much from the world that we're asked to be salt and light within. It's this impulse of separation that gives rise to communities like Gloriavale, or the Amish, which while perhaps attractive on some level can also be seen as a form of hiding from the world God loves.

The apostle Paul came to realise this. He had everything going for him as a law-keeper – the right birth, the right tribe, the right religious belief. As far as external things go, he was top of the class. But Paul discovered something far more important than worldly status and behaviour. He met Jesus the Christ. And in that meeting, and in the growing in relationship with Jesus that followed, he discovered life in the Spirit. Life that meets the demands of love not with rule-keeping, but from the inside, flowing out from the joyful connection he had with Christ.

In fact, he came to see all the gains of his religious life and his high-status birth were nothing, rubbish, compared to being 'found' in Christ. This experience of being 'found' involves the stripping away of all the things we rely on to make us 'good citizens' and receiving instead the spiritual belonging and identity that we have in God. Instead of the law of love being something 'out here' that we obey, it becomes something 'in here' that rises up as a response of love in each moment, as we tap into the current of God's love.

Provided, of course, that we are not fooling ourselves into thinking that our natural impulses are the calling of Christ in us. It's easy to take Christian freedom and use it to just live how I want. Truly knowing Christ, as Paul says, leads us into sharing in Christ's sufferings, as well as experiencing the power of his resurrection. And it is only available to us if we deliberately allow our minds and hearts to be shaped by God's word, by prayer, and by the guidance of our Christian community. As Paul writes in Romans: 'do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.'

The whole point of Christ coming into this world, as I see it, is the renewal of the human heart and mind by giving us the Spirit. No longer do we attempt to 'be good' in accordance with laws and rules, but instead we seek to 'know Christ', and from this place where Jesus lives in us, we are enabled to love as God loves.

Happily, Paul acknowledged that he hadn't attained this fully, and neither do any of us, in this life. But this is our goal and our desire and our heavenly call. Let us press on toward it.