

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Matthew 22:34-46 (34-40)

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco
Reformation Sunday, October 26, 2008

The Greatest Commandment

Today's passage is the third in a series from Matthew. It did not start out as a series but evolved into one. The religious leaders continue asking questions of Christ, and Christ skillfully answers them. On Reformation Sunday we remember how our religious leaders asked questions of the Catholic Church before breaking away. Let us look at our Biblical question and see how Jesus answers.

After the questioning Jesus has undergone in previous passages, the Pharisees are probably delighted that Jesus is able to silence, or literally muzzle, the Sadducees and embarrass their enemies. If you remember, the Pharisees and Sadducees only temporarily join forces to gang up on Jesus in their efforts to get rid of Him. According to Matthew, the Pharisees are regrouping for another attack. This scene is also described and prophesied in Psalm 2:2, "The rulers take counsel together against the Lord, and against His anointed." One of their group serves as a spokesman for the next part of Christ's exam. This person is described as a scribe or one trained in Jewish law. This is the first of two incidents in today's passage. It is carefully linked to the previous questioning by the Sadducees and, though it is asked as a question to test Christ, it raises a fundamental issue for ancient and modern readers: which commandment in the law is the greatest?

This is not a new question. The scribes and religious leaders had debated it for centuries. Documentation shows 613 commandments in the law, 248 are positive and 365 are negative. No one person could ever hope to know and

fully obey all these commandments. Some even argue that the commandment to wear fringes on the hems of garments is the greatest of the 613! This helps us recognize the test to which Jesus is subjected.

In Matthew, Jesus answers the scribe by quoting the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:5, a statement of faith which is recited several times daily by every orthodox Jew. The word “Shema” comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to hear.” The confession of faith begins with, “Hear, O Israel.” The greatest commandment is to love God with all that we are and have – heart, soul, mind, strength, possessions, and service. To love God is not simply to have good feelings about God, for true love involves the will as well as the heart. Where there is love, there will be service and obedience.

But love for God cannot be separated from love for one’s neighbor so Jesus also quotes Leviticus 19:18 and put it on the same level as the Shema. All of the Law and the prophets hang on both of these commandments. Teachings of the Epistles in the New Testament agree with this. If a person really loves God, he or she must also love his or her neighbor.

Warren Wiersbe in *Be Loyal*, a study on Matthew, suggests if we have a right relationship with God, we will have no problems with His commandments. Love is the basis for obedience. All of the Law is summed up by the command to love. If we love God, we will love our neighbor; and if we love our neighbor, we will not want to do anything to harm him or her.

On these two commandments, Christ says, every other principle of the Law has its base. Jesus is probably the first to draw the two passages of

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 together in this way. He introduces the scribe to a new interpretation of love over law.

Jesus has a deeper meaning to convey in this marvelous answer. The Jews are fearful of idolatry. Jesus receives worship and does not criticize those who honor Him. The Pharisees wonder if this is considered idolatry. Christ says no, because He is God! If the Law commands us to love God and our neighbor, then it would not be wrong for the Jews to love Jesus. They accept the authority of the Law, yet they refuse to obey it in their own lives.

Thomas G. Long, a well-known preacher and scholar, asks what is sinister about the question Christ is asked. He explains that the scribe or lawyer is asking Jesus to pick out one law as the greatest commandment. This exposes Christ to criticism over the ones He does not choose. The questioner seems to be hoping, again, to embarrass Jesus with a follow-up question. But Christ leaves no room for follow-up. His answer shows the questioner is no match for Jesus. The first part of Jesus' response quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment." This verse would be well known to all Christ's listeners since it forms part of a key element in Jewish worship. Devout Jews would know this by heart. Then Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18 as a second commandment which is like the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the Law and the prophets.

Jesus accomplishes two things by His answer. First He shows Himself to be completely orthodox by giving a response straight from the Hebrew Bible

and beyond debate. Who could challenge the idea of loving God with heart, soul, and mind accompanied by the love of one's neighbor, as the core of the law. One is reminded of theologian Karl Barth's often-quoted response to the question of, what is the most important truth learned in theological study. Barth is said to have answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Who can disagree with that?

Jesus does more than establish His orthodox credentials. He also confounds the lawyer and those with him. What Christ's answer achieves is to undermine the whole idea of the law as rules and regulations. Jesus claims that the whole law is about love, not rules, about really loving God and one's neighbor, not about figuring out how to avoid stepping on the cracks in the legal sidewalk.

This understanding of the law is the reason Jesus can reach out in the name of God and with healing in His hands to touch a neighbor who is a leper, even though some would have said that doing so breaks one or more of the rules. According to Christ, the whole law, every one of the 613 commandments, is really about love – loving God and loving neighbor. The scholars of the law may have had an image in their minds of every law hanging by a thread to a peg to some key passage in Scripture. Jesus refreshes that image by portraying the whole law and the prophets, everything, as hanging by a cord to the twin pegs of love of God and love of neighbor.

Charles B. Cousar, a Biblical scholar, says three observations about Jesus reply are critical. First, there is an inseparability between the two

commandments, to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbor. The second commandment is like the first one. It gives it focus and pinpoints the way in which the love of God can find practical expression. The writer of 1 John, more specifically than any other New Testament writer, spells out the role of the second commandment in relation to the first by his statement: “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” A failure to honor the second commandment while claiming to observe the first is a contradiction and a lie. The close connection between the two commandments keeps the church’s liturgy, its confessions of faith, its songs of praise, and its purity genuine.

Second, while the two great commandments are inseparable, neither dissolves into the other. For example, engaging in acts of service on a regular basis or being involved in struggles for justice does not mean the first commandment is no longer important. Some non-religious people keep the second commandment in ways which exceed what many Christians or Jews do.

The first commandment, however, remains the first commandment. There is a dimension of loving God which goes beyond or is different from loving one’s neighbor. To put it another way, God remains the ultimate point of reference for human life. Prayer, public and private worship, the aggressive search for truth about God, and wrestling with issues of faith are all essential to the nurture of that ultimate point of reference.

Third, for Matthew, Jesus is the one supreme interpreter of the law; and here he declares that the love of God and the love of neighbor are the interpretive keys to understanding “all the law and the prophets.” Both commands, of course, come from the law. They do not lessen human obligations and responsibilities. But they do make them more radical and comprehensive. What is owed to God and neighbor is not the carrying out of a specific law, but a total approach to life as in with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Love’s claim is without restriction.

The contrast is seen between legalism among the Pharisees and the ethic of love for God and one’s neighbor. By joining the two commandments, Jesus shows the way to fulfill the first, for it is in loving the neighbor whom we have seen that we express our participation in love for God whom we have not seen. All of the law is fulfilled by these two commandments. Like the two hinges on a door, so the two belong together as the New Law, the new commandment.

The order is important, first the opening of one’s life to God, followed by the opening of one’s life to our neighbor. To love is to open one’s life intimately to that of another. To open one’s life to God means to open one’s heart or affection to Christ, to open one’s soul or ambition to Christ, to open one’s mind or attitudes to Christ, to open one’s strength or activity to Christ, and to open one’s self to what God is doing in the neighbor, whether friend or enemy! This is the righteousness which exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

This part of Jesus' examination began with the statement that the Pharisees gathered together and thrust this sharp lawyer forward because they heard Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. It is interesting to note, this story ends in silence, without a retorting word from the lawyer. Christ's response to his question stills the voice of His questioner, and the questioner soundlessly slips off the pages of Matthew never to be heard from again.

Let us not be like the questioners we read about. Let us be like those who listen to Jesus' answers and follow Him and obey His instructions. On this Reformation Sunday, may we, like Martin Luther, John Calvin and other who have brought us to where we are, be the future of our church, reformed and always reforming as we seek to grow individually and as a faith community through loving, obeying, and serving Christ who died on the Cross so we may live in Him. Amen!