

One of my all-time favorite comic strips is Calvin and Hobbes.

Calvin is a boy of about 9 or 10 and Hobbes is his “pet” tiger—  
A stuffed animal to most people—but very, very real to Calvin.

When I was teaching I used to do a retreat day for my kids  
based on the comic strip.

One of the talks was “Calvin’s Take on Rules”

You see, like most kids,  
Calvin was always looking for ways to get out of doing  
those things he would rather not do.

In one strip, young Calvin and his Tiger Hobbes have been playing outside.  
He comes home and is covered head to toe in dirt.

His mother sees him and yells,  
“Calvin, get upstairs and get in the bathtub.”

And Calvin does just that.

He goes upstairs and without taking his clothes off he sits in the bathtub.  
And then he says to Hobbes,  
“I showed her. I’m doing exactly what she told me to do.”

The next frame shows his mother looking into the bathroom saying,  
“I thought I told you to take a bath?!”

And Calvin replies, “No you didn’t. You told me to get into the bathtub.  
Boy did I fool you!”

And the last frame shows his mother turning on the water,  
Calvin sitting there in his drenched clothes and saying to Hobbes,  
“She has no sense of humor.”

That comic strip is an example of the attitude Jesus is trying to combat  
in today’s Gospel.

An attitude of interpreting things, particularly the law,  
from a minimalistic point of view.

You see, Calvin did what his mother said, but not what his mother wanted.

In today's Gospel, the Pharisees are trying to trip Jesus up again.

Remember last Sunday's Gospel?

Last Sunday it was the Sadducees and the Herodians...

Jesus silenced them and now it's the Pharisees turn.

I can imagine them thinking...Okay he did pretty good with that tax thing...

Let's see how much he knows about Jewish law.

So they ask him a question...about laws, about rules, about commandments.

Which commandment of the law is the greatest?

What makes them think this is a tough question is that

there were 613 Jewish Laws to choose from.

Okay Jesus out of the 613 laws, which one is most important.

Think about laws and rules for a moment...

Almost every time we ask a question about laws,

we ask it from a minimalistic point of view.

We don't ask the question:

"What is the safest speed I can travel on this road?"

We ask, "What's the speed limit? How fast can I go and not get a ticket?"

A teenager doesn't ask his or her parents,

"What's the safest time for me to be back in the house at night?"

They ask, "What time is my curfew.

What's the latest time I can come in and not get grounded?"

And so the Pharisees come to Jesus and ask, "Which one is the greatest?"

Which one do I have to obey?"

And Jesus' answer has to shock them...

Not the first part

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart mind and soul."

every Jewish man, woman and child, knew the Shema...

it was prayed day and night...it was posted on their doors...

That would not have shocked anyone, but before they could nod their heads

in approval, before they could say "you're right...that's it..."

he added the second part "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

That was the shocker....

Loving God and loving your neighbor go hand in hand.

What Jesus is saying is that to truly be good...to truly be holy...

Means getting away from simply following the rules...

To getting ourselves connected with the heart of God.

For Jesus, Jewish life wasn't fulfilled in following the law...

It was fulfilled in being rooted in love...

Love for God...love for neighbor...and love for oneself.

And this kind of love can only be found in the context of community.

That's why we gather each week and share stories of Jesus' life...

That's why we gather each week and break bread together.

So that we become the people of God,

molded in the image of Jesus Christ,

living a life based not primarily on following the law,

but a life based on love of God and neighbor.

Sometimes I hear people lament that the Church has gone too lax...

The Church has lessened the rules and regulations...

And my response is usually something like this:

Thank goodness we don't over emphasize the rules any more...

Because simply following the rules will not get you into heaven

Any more than Calvin sitting in the bathtub will get him clean.

Let me give you an example:

We have an obligation to go to Mass every Sunday and Holy Day...

A law set by our Church to help us to love God and love our neighbor...

A law set because God told us to keep holy the Sabbath...

The letter of that law can be followed

by simply showing up at Church and sitting in the pew for one hour,

never singing, never responding, never even praying.

And, people will say, they have fulfilled their obligation.

But, like Calvin, these people are doing what God says,

but not what God wants.

St. Augustine once said, "Love God and do what you want."

It may sound a little flippant...but it's really not...

Because if we truly love God, we will strive to do, not what we want,  
But what God wants.

Jesus came and said two laws are most important:

Love God and love your neighbor. All other laws flow from these.

For that to happen, our love must be unconditional.

A boy once asked his father,

"Daddy, does God love me even when I'm bad?"

His dad responded, "God loves you all the time. His love is unconditional"

The boy thought for a moment and said,

"Unconditional...what does that mean."

His father replied..."Remember those boys that used to live next to us...  
the ones with the puppy.

Remember how those boys used to tease the puppy, and throw sticks at it.

And even though they did that,

the puppy would still run to them and lick their faces.

Well that puppy had unconditional love for them.

They didn't earn his love...but he loved them anyway.

That's the kind of love God has for us and the kind of love we must have...

For God and for our neighbor.