

## **The Greatest Commandment and Whose Son Is Jesus**

Deacon Robert Millott

Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 22:34-46

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

AMEN

In today's Gospel reading we are presented two sets of passages. The first is on The Great Commandment and the second on Whose Son is the Christ?

I want to talk to you about the first passage first.

In verse 36 we encounter a Pharisee, who was supposed to be an expert in the law, which would be the Torah or first five books of the Bible. Those books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

After Jesus had heard the hostile questions from the Sadducees and silenced them the Pharisees ask Him another question. He asked Jesus "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" What the Pharisees are asking Jesus is what are the light and weighty commandments or for that matter the easy and hard commandments.

Now a little background on who the Sadducees and Pharisees were. The Sadducees were members of a Jewish sect that denied the resurrection of the dead and the existence of spirits. They also did not follow the oral tradition that emphasized the acceptance of the written Law alone. The Pharisees on the other hand were members of a Jewish sect that distinguished themselves from others by their strict observance of the traditional and written law, and held themselves to have a superior

sanctity. They often looked down on the poor and marginalized people of society. The people Jesus taught and spoke with.

What might be happening in this discourse is that Matthew may be thinking of a view that was common in some circles of first-century Judaism that, since all commandments are of equal importance in God's eyes and are to be observed solely for God's glory, it is sinful to argue that some are more important than others on the basis of some mere human standard of judgement.

Jesus says in Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." Jesus is accusing the Pharisees and Sadducees of doing what was easy and really the less important of the law. They neglect the most important and that is to show justice and mercy and faithfulness. In verse 37-38 we read Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

In Deut. 6:4 we read "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This law is called the Shema. The Shema builds on the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me". Continuing on in Deut. 6:7-9 God tells the Israelites "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." God wanted them to not forget these laws. God is stressing how important this law is.

Children memorized these verses, and Jewish men wore them in phylacteries or as some call them frontlets. They are a small leather box containing Hebrew text on vellum during morning prayer as a reminder to keep the law. Vellum also known as parchment which was derived from animal skin and was used in ancient times as material to write on. Wearing these boxes would be similar to people who wear a crucifix to remind them that Jesus suffered and died for their sins.

In Exodus 20:3 we read the first Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me. Again in Deut. 5:7 God repeats this Commandment “You shall have no other gods before me. God wants exclusive worship for Himself. The Israelites were not the only monotheists or believers in one god in antiquity. There was an Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton who ruled around 1350-1334 B.C. who was a monotheist as were some Gentiles. For the most part though the Gentiles were Polytheists or those who worshiped many different gods.

Continuing on with verse 39 Jesus says “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” What Jesus tells us here is that all the Law and what the Prophets said are summed up in these two Commandments.

Did you know in the Old Testament there are 613 commandments? There was no clear standard in determining which commandment was the greatest. Since God gave the commandments, they all have equal importance. When the rabbis would get together to talk about these commandments some would talk of some being heavy and some being light. However, in reading the Shema it sounds to me like these are the two Great Commandments: having no other gods, and loving your neighbor as yourself. I have paraphrased Leviticus 19:9-18 into what is involved in loving our neighbor.

1. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge." (vv. 9-10) The reason for this is to leave some food for the poor and the sojourner.
2. "You shall not steal" (v.11)
3. "You shall not deal falsely" (v.11)
4. "You shall not lie to one another." (v.11).
5. "You shall not swear by my name falsely" (v.12)
6. "You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him." (v.13)
7. "The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning." (v.13)
8. "You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" (v.14)
9. "You shall do no injustice in court (v.15)
10. "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great (v.15)
11. "In righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. (v.15)
12. "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people." (v.16)
13. "You shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor." (v.16)
14. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. (v.17)
15. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. (v.18)

Continuing in vs 34 God says" You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. The word 'your' adds a personal dimension to our religious duty to God. He is OUR God and we are His people.

Now back to Matthew. By calling us to love our neighbor Jesus enumerates the love we are to give. He does not tell us to love the world which is what most might prefer. It is usually easier to love in the

abstract or conceptual such as people in another country than in the particular such as our next-door neighbor. It is much easier to drop money in a collection plate or a box on a counter in a store than to visit someone who may be sick in our neighborhood. The neighbor Jesus tells us to love has a real face.

In verse 40 Jesus says, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” These commandments summarize the Kingdom to come that Jesus initiated in His teaching.

The Torah, or the Law, Genesis through Deuteronomy is the most sacred part of Jewish scriptures. The next important will be the books of the prophets, Isaiah through Malachi. These books are very precious to Jewish people because they tell the people of God’s gift of love and what He demands of His people. When Jesus tells the listener “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” He is saying that these two commandments summarize the most important wisdom found in the Bible. The commandments can be thought of as the rule and guide to God’s will—that when we act in a loving and caring way towards God and our neighbor, we can be sure we will be obeying God’s law. So, if we obey these two commandments, we can be confident that we are on the right path in doing what God wants us to do.

I want to go back to chapter 5 in Matthew and briefly review it. Just after Jesus delivers His Sermon on the Mount, He tells His disciples in vs 17-18 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” What Jesus is saying here is that there are certain Old Testament hopes that need to be

filled partly by His life on earth and then His death and resurrection and most importantly His second coming.

We heard earlier about Jesus giving us the Golden Rule in chapter 7 vs 12 in Matthew's Gospel, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. This Golden Rule served as a summary of His Sermon on the Mount. Now He is in Jerusalem where He gives us a double commandment of love, coming at the end of His series of disputes with the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes and His earthly ministry and teaching.

A visitor to St. Andrews will see the love Jesus is talking about. When we pass the peace, or when I put out a box to collect food for the Food Bank or when we go Christmas caroling to the shut-ins, outreach to children and nursing home visitations before covid-19 hit us. We are a loving parish and Diane and I are blessed to be here with you.

Now for the second passage that Fr. John read this morning.

Jesus just finished dealing with His adversaries when he asked the Pharisees "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son, is he?"

Their response was "The son of David". This was an expected response because they expected the Messiah would be a royal descendant of David. The Jews were anxiously awaiting the Messiah to free them from the oppression of the ruling Romans. They did not realize that Jesus had not come to fulfill their expectations. Nevertheless He is the son of David. This was pointed out to the Disciples' at Jesus' baptism and again at His Transfiguration as read in Matthew 3:13-17 and His baptism in Matthew 17:1-8.

The Pharisees again asked Jesus another question, "How is it then that David, in 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”? Saying David, in the Spirit means that he was surrounded by the Holy Spirit and was prophesizing. Jesus is also ascribing Psalm 110 to David. This psalm is considered a royal psalm because its theme deals with the role of the house of David in the Jewish people’s lives. In the Psalm the first verse is “The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool. In this verse the first Lord is in all caps because it refers to God by His divine name. The Jewish people did not think they were worthy of calling God by His name so throughout the Old Testament they use other names to refer to God including but not limited to Elohim, El Shaddai, Adonai, and Elyon. In Rev 1:10 John while on the island of Patmos says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice.” He was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write the book of Revelation. David and John were both under a strong influence of the Holy Spirit and that led them to have prophetic visions and make their pronouncements. In Psalm 110 God is talking to His Son Jesus as the Messianic king who is to come. Peter in Acts 2:34-35 says, “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “ The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”” Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ.”

Now for the second lord. The second lord cannot be a second god because the Old Testament makes it clear that there is only one God. The second lord cannot be David’s son because no parent would call their son lord. That leaves only one possibility and that would be Jesus the Messiah who certainly was not David’s son but His Lord. That would make the Pharisees answer of the second lord being David’s son incorrect. They tried to embarrass Jesus and as usual failed in doing so. They were wrong when they said the lord was David’s son. Jesus was a decedent from the line of David via Joseph His earthly father.

Here these Pharisees who were supposed to be experts in the Law and Prophets and spent many hours debating and discussing points like this one. They asked Jesus, who to them was just a lay person, in hopes of embarrassing him. Jesus then in turn asks them a question and the Pharisees are the ones embarrassed. Now the Pharisees who failed in their attempts are sent home with egg on their faces. That is the whole point of the verses 41-46.

Jesus now leaves the Pharisees and talks with the crowds and His disciples publicly denouncing the Pharisees as hypocrites and a brood of vipers. In just a few days it will be the Passover and Jesus' ministry will soon be completed.

I want to summarize what I have said to you this morning. 1. God wants us to love Him and to do so is by acts of obedience and worshiping Him. 2. We are to love our neighbor by doing acts of kindness towards them that are derived out of our concern for them. 3. The Father to Jesus the Messiah is the one and only living God our Father in Heaven. The genealogy as mentioned in Matthew 1:1-17 is the genealogy of Joseph not Jesus' biological father. Matthew 1:18-22 makes it clear that Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

The measure of a person is not how great their faith is but how great their love is.

Let us pray,

Almighty God, whose Son Jesus Christ came to cast fire upon the earth: grant that by the prayers of thy faithful people a fire of burning zeal may be kindled and pass from heart to heart, that the light of thy church may shine forth bright and clear to all humanity; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN