

As Would Have them do unto You: Christianity and Human Rights

Sermon delivered by

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Theme: Matthew 7:12 -- So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Besides the parable of the Good Samaritan, one of my favorite bible stories comes from the book of Matthew - Matthew 22:33. Jesus was teaching in the temple in Jerusalem before a crowd, when the skeptical Sadducees and Pharisees sought to trap him into saying something for which they could accuse and condemn him. One of the Pharisees, an expert in religious law, asked him: "Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the Law of Moses?" Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments."

It is interesting and noteworthy that Jesus stated that loving one's neighbor as oneself is just as important as loving God. Our relationship with one another is as central the Christian faith as the relationship with God. Christianity can therefore provide a moral foundation for protecting and promoting human rights even in an increasingly secular world.

We think of human rights today in very secular and legalistic terms. The defining document of international human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human rights. Adopted by the United Nations general assembly in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the world's response to the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Second World War. The global community was appalled and horrified by the sheer brutality and inhumanity of that war. The Universal Declaration was intended to provide a framework in which the basic human rights of all peoples around the world would be protected based on certain agreed universal standards. Although not everyone in our world today presently enjoy these rights, we have as a human community at least agreed on certain basic rights that we should ideally all have.

Apart from International human rights laws, we also have national and provincial human rights laws and institutions such as the Canadian Human Rights Act which ensures equal opportunity to individuals who may be victims of discriminatory practices based on gender, disability, or religion. These laws promote and protect the basic human rights we should all enjoy as citizens of Canada and citizens of the World. They regulate how countries deal with their citizens and how we deal with each other within our communities. Take a few examples. All human rights laws whether domestic or international emphasize certain common principles – Everyone has the rights to life; No one has the prerogative to take another person's life. Everyone has the right to property, the right to dignity and no one should be subjected to torture. Everyone accused of a

crime should be given fair hearing and the opportunity to defend him or herself. Everyone has a right to practice his religion, express himself and associate with others.

Although we may think of all these human rights as secular laws, they are in fact deeply rooted in the Christian humanist call that we “love our neighbors as ourselves.” The connections between today’s secular human rights regimes and Christian teachings are not simply philosophical. They are concrete and practical. In the process of drafting the Universal Declaration of human rights, the drafters recognized that the different world religions had something to contribute to developing a modern and universal human rights document. The Human Rights Commission and UNESCO – The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization -- therefore set out to get input from the representatives of world’s religions by interviewing them. Jews, Christian, Buddhists, Hindus and Moslems were all consulted. So although the UDHR is a secular document it has benefited from religious notions of rights.

The Ten Commandments which is at the foundation of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition is made of laws regulation both our relationship with God and our relationship with our fellow men and women. In fact, it is interesting that out of the 10 commandments, 4 deal with our relationship with God while 6 deal with our relationship with our fellow men and women.

- Laws relating to God - You shall have no other gods before me; You shall not make for yourself an idol; You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God; Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy;
- Laws relating to man - Honor your father and mother; You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor; You shall not covet what belongs to your neighbor

There are direct similarities between the Ten Commandments and our secular human rights laws today. Thou shalt not kill protects the right to life. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods protects is the right to property. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor affirms the right to justice and fair hearing.

The other link between secular Universal human rights today and Christian teaching is the aspiration towards universality. Jesus Christ, we are told, came to take the good news to the gentiles and uncircumcised, not only to the Jews. This was a message carried on by the apostles in their missionary journey around the world after the death of Jesus. In the book of Galatians, Apostle Paul states: “There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freemen, male and female for all of you are one person in Christ” (Galatians 3:28-29). Paul in his letter to the Romans states that God created all mankind and all races are equal before God (Acts 17-19).

Although human rights have increasingly become secular and legalistic, they are in fact also rooted in fundamental humanist Christian values. The underlying premise of universal human rights is that we should love our neighbors as ourselves; that we should do unto others as we

would have them do unto us. International human rights laws are really only an affirmation of what the good Christian already knows – that his relationship with his neighbor is just as important as his relationship with God. Christian teaching can continue to play an important role in how we as individual and citizens promote the human rights of others within our communities.