

The Law of Love

Matthew 22:34-40

In broad terms, I have found one question, one subject, to be the most frequently misunderstood area of everything with regard to understanding the Bible and what we might simply call the Christian faith. One question that is asked or studied more often than any other. One subject that has caused more disagreement, dissension and even division among God's people. The question comes in a variety of forms, and it reintroduces itself again and again in a variety of different contexts. This subject can be defined in any number of ways with a variety of different words. But the issue always comes back to this simple point. What is the relationship between the law and the gospel?

More pointedly, it might be asked, as Christians, under the gospel in the New Testament, are we still under the law? Are we subject to the law? And if we are, what law? What does obedience to the law accomplish? How does that law relate to the promises of the gospel? If we are under the law, what, then, is the meaning of grace? I could go on and on with those questions, and I could give almost endless examples just from my own experiences of how those questions work themselves into the lives of God's people and into the life of the church.

The questions are not new, and, in fact, our text this afternoon raises this very issue. We are told, however, this question is not being raised honestly. That is to say, it is not an inquisitive question asked by people wanting to learn something from Jesus. It is asked as a trick question, seeking to embroil Jesus in a debate and argument in which the Pharisees intend for him to get into some sort of trouble. The Pharisees want to start an argument with what we would call today a "gotcha" question, hoping and planning for Jesus to come out of that debate looking

badly. And we know from verse 35 that it was a test, a trick, a trap.

So what's the question?

v.36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

According to Jewish tradition, according to the Talmud, the answer would be 613, 613 commandments in the Torah, or the Law. That would be 248 commandments, beginning with "Thou shalt...", and 365 negative commandments, "Thou shalt not..." You can be sure many of the Pharisees would be very interested to identify them all in order of importance, the most important all the way down to the least important. Not just the top 10, or the top 20, but all 613. So, which commandment is first? Which commandment is the most important?

We've been studying similar trick questions for several weeks now, as Matthew writes in this chapter. In verse 15, we read,

v.15 "Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. 16 And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. 17 Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

If you remember, Jesus answered that so pointedly, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Then the Sadducees asked about marriage in the resurrection, and Jesus' silenced their foolishness with this rebuke,

v.29 "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor

are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven.”

Now we have this question about the law. As we study this question, and the law, let me begin by emphasizing just how wrong the question was. How fundamentally wrong even the foundation for this question was. Specifically,

I. A WRONG USE OF THE LAW.

And that “wrong use”, as I am putting it, is in establishing a hierarchy. In other words, the purpose of the law is not so that we can create a list of importance. The purpose of the law is not to emphasize one law at the expense of any other, nor stress any one particular law as a priority of another. In fact, as James teaches so clearly,

James 1:10 “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”

The Bible makes it clear, that in a real sense, the law is one, the law is a unified whole. It’s all or nothing. In that context, equally clear, is the reality that one sin, any sin, any violation of any law, renders you a law-breaker. And renders you liable to the curse of the law.

Gal. 3:10 “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”

Deut. 27:26 “Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them.” “And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’”

So it is simply wrong to study the law as a hierarchy. And as it obviously was in the intention of these Pharisees,

A. A hierarchy of law creates foolish arguments.

So we read, v.34-36

Let’s start an argument! Let’s make Jesus say something that someone else is bound to disagree with. Let’s make Jesus answer a question that will cause him to be embroiled in a contentious argument, what I call a foolish argument.

Foolish, because it has no constructive purpose. Foolish, because it has no beneficial outcome. No one will learn anything from this question. No one will be more equipped to be faithful to God by answering. No one will grow in grace or make progress in personal holiness or sanctification.

Foolish arguments are so incredibly harmful. One of the several definitions of godliness and maturity found in the list of qualifications for elder in 1 Timothy 3 is that he be “not quarrelsome.” Titus identifies the quality of being “sober-minded.”

In the wisdom of the Proverbs, we read this,

Prov. 26:21 “As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife.”

Let me read several other cross references in order to demonstrate just how significant this is,

Tit. 3:9 “But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. 10 Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, 11 knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.”

Gal. 5:19 “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish

ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

And, 2 Cor. 12:20 “For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults.”

Contentiousness, creating foolish arguments, is evil. And with that,

B. A hierarchy of law renders “lesser” laws irrelevant.

Note in my outline, I have “lesser” in quotes, because my whole point is that there are no such “lessor” laws of less importance. The law is one. But if you acknowledge lesser laws, you are creating the context and the excuse to ignore them, such as the phrase, “the lesser of two evils.” Many people embrace that excuse, justifying to themselves their disobedience on the basis of a “lessor” offense, breaking a “lessor” law. And once you acknowledge that distinction of “lesser,” you render those laws irrelevant. If it is less important, then you may well find occasion to ignore it.

I can give you an example from Jesus’ own words.

Mark 7:9 “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. 10 For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother’; and, He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ 11 But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban”—’ (that is, a gift to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, 13 making the word of

God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

So the whole question is to be faulted. But Jesus still answers, and in his answer provides us with a definition of,

II. THE PROPER USE OF THE LAW.

His answer is actually the very opposite of what is asked for in the question. The Pharisees ask for a hierarchy, and Jesus gives them a comprehensive summary. In other words, instead of creating a debatable list of the relative importance of each separate law, Jesus gives them a summary of the law, a law which serves to unite all the laws together in one. That summary is comprehensive, so rather than creating a list of laws in priority that renders the lesser laws irrelevant, Jesus provides a summary that joins all the laws together in one. And that “one” law is defined with a single focal point,

A. The definitional focal point of love.

This is the definition of the law—to love. I’ll get to that appropriate division in a moment, loving God and love your neighbor, but before we go there, let this sink in a bit. The definitional focal point of the law is love! To obey the law is to love. To love is to obey the law. It’s not one or the other. It’s not even a distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, as if those two are in tension or even conflict. It is simply the definition of law. It is simply the definition of love. That is what the law is about, what it has always been about.

Eph. 5:1 “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.”

1 Tim. 1:5 “Now the purpose of the commandment is love

from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.”

Rom. 13:8 “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Gal. 5:14 “For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

James 2:8 “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well.”

With respect to God, John is so plain,
1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

2 John 5 “And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another. 6 This is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, that as you have heard from the beginning, you should walk in it.”

Please realize the significance of all those words. Love is not only the definition of the law, it is...

B. The comprehensive summary of love.
v.40 “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Instead of a list of laws with their relative importance specified, Jesus gives one law to include them all. Namely, the law of love. It’s all there. The whole law. All the commandments, whether you want to speak of the ten commandments or all the related commandments in the Bible, even if you want to refer to all 613 of those commandments identified in the Jewish Talmud. None are skipped. None are irrelevant. None are more important than any other, because they all define the commandment of love.

In that context, we can then define,

III. THE APPROPRIATE DIVISION OF THE LAW.

I’ve said it often, but let me say it again. Even this division is not a hierarchy, as if the second great commandment is any less important. And certainly, neither of these commandments is such that the one would contradict the other, or that you have to break one in order to keep the other. There is one law, the law of love. And in that love, there is the obvious distinction of both love for God and love for one another.

So Jesus answers the question posed to him this way,
v.37 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

It is,

A. The law of love for God.

Let me remind you, with emphasis, that is not a new commandment. That is not a “New Testament” commandment as contrasted with an “Old Testament” commandment. These words didn’t originate with Jesus. They came from the mouth of the Lord to Moses in,

Deut. 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”

Deut. 10:12 “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?”

This is what so rightly keeps us from the dangers of moralism, the dangers of thinking that religion is the same thing as moral living. This is what keeps us from the dangers of legalism, thinking that there is some sort of external standard of law-keeping to which we must attain in order to be saved, or an external standard of law-keeping which we believe to be sufficient and attainable. God doesn't require merely an external conformity to certainly outward behaviors. Rather he requires our love, a love which is to be defined and practiced outwardly according to his law, but nonetheless, at its root level, still love.

And not just any form of love. Not just a certain quantifiable degree of love. No, this is what God requires of us, of you and of me, that you love him...“with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” With all of it, everything, fully entirely and completely. Nothing held back, nothing in reserve, everything you have and everything you are given to the one who is to be the object of your love, namely God himself.

Now, to say that is to confess that none of us ever fully and perfectly meets that standard of duty, and thus we are always, always dependent upon his grace to receive and accept us in Christ because of his love for us. But that is the standard to which we aspire. That is the goal and the objective for which we live, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

When you fail, seek his forgiveness and pardon. And when he grants it to you, love him all the more for that display of his grace. And the point is that this love is not merely outward. Rather, the outward displays of love reflect the loving devotion of the heart.

So what does the Lord require of you? Your heart. Your life. Everything. The fullness of your devotion. He requires your love. A love expressed by your submission and obedience to his law. And, right alongside that, joined and connected to all of that inseparably, he requires your commitment to,

B. The law of love for one another.

v.39 “And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Just to emphasize again, this law is not new in the New Testament either.

Lev. 19:17 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

Going back to,

Rom. 13:9. “...all [the law is] summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? It means that you honor one another. That you submit to one another. That you bear with one another. That you are kind to one another. And forgive one another. Encourage one another.

Even more specifically,

1 Cor. 13:4 “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

“In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” In the ESV, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” The NASB puts it, “with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.” Beloved, that’s what it means to love. Consider someone else more important than yourself.

So what is the greatest commandment in the law? There is no argument. No debate. No division or dissension. You are to love. You are to love one another as if they were yourself, more important to you than yourself. And you are to love God with everything you have and all that you are, with all your heart, soul and mind. “He who loves another has fulfilled the law.”