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Perseverance of the Saints and Christian Living: What Does the Lord Require of You?

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God and Love

The Bible tells the story of a long human march toward understanding God in the way God is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, namely, that God is love. Before human beings were able to receive that understanding, they had to learn that there is only one true and living God, and that God is the absolute, transcendent Lord of the universe, and that God is more concerned about moral behavior than about ritual activity, and that God acts in history in order to create a community of people to be the people of God.

Only after they had understood these and other truths about God were people prepared to grasp the amazing story of the Incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth and the grand work of Jesus in preaching the Kingdom of God, teaching a new way of life to men and women, welcoming children, healing the sick, creating a new community of faith, and, most important of all, sacrificing his own life and then rising again to deliver human beings from all of the enemies which were destroying their lives, including death itself. In the light of the sacrifice of Good Friday and the victory of Easter Sunday, people were able at last to begin to understand what John meant when he wrote, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16).

John expressed the responsibility of people who are privileged to know that God is love in one of the most simple and also profound statements in the Bible: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). That summarizes our theology—God first loved us—and our ethics—we love because God first loved us.

During his historical ministry Jesus had taught that what God wants us to do is to love. During the last week of his life, he engaged in discussions and debates with various people in Jerusalem. One man asked him which of the commandments in the law was the most important (Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34). The man was a lawyer and a scribe, that is, a person who spent his life copying and learning the Torah. He therefore was an

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expert in the law. If he was a devout Jew, he treasured the law (see Psalm 119 for the feelings which devout Jews had about the law). He believed that the law provided people with the guidance they need to live life well. His question was therefore a good and important one: Out of all the things God has commanded, which is most important? In modern terminology we may say that he was asking, “What is the meaning of life? What’s it all about?”

The question was a good one despite the fact that the man was insincere and hoped to embarrass Jesus by showing that Jesus, who functioned as a rabbi, was not in fact au courant concerning learned views of the law.

Jesus was famous for his indirect manner of communication. He told oblique parables which even his disciples couldn’t understand (see Mark 4). When asked a direct question, he sometimes answered with a question (see Luke 20:25-26). He was like the philosophy professor whose student asked, “Why do you always answer our questions with questions?” and who responded, “Do I do that?”

But on this occasion Jesus was perfectly direct, presumably because, despite the questioner’s motives, the question was such a good one. Jesus told the questioner which commandment was the greatest; it was Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

And then he gave the questioner a bonus; he told him what the second most important commandment was. It was Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And then he gave him a third insight, one which the questioner probably could never have thought to ask for: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

So, there we have it. God is love. We love because God first loved us. The meaning of our lives is to love God and to love our neighbors. When we have done that, we have done what the Lord requires of us.

Love and Laws

If that is true, then why are there so many commandments in Torah? It is because love is not only an emotion but also a behavior. While it is important for us to have strong affections for God and others, it also is important for us to act in certain ways, the ways of love. The many commandments in the law, and the counsel of the Wisdom literature, and the oracles of the prophets, are all guidelines in the kind of conduct that constitutes love for God and neighbor.

For example, we love God by having no other gods, by making no graven images, by not taking God’s name in vain, by observing the Sabbath day, and by honoring the religious traditions of our parents—the first five of the Ten Commandments. And we love our neighbors by not murdering them, by not committing adultery, by not stealing, by not bearing false witness against them, and by not coveting their possessions—the next five of the Ten Commandments.

In the chapel of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary there is a large pulpit with a wood carving on the front of the two tablets of the law, with the numbers 1-5 on the first tablet and 6-10 on the second. But the words of the Ten Commandments are not carved there. Instead, on the first tablet are the words of Deuteronomy 6:5, and on the

second the words of Leviticus 19:18. That communicates precisely what Jesus was teaching, namely, as Paul later put it, “Love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10).

You and I and all other human beings were created to become lovers, people who freely love God with all our hearts and who love our neighbors as ourselves. That is our true destiny. That is the meaning of our lives.

It is in the light of all these truths—that God is love, that we love because God first loved us, that love of God and of other human beings is the purpose of our lives, that love is the fulfilment of the law—that we understand the point of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

Love and Perseverance

If we Christians are sure that God is love, and that God loves us, and that God always will love us, and that nothing “in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39), then what does all that tell us about the doctrine of the perseverance of saints? The answer is that this doctrine is part of the package of ideas that, taken together, free us up to become people who love God and their neighbors. Because we are confident that God will never cease to love us, we are delivered from our uncertainty to live freely a life of love before God. We do not have to try to do right and to believe aright in order to insure that God will always love us; because we know that God will always love us, we are free to love God and to love other people, and we will do that by doing right and believing aright.

Consider the alternative. If we were not sure that we could not be separated from the love of God—if we lived with the permanent possibility that by our doubts or our conduct we might somehow forfeit the love of God and be lost once again—we would live at all times with uncertainty and fear. Such fear could motivate us to abstain from certain kinds of conduct, and to do certain kinds of religious activities such as attending church; fear is a powerful human emotion and a powerful motivator.

But fear cannot motivate us to love. You cannot be frightened into loving. God’s “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18) from our lives and replaces it with trust and confidence in God and in God’s everlasting love for us, and with gratitude, and eventually with love.

So the biblical teaching that God will preserve all saints in this life and in the life to come, so that they shall never slip away from the embrace of the divine love, underwrites God’s work of changing us all from narcissists into persons who love God and who love one another. That is the role of the doctrine of perseverance in the lives of all Christians.

A Parable

I close with a parable.

Two young married couples live next door to each other. Their houses were built at the same time and look a lot alike, and the couples are about the same age and have been married for about the same length of time.

One morning, it happens that both of the husbands say to their wives, “I’d like to have my favorite meal for supper this evening.” Then the husbands leave for their day of work.

They return to their homes at about the same time. They wash up, and then they sit down for supper. Their wives have cooked their favorite meals, and they enjoy them.

The two stories sound identical, but they are, in fact, entirely different.

In one home, the husband is a cruel, domineering man who gets what he wants from his wife by intimidating and bullying her. His greatest threat is that he will divorce her; this frightens her because she doesn't know how she would survive if he did this. When he tells his wife to cook his favorite meal, she knows she had better do it or there will be a price to be paid. The simple truth is that she is afraid of him, afraid of what he may do if she doesn't cook the meal. So she cooks his favorite meal and watches anxiously to see if he's happy with it.

In the other home, the husband is a kind and gentle man. He loves and trusts his wife, and she loves and trusts him. They are happily married, and they enjoy being together and making each other's life one of joy. When she learns that her husband wants his favorite meal for supper, that is all she needs to know—she is delighted to cook it for him.

Our question is: Is God more like the first husband or more like the second? Or perhaps we should put it the other way around: Which husband is more like God, the bully or the lover?

I think it is the lover.

God is not a bully. God does not attempt to bring about the transformation of Christians by intimidating them, telling them that they may lose their salvation if they do not behave. Rather, God transforms Christians by lovingly forming them into persons who love. While there is a place for rules, and even a place for warnings—after all, we can hurt ourselves and we can hurt others by our conduct—in the end God's work in our lives is carried out by the moral force of unconditional love.

Conclusion

God's sanctifying work in the lives of Christians is carried out in a way that is consistent with the facts that God is love and that God's goal for Christians is that they become a community of people who love God with all their hearts and who love their neighbors as themselves. There is no place in this work for intimidation, but only for the moral force of love. If love cannot change us, nothing can. But, of course, it can.