

The Great Commandment

Preached on the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Oct. 3, 2021
Text: Mt. 22: 34-46

Today's text recounts events that take place three days before Good Friday. The Lord has been teaching in the Temple since the Sunday of the Palms and the people are quite taken with him. Many are in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and so drawing a crowd is pretty easy. The Establishment, however, sees him as a threat and wants to destroy him. So they are trying to lure him into saying something that can be used against him in a trial or some other public denunciation.

In the chapter from which our reading comes, 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.

So in verse 15 of our chapter, they counter-attack. They do so by crafting carefully formulated questions. These are designed to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the public.

Here is the first volley of the counter-offensive. Given that Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire, an interesting—and dangerous—question was: "Is it, or is it not, lawful to pay tribute to Rome?" Those posing this question were the Pharisees and the Herodians, normally bitter opponents. The stakes were definitely high if such ideological enemies would join forces against Jesus. 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. These two groups found common cause because of their shared hatred of Jesus and desire to eliminate him.

The question 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; they found it religiously offensive. To a Jew, God was the only King. Hence, their nation was a theocracy; and so to pay tax to an earthly king was to admit the validity of his kingship and thereby to insult God.

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?" asked 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 routed, the Sadducees took up the battle. The Sadducees were not many in number; but they were the aristocratic governing class. The chief priests, for instance, were Sadducees. In politics they were collaborationist and hence ready to cooperate with the Roman government, if co-operation was the price to maintain their privileges. In their religious beliefs, they were in some sense minimalists. They refused to accept the oral and scribal law, which to the Pharisees was of such paramount importance. Furthermore, the only part of Scripture which they regarded as binding was the Pentateuch, 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 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 hypothetical 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?"

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. But Jesus directs their attention to the most common title of God in the Pentateuch—"The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob". God can only be the God of the living. Jesus did 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 life after death. The crowds were amazed at a man who was a master of argument like this, and even the Pharisees had to restrain 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 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 guides our emotions, directs our thoughts, and 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 only after figuring out how one can love a Person they

cannot see. The Bible seldom enjoins us to sort out our inner life and its complex motivations. It looks more on actions. You pray, you obey God, and you live as if he is right next to you. You immerse yourself in Scriptures. You are not to get wrapped up in endless introspection and wondering why you “just ain’t feelin’ it.” The first and greatest commandment begins with “Thou shalt...,” not “Try to find it in yourself...”

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. We are to love God as being unsurpassably valuable, glorious, and holy. Indeed, God 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, and 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 who are 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 transactional. “If I’m nice to her, then she should be nice to me.” 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 are constantly giving ourselves a lot of slack because we hold a special place in our hearts. And this makes it extremely difficult to love someone else as much as we love ourselves. *Our* problems and concerns are generally the most important things to us. So, while—hopefully—we respect and love our spouses, close friends, and family, loving others outside that circle, seeking their good, can be a real challenge.

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’s a command. It’s not optional. We should show love and mercy to others because the Lord has done that to us. Our Christian pilgrimage is one in which love becomes our default position over time as we progress toward godliness. “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Let us then 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 establishment of God’s Kingdom, not obsessing about our own needs and psychic health. We need to think more of others’ needs than of our own. Instead of plotting and angling for own advantage, we need to fall at the feet of the Lord, in praise and adoration, seeking His will. If we are loving God and walking in his ways, the rest will be taken care of.

In the Name...