

## God's Love Commandment

### **Summary**

*Scrupulous people are never at peace with a decision. They constantly go back to a previous choice and reevaluate it. Not so with God, who is consistent in the work of love.*

“Is yoga a sin?” The question was asked in a letter to a Catholic newsletter. Troubled by this matter, the writer went on to say, “My gym offers classes in yoga, and I find the stretching and breathing exercises to be very helpful. A friend says I should no longer attend the class because yoga is a spiritual practice that isn’t accepted or endorsed by the Catholic Church.”

This question appeared in a newsletter called “Scrupulous Anonymous,” published by a self-help group for people who agonize over problems of religious obedience and purity. Scrupulous Anonymous helps individuals who are troubled by past sins, and provides assistance to those who worry about sin in places where there is no sin.

Founded by a Roman Catholic community in 1964, the group helps people who suffer from “scrupulosity,” a state of anxiety or indecision that often has moral, religious or psychological roots. Scrupulous people are never at peace with a decision. They constantly go back to a previous choice and reevaluate it. They retrace their steps, hoping to achieve goals such as perfect obedience or purity. It is hard for scrupulous people to stick with a decision or a course of action because they worry constantly about sin.

As for the response to the question about yoga: “Although yoga does have roots in Hinduism,” wrote the editor of Scrupulous Anonymous, “the yoga offered in a public gym isn’t a threat to your Catholic life or spiritual practice.”

In a sense, our God is an *unscrupulous* God. Not that God lacks moral principles, which is the normal meaning of the word “scrupulous.” We all want a pharmacist to be scrupulous about filling a prescription correctly and an attorney to write a contract with scrupulous attention to detail.

But our God is unscrupulous in a different sense of the word. God has absolutely no feelings of doubt or uncertainty or second-guessing about his actions, but instead always sticks with a decision or a course of action. God is consistent in the work of love, which God directs toward Jesus and toward us.

From God’s point of view, love is not primarily a feeling that can change or be reevaluated. Instead, it is a decision, a choice and a commitment. The Greek word for love used in John 14 is *agápē*, which describes a universal, unconditional love that is not affected by circumstances. When Jesus says, “Those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them,” he is speaking of the unchanging *agápē* love that begins and ends in God. Our Lord is unscrupulous in the sense that God sticks with his decision to show us the love only God can give. God has no doubts about this choice, and as a result, God’s love never leaves.

And Jesus is the one who reveals to us just how unscrupulous God is. In John 14, Jesus is at the Last Supper with his disciples. He knows that he is leaving them soon, so he promises, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” This Advocate is the Holy Spirit, who acts as a helper and comforter and counselor.

Notice that Jesus describes the Spirit as “another Advocate.” This suggests that Jesus himself is the first **helper**, comforter and counselor. Everything that the Holy Spirit does is a continuation of what Jesus has begun. The Spirit spreads the truth about God,

offers healing and hope, and shows the love of the Lord — just as Jesus did. “You know him,” says Jesus, “because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” The Spirit will actually live in us and among us, continuing the mission and ministry of Jesus.

Best of all, this Spirit will be with us **forever and at all times**. The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus does not end the unscrupulous work of God. No, the Spirit proves that God has absolutely no feelings of doubt, but is sticking with his course of action. God will be with us eternally, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. God’s love never, never leaves.

Jesus goes on to say, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” Jesus has a love that is as intense and as steadfast as the love of a good father or mother. He does not want his followers to feel alone in the world, even though he will no longer be physically present with them. Instead, he promises that his life will continue and that his connection to them will not be broken. He continues to live among his followers through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

“On that day,” predicts Jesus, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” This is good news for us. Jesus assures **us** that we will remain connected to **him**, and **he to us**, even when he is dwelling with God the Father in heaven. We will never be orphans, but only children who remain linked to Jesus and to God through the power of the Spirit. The love of God never leaves — it is steadfast, constant and eternal.

So where can this love be found today? The answer is not obvious. In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Charlie Brown says, “If I ever had to choose a way to die, I would like to die by poison. How about you, Linus?” His friend Linus answers, “I would like to be killed by **loving kindness**.” Charlie Brown says, “Yes, that would be a good way to die, but poison is much easier to get.”

Charlie Brown is right — it is not that easy to get loving kindness, another term for *agápē* love. It is not advertised on television or in magazines, where the typical love is *eros* — a word that is better translated as “desire.” We see a lot of *eros* in ads for jewelry, clothing, perfume and luxury cars, but not much *agápē*.

But Jesus suggests in John 14 that *agápē* can be found in the community of people who keep the commandments of Jesus. When Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” he is not trying to put a checklist in front of us, one that will make us feel like moral failures. He doesn’t want to tip us into scrupulosity and cause us to agonize over problems of religious obedience and purity.

No, when Jesus asks us to keep his commandments, he is simply asking us to live a life of *agápē* love. After all, a few minutes earlier in the Last Supper, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Keeping the commandments of Jesus means loving one another, just as he has loved us. This kind of love doesn’t kill us. It gives us life.

If we work together to love one another, we will experience true loving kindness, a gift from God that is steadfast, constant and eternal. We will discover that love and commandment-keeping are two sides of the very same coin, and that they include identical attitudes and actions. “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me,” says Jesus — he is stressing that keeping his commandments to love one another is the very same as loving him.

The result of such love and commandment-keeping (Christ’s Commandment to LOVE) is an eternal union with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus promises that “those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them” — in the form of the Spirit. Notice that the bonds that unite us to God are all grounded in love, not in effort or obedience or purity. If we love God, God will love us, and Jesus will love us and reveal himself to us. This love is possible for us because it comes to us from Jesus, the one who said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Because this love comes from Jesus, we don't have to be scrupulous people who are never at peace with a decision. As long as we have been functioning in love, we are free from the need to constantly go back to a previous choice and reevaluate it. We never have to retrace our steps, hoping to achieve perfect obedience or purity. We can be free from constant worry about sin, because our love will keep us connected to Jesus, the one who loves us and reveals himself to us.

Love and commandment-keeping have nothing to do with scrupulosity, because our God is an unscrupulous God. He sticks with his decision to show us *agápē*, in every time and in every place and every situation, **and he invites us** to do the same.

So let's choose loving kindness, make it a priority, and remain committed to it. Our efforts to love one another are always going to be supported, because God's love never, never, ever leaves us.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” I will NEVER leave you Jesus promises us in today's Gospel. God is not some ruthless heavenly spectator judging us as on reality television, relishing our failures, wishing to exchange us for a better or more attractive child, no curmudgeonly “Daddy Warbucks” in the sky. Rather, God comes to love us in Jesus, singularly loving and accepting, seeking our trust, promising to be ever-present with us in the Holy Spirit.

This Holy Helper moves us even when we don't recognize its power, even when it seems "an unknown God" (Acts 17:23, our First Reading). Though we might battle an elemental loneliness, we have not been abandoned.

Many life experiences can leave us feeling orphaned or abandoned. Family can ease that feeling but also magnify it if our family relationships are strained or if our families live far away. Think of those who count deployed soldiers among their loved ones in recent years, or construction workers and tradesmen who need to live in hotels far away from their families to keep making money for their families in the recent difficult economy. The Internet, webcams, Skype, and social networking can link people across the miles but can further aggravate loneliness and isolation when these substitute for real intimacy in our highly connected world. How do we experience this loneliness and this longing for home and belonging? How does Jesus' promise that he will not leave us orphaned speak to these real-life concerns?

When Jesus makes this string of promises in John 14, saying that he will remain with us in the Holy Spirit as our Helper, it's hard to envision how this support comes to us sometimes. When we do not get to see or hear those we love, the simple gifts Jesus offers in body and blood, bread and wine shared with real warm neighbors have great power. Even when life keeps delivering bad news about how far apart, we are from another, how broken our relationships are, "I will not leave you orphaned" is the godly reassurance that we are not alone.

Amen!