

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 20th Sunday after Pentecost, Oct. 26, 2014

The Greatest Commandment

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

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Matthew 22:34-46

In an effort to trap Jesus into saying something that would justify their charging him with heresy, the scribes and priests, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, asked him “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you the authority? They were hoping that Jesus would answer them in a manner which was contrary to the rules, at least the rules as they interpreted them. They wanted a good reason to get rid of this pesky rabbi from Nazareth. Matthew 21:23 through 22:22 describes how Jesus responded. I have spoken about these earlier passages for the past three weeks. Nevertheless when you get home after church today, I urge you to read the full story in Matthew 21 and 22 to refresh your mind about this part of scripture.

Jesus countered the Pharisees’ questions with three parables – the Parable of the Two Sons, the Parable of the Wicked Vineyard Tenants, and the Parable of the Wedding Party. All three parables were clear attacks on the scribes and priests, each parable depicting them as not serving God, but instead serving their own selfish ends.

Then they tried another way to entrap Jesus, this time by trying to get him to answer the question, “Is it lawful (meaning Jewish law) to pay taxes to the emperor or not? They hoped that he would answer in a way which would get the Romans on their side against Jesus.

Again, Jesus thwarted their rather obvious ploy. He responded, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” That response cut the Pharisees off at the knees and they left and ended the discussion, at least for the time being. However they were far from finished. They were not giving up.

Once the Pharisees left, scripture tells us in Matthew 22:23-33 that the other Jewish leadership group, the Sadducees, picked up the assault on Jesus with questions about resurrection. The Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, did not believe in resurrection

and they hoped to trap Jesus somehow in a heretical answer. Jesus silenced the Sadducees very forcefully – so much so that according to Matthew 22:33 the crowd that witnessed Jesus' exchange with the Sadducees “were astonished at his teaching.”

The *Adult Bible Studies* for the Presbyterian Church USA Sunday school last year commented that, “The common people heard (Jesus) and ... found a power and conviction in him that they did not find in their conventional leaders.” They saw what the Pharisees and Sadducees did not see.

Jesus' oral defeat of the Sadducees caused the Pharisees to reinitiate their attempts to entrap Jesus. Our gospel reading for today makes that clear with the words, “When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.”

It would be well at this point to briefly explain the difference between Sadducees, Pharisees and lawyers in the time of Christ. The Sadducees and Pharisees were the political parties of the day. The Sadducees were responsible for the care and upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem and were the Priesthood which was the highest social class in Judean society. They rejected any belief in resurrection and in oral law. They saw the Torah, the Pentateuch, as the sole source of divine authority. Unless these first five books of the Bible stated it, it was not a valid interpretation of scriptural law.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, did believe in resurrection and did not see the Torah as the sole source of divine authority. Rather they supported oral tradition, the so called “Oral Torah”, that had been handed down over the centuries, in addition to the written Torah. They believed that God had given Moses knowledge of what the laws meant and how they should be applied. In other words an Oral Torah. The *Jewish Virtual Library* says that the Pharisees were, “... in a sense blue-collar Jews who adhered to the tenets developed after the destruction of (Soloman's) Temple, that is such things as individual prayer and assembly in synagogues.”

The Sadducees were “strict constructionists.” If the written Torah didn't say it, it wasn't so. Period!

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Council, was made up of 71 members, both Sadducees and Pharisees, and their responsibility was to interpret civil and religious laws. As you can see, they were as different as our Democratic and Republican Parties

are today. They disagreed on many things but one thing they agreed on was the need to get Jesus and his followers out of their collective hair.

Going back to our scripture reading, the Sadducees had backed off and the Pharisees resumed their attack on Jesus by having a lawyer present the ultimate question to Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest." Lawyers in first-century Israel were also theologians because the law of Israel was the Torah. What the Pharisees were doing was sending an expert, someone trained in the law, to outmaneuver Jesus.

You need to remember that the Torah contains 613 commandments, not just the 10 we Christians normally think about and here was a lawyer asking Jesus, "Of the 613 commandments, which one is the most important." In the lawyer's eyes, Jesus had only one chance in 613 of getting the answer right. Those are lousy odds in anyone's book.

How did Jesus respond? He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." But he didn't stop there. He continued by saying, "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments."

Jesus gave two commandments, not one, in answer to the question, and concluded with the statement that these two commandments encompassed the totality of the law.

Frederick Buechner, a noted theologian, in his book Listening to Your Life, wrote this rather tongue in cheek commentary on Jesus' response:

When Jesus said to love your neighbor, a lawyer who was present asked him to clarify what he meant by "neighbor." He wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever came up. He presumably wanted something on the order of: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be

construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.

Instead Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (as recorded in Luke 10:25-37), the point of which seems to be that your neighbor is to be construed as meaning anyone who needs you. The lawyer's response is left unrecorded.

Jesus answered the question asked by quoting a part of Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" Jesus quoted the Torah, the written law. What he quoted is known as the "Shema" or "Shema Yisrael", the first words of a section of the Torah which is recited by faithful Jews at morning and evening services. Jesus quoted the Shema and then he added the second commandment, "...love your neighbor as yourself" from Leviticus 19:18, another part of the Torah. Jesus responded to the lawyer and the Pharisees by throwing their law right back at them and by confounding them with a question of his own, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They replied, "The son of David." Jesus asks then for the Pharisees to explain how the Messiah could be the son of David if David calls the Messiah "Lord". Would anyone call their son Lord? Hardly. Not even in England's House of Lords could that happen. Lordship passes from father to son, not the other way around. We refer to God as Lord and to Jesus as Lord – the father and the son – not the son only.

The Pharisees could not respond to Jesus question and as our text says, "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions."

The point of Jesus' answers to the questions asked of him is that the entirety of the Ten Commandments is encompassed in loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and in loving your neighbor as yourself.

The first four of the Ten Commandments are reflected in loving God –

- #1 You shall have no other gods.
- #2 You shall not make idols and worship them.
- #3 You shall not take God's name in vain.
- #4 You shall keep the Sabbath day holy.

Loving your neighbor as yourself obviously includes:

#5 Honoring your parents.

#6 Not committing murder.

#7 Not committing adultery.

#8 Not stealing.

#9 Not bearing false witness.

#10 Not coveting anything of your neighbor's.

You need not memorize the Ten Commandments. You only need to remember two – loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself, and remembering that your neighbor is anyone in need, including your enemies.

That is not easy to do at times but that is what being a Christian means. We worship one Messiah, one God, one Lord, a God and Lord in three parts, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a God who commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen!

(Note: All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)