

## “Whose Son Is He?”

Matthew 22:34-46

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

October 25, 2020

Our gospel lesson for today contains two related stories. The first is pretty straightforward. The second, not so much! The first has to do with the very practical question of *which commandment in the Jewish Law is the greatest of all*. The second has to do with a much more obscure question about the nature of the Messiah. In the first, Jesus *explains*; in the second, he *confounds*. The first story is *vitally* important for our faith and life as Christians. The second is important for what it says about Jesus.

Let's start with the first story. This one is probably very familiar to you. We're near the end of Jesus' ministry; he's in Jerusalem; Jesus is being put to the test by various groups of Jews. This time, by one particular Pharisee, who is described as a "lawyer." That does not mean "an attorney," in our sense of the word "lawyer"; rather, it designates someone who was particularly skilled and knowledgeable in the *Jewish Law*, all the commandments that appear in the first five books of the Bible. This was a *religious expert*, well-versed in the 613 specific commandments in Jewish history and tradition. He approaches Jesus with a question. Like the Pharisees who had previously asked Jesus about paying taxes to the Emperor, this man is not truly seeking *knowledge*. He's trying to *trap Jesus in his words*.

The question is this: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" It would seem that the lawyer is hoping that Jesus will lift up one law and downplay the rest. Then they could accuse Jesus of not taking the law seriously enough, of "picking and choosing" which laws to follow. There were – and still are – plenty of people who do that sort of "picking and choosing," as if *they* were God.

Jesus was a Jew; he had been raised in the synagogue; he had heard the Torah read every week in the Jewish services, much the same way it continues to be recited every week in Jewish synagogues today. At an early age he had demonstrated a remarkable aptitude for the Jewish law. At the age of 12, on a visit to Jerusalem, Luke tells us, Jesus was sitting among the teachers, listening to them, asking them questions; "and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." (Luke 2:47) The lawyer is foolish to think he could possibly trap Jesus with a question about the law.

Jesus answers the question. It is simple and straightforward. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." It is a quotation from the Jewish Law, specifically, it is a quotation from Deuteronomy 6. It is the second sentence in what is called the *Shema Yisrael*, a classic cornerstone in Jewish daily prayer rituals. The paragraph that Jesus quotes from is without question *the* most important paragraph in the Jewish law, both then and now. Jesus gives the absolutely correct answer to the lawyer's question; he says it is the "greatest and first commandment."

But he doesn't stop there. He lifts up another commandment, a second commandment, from the Jewish Law. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That one is not quite as central in Jewish

history and liturgy, but it, too, is a quotation from the Jewish Law; specifically, from Leviticus 19. Jesus lifts this up as a *second* commandment of greatest importance, and likens it unto the first.

“On these two commandments,” says Jesus, “hang all the law and the prophets.” That is to say, *everything* that the Bible teaches, from the Five Books of Moses through the historical books that trace the Israelites’ history from the crossing of the Jordan to the destruction of Jerusalem, and including all fifteen prophetic books – *hundreds* and *hundreds* of pages – can all be summed up in these two essential teachings. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind;” and “love your neighbor as yourself. It all boils down to *love*, says Jesus: first, an utter and complete love for God; second, an expansive love for all of humanity. Love flowing *upwards* from your soul to God; love flowing *outwards* to all your sisters and brothers, of whatever nation, color, creed, or political affiliation. The Jewish life – and the *Christian* life – are both fundamentally about *those two loves*.

It is a completely straightforward answer. It is also eminently practical. If someone were to ask you, “What is Christianity all about,” you could in all sincerity say that it is fundamentally about *those two loves*. There is nothing here that the Jewish lawyer can argue with. His attempt to trap Jesus fails.

So then, Jesus turns the tables back on them. If *they* can come up with no more questions for *him*, well, *he* has one for *them*. This one is trickier. “What do you think of the Messiah?” he begins. “Whose son is he?” According to traditional Jewish understandings, the Messiah would be descended from King David. So they answer that the Messiah is “the Son of David.” Jesus then throws them the *real* question. “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” Talk about perplexing. There *is* an answer to this question, but it requires some work!

Jesus is quoting here from Psalm 110. The introductory comment at the beginning the Psalm indicates that it is “a Psalm of David.” The Psalm itself begins with the words, “The LORD said to my Lord.” In Hebrew, there is a clear distinction between the first mention of “LORD” and the second mention of “Lord;” the first is the divine name, the name of God, “Yahweh” or “Jehovah,” which observant Jews never say aloud. They substitute the word “Adonai,” which means “The Lord,” anytime the divine name appears in the text. The second use of the word “Lord” is generic; it is not God’s name; it could be translated as “my lord” or “my master.” So, another way to translate that line would be, “GOD said to my master.” But who is “my master”? Generally speaking, Jews in the time of Jesus would have understood the “master” as a reference to the Messiah, the promised king to come. God *hands over royal power* to the Messiah, the Anointed One, who is referred to as “my master” or “my lord.” But who does the “my” refer to? Whose master or lord is this? Is it David’s? His name is at the top of the psalm. If so, that would mean that David understood the Messiah to be his “lord” or “master” in some sense. That would mean the Messiah *existed* in some form at the time David was alive. But how could that be, if the Messiah is also *descended from* David? How could David *actively serve* a Messiah who wouldn’t be born until *centuries* after David was dead? Do you see the problem here? The problem is *time*. How can the Messiah be both David’s *lord* and David’s *descendant*? Or, as Jesus puts it: “If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” You see why this would have confounded the Pharisees!

Of course, there *is* an answer. Jesus Christ is the Messiah; Jesus is descended from David; yet Jesus is also the Word of God who existed before the world was created. At the time David lived, Jesus existed in heaven; he hadn’t yet come to earth. He could be both “David’s master” *and* “David’s son.”

But the Pharisees don't see that. They are stumped. No one asks Jesus any more questions.

Now: what's in these stories for us?

For one thing, there is a reaffirmation of the reality that Jesus *is* the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. If we read the Psalm that Jesus quoted in its entirety, we see that Jesus is both a ruler and a priest. He will stand over his enemies; he will shatter ungodly kings; he will execute justice among the nations. The reign of Christ will be the most *just* kingdom imaginable. That is wonderful news to all the peoples of the earth – and a warning to any who would try to rule in ways that are *not* in keeping with the kingdom of God. The justice and judgment of Jesus Christ *will* come upon them.

We also learn here the two things, above all else, that are most important to Jesus, the two things that *should* be the most important to any of us who bear his name. “Lord the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” Regarding the first: loving the Lord our God is something we do with *every aspect* of our being. We use our *heart* – for it is an *emotional* activity. We use our *soul* – for it is a *spiritual* activity. We use our *mind* – for it is an *intellectual* activity. If we devote ourselves to God solely through our *emotions* – that's not enough. If we devote ourselves to God solely through our *spirituality* – that's not enough. And if we devote ourselves to God solely through our *intellect* – that's not enough. Even *two* of the three isn't sufficient. No, the proper love of God involves *all three*. Which means that God expects us to use our heart *and* our soul *and* our mind when we come to church. We don't check our brains at the door when we come to church, any more than we check our heart, or our spirit. Don't settle for a version of Christianity that lacks *emotional* investment, or a version that is missing *spiritual* nourishment, or a version that dumbs down the faith, or rejects what we learn from science. *None* of those are authentic. Proper devotion to God involves the heart, *and* the soul, *and* the mind. It involves *all* of who you are.

Then, regarding the other great commandment: we are called to *love our neighbor as our self*. “Neighbor” means *anyone* – not just the people who look like us, the people who speak our language, the people who worship the same God we do. *Every person on the face of this earth* was made in the image of God. We are to *honor* that divine image that is in *all* of them. Sometimes, that divine image may be hard to see, especially in people who are cruel or selfish or who do evil things – but deep down, maybe pretty buried, *they were made in the image of God*, even if, in some cases, that image may have become tarnished over time. The commandment doesn't just mean, “treat other people as you would want people to treat you;” it goes further than that. It means, *look for that face of the divine*, the way that other person was made in the image of God, *the same way you were*. Regardless of any other circumstance, you and that other person share the same origin, and you will share the same fate. Wherever you come from, whatever has happened to you along life's road, whatever sins – great or small – you may have committed along the way, *you came from God*. One day, at life's end, *you will stand before God once again*. In that respect, *every person on the face of this planet is fundamentally the same*. In God's eyes, we are all alike in those two respects. So while we live this life, we are called to *show everyone else* the same *fundamental respect*, the same *fundamental love*, that grows out of our identity in God. Don't hurt them, don't rob them, don't lie to them, don't spread false information about them, don't treat them in *any way* that fails to honor the image of God that they bear.

If the human race could *learn* that basic truth, and *practice* it ... what a world this would be!

© 2020 Rev. Bill Pinches