

Today's text recounts events that take place three days before Good Friday. Some scholars call it the "Day of Questions." It is well-named: many questions are aimed at Jesus, and He returns the favor. The tensions are pretty high considering many have come to Jerusalem to observe Passover. The Lord has been teaching in the Temple since the Sunday of the Palms, and the people are quite taken with Him. Other groups see Him as threat, and many of them would like to send this bumpkin packing, back to Galilee. So His opponents are trying to trap Him in some statement that can be used against Him in a trial or some other denunciation before the authorities. Groups are coming together who were normally enemies to try and rid themselves of this trouble-maker.

For in the second half of Chapter 21, as well as the whole of this chapter, Jesus is on the offensive. He has attacked the Jewish leadership in three parables: The Disobedient Son, The Wicked Husbandmen, and The King's Feast. They have had enough. "Who is this man, challenging our authority and teaching in the Temple (as if it belongs to Him)." This needs to end. Now in verse 15 of our chapter, the leaders attempt a counter-attack.

They do so by directing at Jesus carefully formulated questions. They ask these questions in public, while the crowd look on and listen, and their aim is to make Jesus discredit himself by his own words in the presence of the people. First, we have the question of the Pharisees, and it was subtly framed. Palestine was an occupied country and the Jews were subject to the Roman Empire; and the question was: "Is it, or is it not, lawful to pay tribute to Rome?" The seriousness of this attack is shown by the fact that the Pharisees and the Herodians combined to make it, for normally these two parties were in bitter opposition. The Pharisees were the supremely orthodox, who resented the payment of the tax to a foreign king as an infringement of the divine right of God. The Herodians were the party of Herod, king of Galilee, who owed his power to the Romans and who worked hand in glove with them. The Pharisees and the Herodians were strange bedfellows indeed; but their differences were for the moment forgotten in a common hatred of Jesus and a common desire to eliminate him. The question which the Pharisees asked set Jesus a very real dilemma. If He said that it was unlawful to pay the tax, they would promptly report him to the Roman government officials as a seditious person and his arrest would certainly follow. If He said that it was lawful to pay the tax, he would stand discredited in the eyes of many of the people. Not only did the people resent the tax as everyone resents taxation; they resented it even more for religious reasons. To a Jew, God was the only king; their nation was a theocracy; to pay tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship and thereby to insult God. Therefore, the more fanatical of the Jews insisted that any tax paid to a foreign king was necessarily wrong. Whichever way Jesus might answer—so his questioners thought—he would lay himself open to trouble.

But Jesus, aware of their malice, simply asked to see a coin. It was stamped with the Emperor's head. In ancient days, coins struck by a king were considered his property. "Whose head is on the coin?" asks Jesus. "Caesar's", they said. "Well, then, give it back to him. Give to Caesar what belongs to him, and to God what belongs to Him." With that, His questioners left with their tail between their legs.

With the Pharisees being routed, the Sadducees took up the battle. The Sadducees were not many in number; but they were the wealthy, the aristocratic, and the governing class. The chief priests, for instance, were Sadducees. In politics they were collaborationist; quite ready to cooperate with the Roman government, if co-operation was the price of the retention of their own privileges. In thought they were quite ready to open their minds to Greek ideas. In their Jewish belief they were traditionalists. They refused to accept the oral and scribal law, which to the Pharisees was of such paramount importance. They went even further. The only part of scripture which they regarded as binding was the Pentateuch, the Law par excellence, the first five books of the Old Testament. They did not accept the prophets or the poetical books as scripture at all. In particular, they were at variance with the Pharisees in that they completely denied any life after death, a belief on which the Pharisees insisted.

The Sadducees produced a question which, they believed, reduced the doctrine of the resurrection of the body to an absurdity. There was a Jewish custom called Levirate Marriage, though how much it was actually practiced is unclear. If a man died childless, his brother was under obligation to marry the widow, and to beget children for his brother. The Sadducees cited a case of Levirate Marriage in which seven brothers, each dying childless, one after another married the same woman; and then asked, "When the resurrection takes place, whose wife will this much-married woman be?" Here indeed was a catch question.

Jesus points out their ignorance of scripture and God's power. The resurrected life is not bound by anyone's marriage customs. Then He goes on to demolish the whole Sadducean position. They had always held that there was no text in the Pentateuch which could be used to prove the resurrection of the dead. Now, what was one of the commonest titles of God in the Pentateuch? "The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob." God cannot be the God of dead men. The living God must be the God of living men. The Sadducean case was shattered. Jesus had done what the wisest Rabbis had never been able to do. Out of Scripture itself He had confuted the Sadducees and had shown them that there is a life after death which must not be thought of in earthly terms. The crowds were amazed at a man who was a master of argument like this, and even the Pharisees had to hold back their praise.

With this context in place, we come to our reading.

When the Pharisees had heard that Jesus had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5. That verse was part of the Shema, the basic and essential creed of Judaism, the sentence with which every Jewish service still opens, and the first text which every Jewish child commits to memory. It means that to God we must give a total love, a love which dominates our emotions, a love which directs our thoughts, and a love which is the dynamic of our actions. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

You will notice that Jesus and the scriptures don't say we should love God by conjuring up loving feelings, or by coming to "feel good about ourselves," or by spending a lot of time considering just how one can love a Person he or she cannot see. The Bible is surprisingly uninterested in our inner lives and various motivations most of the time. It looks more on actions. Love is not a something that mysteriously erupts in you as you attempt various self-help regimes. It is rather something you develop through practical action. You pray, you obey God, you live as if He is right next to you. You immerse yourself in the scriptures. You are not to get wrapped up in endless introspection. If you are disheartened because you "just ain't feelin' it," you will probably not get off square one. Pray even if you don't feel like it. Read the Bible or the Book of Common Prayer and concentrate on the language, repeating it and letting your soul marinate in it. Go for a walk and make yourself see this amazing creation. Give thanks to God even if you are not feeling particularly thankful—and lo and behold—you might actually find yourself being thankful. The first and greatest commandment begins with "Thou shalt...", not "Try to find it in yourself..." If you wait until you have worked out whatever internal issues are holding you back, you may never begin to love God.

The second commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," comes from Leviticus 19:18. Our love for God must issue in love for men. But it is to be noted in which order the commandments come; it is love of God first, and love of man second. We are to love God as being unsurpassably valuable, glorious, holy, and loving. Indeed, He defines Value, Glory, Holiness, and Love. All humans are made in His image, and so are to be valued and loved as well. In other words, only God, in the final analysis, can truly ground our value and lovability in something other than sentiment or kinship. These latter two are fine, there is nothing wrong with the love of parents for their children, or of good friends for each other. But we are commanded to love our neighbor, even those we find annoying or rude or opinionated or just not our cup of tea. How is this done?

Well, we do need to pray for God's help. But we are not to be passive. Just like loving God, loving your neighbor requires action. People often want to reduce it to the so-called "Golden Rule": "treat others the way you want to be treated." That is good as far as it goes, but it can become a bit too transactional. "I'll wave to her if she waves to me.

If she won't, then why make a fool of myself by waving to her?" The commandment Jesus quotes demands that we go further than simply "doing to others *so* they will do unto you." Loving your neighbor as yourself means giving them the grace that you think you only deserve. And the grace that we think we deserve is often the grace we're unwilling to give. We want much forbearance because we love ourselves especially. We are very kind to ourselves, consulting ourselves continually about what would make us happy, or at least, not inconvenienced. And this makes it extremely difficult hard to love someone else as much as we love ourselves. For one, because *our* problems and concerns are often the most important things to us. And our neighbor will not only have his own problems, but he may be fairly unappealing to boot. He could even be someone we see as an enemy. It's easy to respect and love the people we like. It's tough to love people we don't like. Those who we don't enjoy being around are the very people we must love.

You see, we should be quick to show love and mercy because that's what the Lord has done for us. If you're a Christian it's only because of the grace and mercy of God. The grace and mercy that we have been recipients of is the same grace and mercy we should be willing to give. And this is true of all our neighbors, even those who have been inconsiderate or downright hostile to us.

This love is difficult, but we're called to do it. The Lord doesn't *ask* us to love our neighbor. He says "Thou shalt." It is a command. It's not optional. It's not an "if I have some extra time on my hands" sort of thing. The Christian's default position is supposed to be one of love. Jesus said, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Jesus summarized the entire Old Testament law in two simple commandments: love God and love others.

We do not know how much time any of us have on this earth. Let us forsake the way of the Pharisees and Sadducees, as far as they were so focused on their status and privilege. We need to be working for the growth of God's Kingdom, not obsessing about our importance or lack thereof. We need to think more of others and their needs than of our own. We need to put to death the flesh, which is always plotting and angling for its own advantage; instead we need to fall at the feet of the Lord, in praise and adoration. If we are loving God and walking in His ways, the rest will be taken care of.

*In the Name...*