



Sermon & Scripture

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Matthew 22:34-46

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" **37** He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: **42** "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." **43** He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

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'The Lord said to my Lord,

"Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet"?

45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" **46** No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Loving and Generous God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

The Bible can be pretty confusing. In my few months here, we have talked about some pretty complicated passages. There is a lot in the Bible that is hard to understand and plenty that is not that clear to us reading it hundreds and hundreds of years after it was written. It would be so nice if Jesus had given us more clear instructions for how we should read it and what are the things we should most pay attention to, and what doesn't matter as much in today's world. We don't get that guide or instruction manual, but today's passage does give us some direction.

We are continuing our journey through Matthew, this time we skipped a section since the passage from last week, but we continue on in the same series of interactions. Even though Easter was so long ago in the Spring and some have started to look ahead toward Christmas, we find ourselves in the part of Jesus's story that we would call Holy Week. The time between Jesus riding into Jerusalem, now called Palm Sunday, and when Jesus is killed on the cross. As we have been discussing the past several weeks, as we have spent time on these passages that describe Jesus's final days, this was a tense and dramatic time for Jesus. Though we like to think of Jesus as calm and feel-good, much of what Jesus had been teaching and doing throughout the Holy Land in those times was considered radical then and still is now. He critiqued their practices, he challenged their way of life, and his teachings threatened to turn their religious life on its head. He had been making a lot of people quite upset! Especially the Jewish leaders who thought it was up to them to keep law and order and know what is best to be a follower of God. It is easy for us to look back at the Bible and not have any question that Jesus is the Son of God, because that is how we have always known him, but the Jewish leaders at the time that he was first on earth, didn't get it. They had come to expect a Messiah who was basically opposite in every way from how Jesus actually was. So, a lot of the top leaders didn't believe he was the Messiah or the Son of God and instead, just some rabble rouser coming in to make them look bad and break all the rules. On top of it, this rabble rouser was gaining a following. People far and wide were listening to him, sharing about him to their friends, and starting to put into practice the things he was teaching. If they let him continue, they might lose their leadership positions. They might lose their power. So this rabble rouser, Jesus of Nazareth, was not only a nuisance but a political threat to them. They are done dealing with him and want him out of the picture so they can continue on living life as normal and maintain the status quo.

It is with that attitude that leaders from each sect of Judaism come to him in the temple in Jerusalem and start asking him questions, trying to test him or trap him into saying something that would make his followers stop believing in him, or give them a reason to get him arrested, and they hoped for a death sentence. The chief priests and elders tested him on who gave him his authority, the Pharisees and Herodians tested him on what should be done about Roman taxes, and now a couple of questions testing him on Jewish law. We know that Jesus knew his stuff, but they were hoping to catch

him as not the expert he was going around acting like. We skipped the passage that has the Sadducees question about Jewish marriage and the afterlife. Jesus's answer to that question left them astounded. But the Jewish leaders so wanted to have the last word. So the Pharisees put their heads together and had one of their top theologians, experts in their religious practices and beliefs approach Jesus with this question. He leads with "Teacher" which highlights for us that he didn't think of Jesus as Lord, which is how his followers address him. He continues, "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This is no light question, [as I mentioned with the kids] they aren't just thinking about the 10 commandments, the Jewish tradition says there are 613 commandments or laws in the Hebrew Bible. So, he is asking Jesus to tell them which of those 613 is the greatest. This question may have been to draw Jesus into a debate of the time whether or not all laws are equal or if Rabbis could decide that some were the most important. Obviously, this debate doesn't really exist now, as I am a walking broken law against wearing mixed fabrics. None of us think twice about eating shrimp or pork, well I do, but that's because of a bad experience with keeping shrimp down when I was a kid. I had no concern about putting cheese on my burger last night. But, the Pharisee lawyer's question perhaps feels all the more relevant because of that. Bringing Jesus into the debate could be trying to get him to say something that could be disparaging toward a part of the law, such as saying the moral laws are more important than the laws about religious practices.

Jesus doesn't fall into their trap once again, but answers in a way that doesn't take either side of the debate. "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. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." We know these two commandments from the Gospels, but Jesus is not creating new commandments here, just bringing them together. The first commandment comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: **"4** Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. **5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The second commandment comes from Leviticus 19, as a conclusion to a series of commandments on how to treat your neighbor: **"17** You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. **18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." Jesus is bringing these two commandments together, yes, saying loving God is the "greatest and first commandment" but he immediately puts his own twist on his answer, saying the second is "like it." Looking at the original Greek, this use of "like" is not comparing it as just similar in appearance. But that it is of equal importance and inseparable from the first. Which means that loving God and loving neighbor is of equal importance and one is not complete without the other. It is not that we love God as a first task, and then move on to the second task of loving our

neighbors. Jesus pulling together these two commandments in this way is saying that to love God is to love one's neighbor and to love one's neighbor is to love God.

This sounds straight forward and easy, and it is much more straight forward and less tedious than many of the other 613+ laws in the Bible. That said, in practice there are different ways that people think about these two greatest commandments and apply them. The first biggest difference in how people can interpret what "loving your neighbor as yourself" means. One way it is interpreted is that it means doing Random Acts of Kindness or being kind and nice, not much else. This and others consider loving your neighbor as a very one-to-one or individualistic task. It is just about what I do for you and others directly. Another way to think of loving your neighbor is making sure others are saved and using tough love with discipline and legality to "help" them conform to their idea of the right way to live. Another way to interpret it is to think loving their neighbor is making sure their neighbor is loved, and cared for, which fits more into thinking of neighbor as more than one person, as a community, or our whole world. This interpretation leads to thinking of loving others through social justice and service, making sure that someone is loved for the moment and that that love and care is sustained for longer than the interaction or one event. None of these interpretations are fully right or fully wrong, but perhaps all of them have truth to them. When we look at the rest of the Bible and the many laws and advice and lessons that are shared through the text, there are pieces of each of those interpretations scattered throughout.

The important thing to remember here is that Jesus concludes his answer to the Lawyer with this: "One these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Jesus is telling us that all of the laws and teachings of the prophets point toward these two commandments. This means that when we are reading the Bible our interpretation of what it is saying must support loving God and loving neighbor. If our interpretation does not lead us or someone else to loving God AND loving neighbor, then we need to read it again and figure out a different interpretation. With 613 plus laws outside of these two, it can be easy to start thinking of the other laws and teachings as the limits and caveats being set to the way we live out our faith. Jesus saying that all the law and prophets hang on Loving God and Loving neighbor means that when it comes to these commandments, none of the rest of the Bible act as caveats. It is not Love God and Love neighbor as yourself, except in this situation, or Love God and Love neighbor as yourself, UNLESS they are doing this thing. NO. It is Love God and Love Neighbor as yourself and the way you live out the laws and teachings should lead to more of that.

Is there a way to know if we are succeeding in that? Well, the best way to figure that out is to listen. We are surely going to make mistakes, as individuals and in groups or communities in loving others and loving God, but we must be willing to listen for when others tell us that we made a mistake or something we did didn't work out or have the effect we intended. This is where love gets a bit complicated. You can't make

someone feel loved. Intentions only carry so far. We must listen for if the other person or people are saying they are not feeling loved. I'm not talking about someone claiming they are not feeling love like a petulant teenager shouts that you are torturing them by not allowing them to go to some party or giving them consequences for breaking the rules. I mean when someone says they are not feeling loved or worthy of love in an earnest way. We cannot decide for someone else how they are feeling or what their lived experience is. If someone says they are not feeling loved, that they do not matter, or are not loved as others are loved, then it is up to us to believe them. One of the ways to apply these greatest commandments is to recognize that some of our greatest work as Christians is to look for those who are not being loved as they deserve and do something to fix it. That can be as small scale or local as befriending someone who appears lonely or outcast to as large scale or global as contributing to a movement of equality or supporting an organization bringing education to girls in impoverished communities.

Loving neighbors is big work, so it is a good thing that we are not supposed to do that alone. We are first taught by Jesus in this passage to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Basically, Love God with everything that we are, our feelings, thoughts, and actions. This is another part of what we give as part of living into our faith, but God does not leave us hanging. As we open ourselves up to loving God with all that we are, we are letting God into everything that we are! We are inviting God to be a part of our hearts, souls and minds, part of our feelings, thoughts, and actions. As we love God with all of us, and invite God's love into all of us in return, God can then be a part of all that we are. God fills us with God's love to fuel us for living out our faith. As we love God, God loves us. As we love our neighbor, we love God and open up more of us and others to love God. As we choose to be a part of that amazing love, we are also loving ourselves. Though these commandments tell us how important it is to not be self-centered, they don't leave you out. Don't leave yourself out of this equation. It is Love God with all that you are and Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Loving yourself is an important part of this equation too, and not just in the self-care way that is popular these days. But truly, loving yourself, caring for yourself, doing what will be life-giving and help you flourish.

These commandments are always important, obviously, as Jesus says these are the most important commandments. But bringing them up in this moment is bold! He is facing those who will kill him in a few days, when he knows they will kill him because they had gotten out of touch with the movement of God in the world and were no longer loving God and neighbor with all their heart, soul, and mind and as they loved themselves. If they were truly loving God with their whole selves, they would recognize God amongst them in Jesus. If they were truly loving neighbors they wouldn't be so intertwined with the oppressive government of Rome. If they were loving others as they

love themselves, they would be working to uproot and not create and support systems that kept others down in poverty and marginalization. Jesus not only sidesteps their trap that was set by their question, but once again points out to their faces the ways that they have fallen away from how God would like them to be. He emphasizes it by not allowing them the last question, and finally flings his own mind-bender at them. "Whose son is the Messiah?" He knows they will answer "The Son of David." and so he responds by quoting a Psalm, a writing attributed to King David, then pointing out the paradox of David calling Jesus Lord and Son. This points out their misunderstanding of the Messiah, but also turns the tables on them, making them look like they are inadequate at interpreting scripture, when that was what they were trying to do by asking Jesus which is the greatest commandment. He is once again making them look bad in the way they were trying to make Jesus look bad. Jesus gets the last question then because they dared not ask him any more questions.

Jesus's timing in sharing those two commandments as the greatest of all was super timely in the moment he first spoke it. The timing of remembering these commandments as the greatest and that everything else should support them and not the other way around, seems also too perfect for this time in 2020. There are so many big things going on that have an effect on the way that people are being treated and the ways that love for God and neighbor and self is being lived out. We are still within a pandemic that has made us slow down and rethink the way we care for the most vulnerable around. We are now ten days from an election with choices more polarized than ever on who is best for our country and states. We are witnesses or perhaps participants to one of the largest and longest movements in American history against systemic racism. We have been facing the realities of climate change as the west coast continues to burn and the south has been battered by one of the worst hurricane seasons in 170 years. I am sure you can think of other things that 2020 has brought us. In the midst of this crazy year there are countless examples of those who are loving neighbor in important ways, there are also plenty of places where there could be more loving God and loving Neighbor as yourself. Thinking about all the ways we could do better can be overwhelming or anxiety inducing. Especially in the midst of this year, there is just so much going on, thinking about how much we can do better can feel like one burden too much. Reaching the full loving God and neighbor and self with all that you are is not a sprint race. You don't have to be perfect at it right away, but it is something we work on, something we add to, something that can grow within us slowly during some seasons and quickly during others. So, I encourage you to hear these commandments for how important they are and think about where you can apply them in your life anew, but also remember to be kind to yourself in the midst of times such as these and give yourself grace when you don't live it out just perfectly. Beyond all that though, always remember that this is work that we do WITH God and each other. You

are not alone in loving God and Neighbor. We are all working on doing that better and better and God is joining us in that work. Remember, God fills us with God's love to fuel us for living out our faith in loving God and neighbor and ourselves. Let us, together, love God and Neighbor and ourselves so much that we become holy rabble rousers, shaking up the status quo to bring about more love for God and neighbor.

Before we pray, I want to explain my prayer choice for a second. Many of the traditions that we practice for Halloween today in the US stem from practices of Samhain in Ireland from the Celtic peoples. In honor of Halloween and where much of the fun comes from, I picked a celtic harvest time prayer instead of writing my own.

These words come from Gregory Norbert of Weston Priory. Let us pray:

A time to gather, a time to reap
The fruits we've planted, hoping to bear peace.
The seeds have fallen so many months ago:
The harvest of our life will come.

In tenderness is life's beauty known:
And as we listen the morning star will shine.
The days go by; why not let them be filled
with new and surprising joys?

A time for kneading love's leaven well,
to open up and go beyond ourselves;
And as we reach for this moment, we know
That love is a gift born in care.

A time for hoping and being still,
To go on turning away from brittle fear.
A time to come back with all of one's heart
And bending to another's call.

This is our Journey through forests tall;
our paths may differ; and yet among them all
Life's dreams and visions sustain us on our way,
as loving gives birth to joy, gives birth to joy.
Amen.