



## Christian living in a polarized society

A central theme of the Gospel is the Great Commandment, which is summarized in Matthew 22:36-40:

*“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*

*Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

Already in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provided the New Testament perspective on this teaching.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).*

The Lord makes it clear that there are no acceptable excuses for not loving one’s neighbor. Although the teaching is quite clear, the danger exists that one might seek an out by playing with the words. For example, how do you define ‘enemy?’ Is one’s enemy only the person who stands against them in adversarial situations, such as on a battlefield or in a courtroom?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘enemy’ as *one that is antagonistic to another*. The meaning of ‘antagonize’ is *to incur or provoke the hostility of*. Simply stated, my enemy can be the person who annoys me, the person I disagree with.

On this basis, one might feel that they are surrounded by enemies in their everyday life. This feeling is heightened by the power of social media. 2020 has been an exceptional year – with an exceptional amount of stressors pressing on all of us both individually and in society as a whole. The current political turmoil has produced strong feelings in the minds and hearts of many. As Christians who, through the baptismal vow, have made a

■ | commitment to grow into a new life in Christ, it is critical that we evaluate where we stand relative to fulfilling the Great Commandment.

Have political issues become a primary focus of our attention and thoughts? We are all allowed to have whatever opinion we wish relative to issues, including politics. However, what is our priority as Christians – current day issues or our relationship with Christ? Jesus Himself said that *this world will pass away...but My word will never pass away.*

The Lord does not expect that we will seek *common* ground when we have a disagreement. He expects that we will seek *higher* ground. The reason we love our neighbor is that we love Christ, not because our neighbor is always so lovable. Jesus Christ is 'the higher ground.' We need to keep in mind that every one of us depends on His grace. Human definitions of right and wrong, good and bad, must be subordinated to His law, the law of love. If the new life in Christ is developing in us, we can come together in Him, by focusing on Him and the Gospel.

In Romans 14, Paul provides a wonderful teaching of how, in a practical sense, we can and should seek the higher ground in Christ. It is beneficial to read the entire chapter (only 23 verses). Verses 12 – 15 can help one to grasp the essence of the message:

*So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.*

***The Law of Love***

*I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*

Paul makes it clear that we should not allow differences, even something as trivial as tastes in food, to cause us to judge others or speak ill of them. The vow we have made obligates us to give account to God for our actions, to neither judge others nor cause them to stumble. As Christians, we must always keep in mind that God is the only One who can properly evaluate (i.e. judge) someone's thoughts, words and actions. In lieu of judgement, He has chosen to free us from the limitations of our human perspectives. As the new life in Christ grows within us, we recognize the need to seek, and the way in which we can, find the higher ground in Jesus Christ. Romans 12:18 (NLT) summarizes it nicely:

***Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.***