

Introduction

'I never realised I could fall asleep on a treadmill until I did so while trying to read Leviticus' is a known quote from a theology student.

But Leviticus is more than a list of arcane rules and customs. It is a profound theological statement about life with God. Chapter 19 is worth reading in its entirety. In our reading we find the most famous verse in the whole of Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (verse 18).

When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus quotes this and Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Heart and Soul

We say don't we, when someone puts in a lot of effort, 'he or she put their heart and soul into it'

It describes a high level of energy, commitment and enthusiasm.

When we consider where and when we might have put our heart and soul into something we might get a sense of this call of God to his people and ask ourselves if this applies to our life of faith.

The Shema

The words Jesus uses, form part of the Jewish Shema, the bedrock of Jewish prayer life. It is recited twice daily by devout Jews. It begins 'Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all you're your strength'.

For Jesus, this is the first and most important commandment. But Jesus expands our understanding by adding this verse from Leviticus. His point is, it is not about ranking individual laws, not about deconstructing the range of God's law into manageable proportions, not about being selective about individual laws, but of learning to see their holistic synergy – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Holistic

The commands to 'love the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 6.5) and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19.18) had been central to Judaism for centuries, and the Jewish leaders do not dispute what Jesus says here about 'the greatest commandment'. Loving your neighbour as yourself is not something new Jesus brings to the party.

Josephus saw virtue in human relationships as an aspect of reverence for God. Rabbi Akiva, a respected 1st century Rabbi saw 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' as at the heart of human relationships. Even Rabbi Hillel, from a generation earlier said 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour' and of course here it is in Leviticus.

So, this is nothing new.

Biblical understanding of love

The key problem in interpreting this double commandment for our time is that we lose sight of the biblical meaning of love. Our culture has equated love with intense emotion.

But biblical love is not strictly emotional.

God's love is active. God chooses to love Israel. To love God with all one's heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us. Feelings and emotions do not enter the equation.

In short, biblical loving is a choice, not a feeling.

Love as emotion

To love God with all our heart, soul and mind, seems nearly impossible if we think of love as an emotion. How do we conjure up feelings for something as remote, mysterious, and disembodied as the concept of God? We cannot look into God's eyes, we cannot wrap our arms around God, or even see the face of God.

Likewise, loving our neighbour is difficult. If love is merely our emotional response to the person next to us, we are likely to be turned off rather than moved to love. Furthermore, how can we legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love in an emotional sense?

Biblical love

Biblical love is something we do. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous.

To love our neighbour as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we love emotionally.

To love our neighbour as ourselves is to make a conscious choice and act upon it.

And what about love of God?

Again, as God chose Israel and elected to forgive her at every offense, so we can choose God and serve him in every way. We can love with our heart: through generosity to God's people. We can love with our soul: by worshiping God and praying for our neighbours and ourselves. And we can love with our minds: studying God's Word and letting it correct us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world.

Two Commandments, one movement

A key point here is the holistic nature of the two commandments. When we love God's people, we are always, and at the same time loving God. They are inseparable.

This is why we share the Peace. We cannot be in right relationship with God unless we do everything possible to be in right relationship with our neighbours as well. It is to wish them well; to wish them the shalom of God.

We approach communion as a community, the body of Christ, united by the Spirit in love, and together, as a communion and in communion with each other and with God, we both receive love as well as give ourselves in love to Christ and to each other.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.