

Thou Shalt Love

A sermon on Matthew 22:34-46
for Sunday October 29, 2017

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

I. "THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT," OR LOVE = LAW ON AUTOPILOT

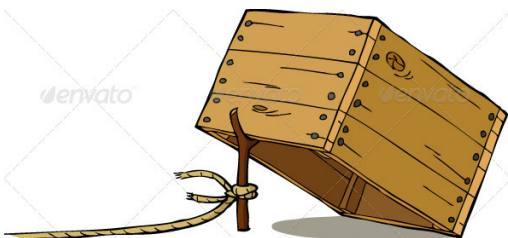
Today's Gospel reading is commonly known as "the Greatest Commandment" and it is an easy one to preach on. It is where Jesus boils down religion to its very essence: Love. Love God, Love one another. It is hard to screw that up too badly.

It is a new, less legalistic way of approaching life. Instead of focussing on specific "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots," focus on love and the law follows naturally. If you love your brother, you are not likely to murder him. If you love God, you going to do your best not to let anything get in the way of your relationship with him. Acting through love, the rest sort of falls into place.

If that is all you needed to hear this morning, feel free to stop paying attention, because you have the main point of my message this morning already: Live from Love and you will be living into God.

II. AVOIDANCE OF THE REAL QUESTIONS AND HEARING THE ANSWERS

But that is to ignore the context in which Jesus gives his disciples this summary of the Law. The Gospel reading follows on a story in which the Sadducees were asking Jesus some ridiculous question about a hypothetical situation in which a woman marries seven brothers, and then whose wife she will be in the resurrection. They were probably



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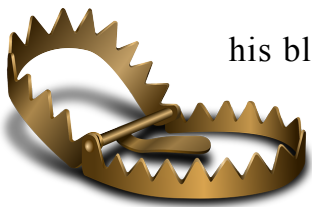
hoping to force him into admitting that the resurrection is a stupid idea. Jesus saw right through this and answered that their question didn't even make sense and didn't relate to the real situation of what the resurrection would be like. He then answers the question that they did not ask: If the doctrine of the resurrection was rubbish or not. And he does this by offering another word puzzle to them: How it is that God - the God of Life - is referred to as the God of Jacob, etc. when those people had died long ago. The answer would be "Oh, if God is God of the living, then those people must still be alive in some sense." The Sadducees did not care too much for this answer they were being led to, and refused to accept it, and were thus silenced.



The same thing happened in this mornings reading with the Pharisees. These pharisees agreed with Jesus on the resurrection bit. But they were not at all amused that he had been referring to himself as being equal to God. This is blasphemy, and Jesus is guilty of it, unless that is, he happens to indeed be who he says he is.



So the Pharisees ask a question of their own to try to trap him into being explicit in his blasphemy, or otherwise to realize his error and repent. What is the Greatest of the commandments?



The answer is easy and immediate to those familiar with the Jewish scriptures. The greatest is the first commandment: Thou shalt love the Lord your God and have no other God beside him. Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one and there is no God beside him. This is not a line from a dusty old book that gets read once in a while on the Sabbath. This was a daily part of life for the Jews. They recited this line multiple times a day. Our Lord answers acceptably, because love of God is the answer.

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He goes further with his answer, but not to insist on his relationship to the Father, as the Pharisees may have hoped. For “he did not deem equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Instead, he takes note of what these Pharisees needed to hear and remember: not what the right answer is, but what the right answer *means*. “If anyone loves me, he will keep my commandments.” This isn’t a command so much as it is an explanation of what happens when you love God. In loving God, we love others. As it says later in Matthew, Jesus said “truly, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me.” This second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is an outflowing manifestation of the first, to love God with all you are.

for
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IF ANYONE SAYS, 'I LOVE GOD,' YET HATES HIS BROTHER, HE IS A LIAR. FOR ANYONE WHO DOES NOT LOVE HIS BROTHER, WHOM HE HAS SEEN, CANNOT LOVE GOD, WHOM HE HAS NOT SEEN (1 JOHN 4:20).


- BIBLE

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The Pharisees were missing that part, perhaps more concerned about the ranking of commandments than they were about living them out. More concerned about making the law work for them as a weapon instead of allowing themselves to be transformed by it.

And even so, Jesus tends to their needs. Both saying what they needed to hear, and also getting to the heart of what they were actually asking about. Because this wasn’t about the ranking of commandments. This was about Jesus’ Messiah-hood. And so he addresses that too.

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my Lord
or my son?

Gently, offering questions that should lead them to their answer. Who is the Messiah? How do you explain David calling the Messiah “Lord” if that Messiah is his son? He invites them to consider that the Messiah is not mere man, but indeed Lord. “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool” says the 110th Psalm. Jesus seems to be urging a reading of that being God the Father saying to God the Son, introducing the idea of the Godhead.

Such are the questions Pharisees ponder, and it might be less important that we understand the exact relationship between persons of the Trinity than it is to know that God knows what our real issues are, and answers questions that we won’t even ask, and tell us what we need to hear.

III. APPROACHING CHRIST

Whether or not we hear it and the manner in which we respond is another matter. The Pharisees weren’t able to respond. Neither were the Sadducees. They were both already convinced that they were right. The questions they asked were not raised with the intent of learning anything or growing in the faith. Their interest was in proving Jesus wrong.

This brings us back to ourselves, and our own walks with Christ. Are we looking for something so specific from God that we can’t see the answers right in front of us? Are we so caught up in trivial matters that we forget the foundational ones? Are we so preoccupied with being “right” that we fail to love God and neighbor? I hope not. I’d hope that we can read this scripture about the Greatest Commandment and take it to heart.

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The Greatest Commandment is to Love God. Loving God does not lead to the desire to put others down, that's the work of ego and pride. Loving God flows into caring about others. That is what marks us as Christians. The next song is one of my favorites, and it's not titled "They'll know we are Christians by our self-righteousness" or "They'll know



we are Christians by our dogmatism." No, "They'll Know we are Christians by our love." The type of self-giving love that God extends to us, we extend to others, and back to God in our worship and prayers.

*Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*

