

# The Only Argument Worth Making

Matthew 22: 34-46

October 25, 2020

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

On this Giving Sunday, I'm reminded of the story of the part-time organist who wanted to get the job full time. So she asked the pastor what she could do to enhance her possibilities. The pastor told her it was stewardship season and that the sermon would conclude with an appeal to the congregation to give extra this year to help support the budget. At the end of the sermon, the people who would be willing to give an extra thousand dollars would be asked to stand. The pastor indicated that the organist might want to play some appropriate music while the people made their decision. The sermon concluded with the preacher's appeal and the organist began playing the National Anthem. Everyone stood and the budget was quadrupled. And a lifetime contract was issued to the organist.

Sometimes you have to think differently to accomplish your goals. Steven Covey was researching expectancy theory and the "Pygmalion effect" when he realized that our perceptions are deeply embedded. He discovered that "we must look at the lens through which we see the world, as well as the world we see, and that the lens itself shapes how we interpret the world." Covey stated his 7 Habits of Highly Effective People in simple maxims like "be proactive" and "put first things first." In essence, Covey's program for effectiveness relied upon the notion of intentionally connecting one's everyday activities to one's deeply held values and commitments. The Seven Habits provided a program for identifying and focusing on core values and allowing these to guide daily practices.

Recently I was reading the obituary of William H. Danforth, the former Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis Missouri, where he served for 24 years. When Bill was 12 years old, his self-made grandfather handed him a pair of scissors and told him to cut out the word "impossible" from his dictionary. He wanted his grandchildren to feel that they could change the world, as long as they gave back. And all four of them did. His brother John became a three-term United States Senator from Missouri. Bill Danforth was given a lens through which to see the world by his grandfather and he absorbed the lesson.

Our text today provides the teachings of Jesus at the very core value, “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the greatest commandment and the second. These are the core values that should guide your daily practices.

Jesus had his critics. There were people threatened by his popularity. There were preachers whose thunder he stole as well as their congregations. As word got out about him, Jesus faced his opponents. One such opponent asked him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Argument and debate served as the cornerstone of Jewish theological reflection and development. It is the way you hammer out your faith. That’s one of the reasons that it is sometimes said, “Wherever you have four Jews together, you’ll have five opinions.” There are two ways to win an argument in this context. You could come up with the correct answer or, you could pose a question that couldn’t be answered. Here Jesus does both, when answering the question.

At first glance, the question sounds profound. But the operative word here is the word “test.” They asked the question in order to test him. They didn’t want Jesus’ insight into any deep question. They merely wanted to trip him up. If they could make him mis-speak, they could discredit him and choke off his growing popularity. We know that happens all the time in life, especially in public life. Did you see the Presidential Debate this week? Lots of attempts to get the opponent to mis-speak and thus discredit himself.

This lawyer asked Jesus his question like an opponent during a debate. He simply wanted to show him up as a fraud. What a surprise when Jesus answered correctly right off the bat. “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” And Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, 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.” Then Jesus turns the tables and poses a question the Pharisees could not answer, “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” Now the questioners have no reply.

The overall effect of this exchange between Jesus and his critics is to point out the futility of all verbal wrestling as a way to understand what it means to live a life of faithfulness to the living God. I can only understand by doing it. I understand by living it. How do I love God? By loving my neighbor. Theological puzzles may provide for an interesting diversion and maybe even a little insight, but the key that unlocks the mystery is faithful living. The only argument Jesus really seems to care about is the one I make with my life. He's not asking for any half-hearted living, as though I could love God with half of my heart, half of my life. Have you ever seen a tennis player, after a match, jump 35 1/2 inches over the net? Unfortunately, tennis nets are thirty-six inches high. Going part way, even most of the way, just doesn't cut it!

Why hasn't loving others become a higher priority in life? The answer to why people have difficulty loving each other over the long haul strikes right at the heart of every relationship I'm involved in. Little progress can be made in a marriage, a friendship, or a family, even among a group of friends, until the participants can honestly say, "I don't know how to love this person. To be honest, I don't even want to love this person sometimes. But because you, Christ, my Lord, have asked me to, I ask you to fill my heart and my mind with love for this person!"

This is not some wishy-washy kind of thing that lets everyone use you. I learned a whole new dimension of love that I hadn't known before when my children became teenagers. I discovered that I had to sacrifice closeness that I may want with my children because love called me to set some standards and clear boundaries. And I confess that I didn't always know how to do that, and I had to ask the Lord for help.

In the last of Tolstoy's *Twenty Three Tales*, he tells the story of a king searching for the answers to three questions: How can I do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I therefore pay more attention than the rest? and, What things are most important and require my attention first?

The king's search took him to the hut of a wise, old hermit who lived deep in the forest. The king approached the hermit, and saw that he was dressed in rags, and at the end of long a workday, sick and on the verge of collapse. The king took the spade from the hermit and finished the

job of digging the garden. At sundown a bearded man with a terrible wound staggered into the hermit's yard. Unknown to the king, the man's wound had come from one of the king's own guards keeping watch in the forest. Gently the king cleaned the wound, bandaged it, and stopped the bleeding. Night fell. The king slept on the threshold of the hut. When he awoke, he re-dressed the bearded man's wound and checked on the hermit. The wounded man, overcome by guilt, confessed to the king. He had hidden in the forest waiting for the king to return from the hermit's hut so he could kill him. He wanted revenge for a judgment the king had made against him some time in the past. The king listened intently and then promised to send his own doctor to take care of the man's wound. And the king prepared to leave. Then remembering his own mission, the king again asked the hermit the answers to his three questions: How can I do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I therefore pay more attention than the rest? and, What things are most important and require my attention first?

The hermit patiently explained that the king had received his answers on the previous day. When the king had come upon the sick hermit, he had finished digging his garden for him. This was both the right thing and the right time, and the most important matter at hand. Had the king chosen to leave instead, the man hiding in the forest would have killed him.

Secondly, he helped the wounded man, again the right thing at the right time. "Remember then," the hermit continued, "There's only one time that's important. Now!" And then he added, "The most necessary person is the one who is in front of you . . . and the most important thing is to do good for that person, because for that purpose alone is anyone sent into this life!" And that gets at what Jesus is saying here. I understand by doing it – now – by living it – now! And the more I do it, the more I understand it.

Right this minute, I can't think of six people who truly believe they are doing exactly what God wants them to do. Instead they're waiting to find out what their true purpose is, or else they're waiting until circumstances improve enough for them to do a better job of fulfilling it. Until then, one thing is for sure – this is not it. This present life, under these circumstances, cannot possibly be what God has in mind!

Now that's sad but also useful, since it's all the permission most of us need to postpone full immersion in our lives. If this life is not yet my real life, then why give it all I have? Better to stay in the baby pool where no one expects too much of me. If anyone asks what I'm up to these days, I can say, "I'm still practicing." I keep discounting what I do every day. I keep discounting who I am because it doesn't match my fantasy of what I am supposed to look like.

But the life the Lord is calling me to is the one I'm living right now! Right here, under these present circumstances! I have everything I need to respond to God's call. I have what each of us has – one whole life to live on this earth. With people in it whom I may lift up by my presence, or put down by my absence, even when I'm standing right in front of them. Every night when we go to sleep, there is either more life in the world, because of us, or less life, because of us.

So, I come to understand the truth of God's reality and the truth of God's love by the doing and the living — again, and again, and again. This seems to be the only argument Jesus seems to care much about. The argument Jesus really seems to care about is the one I make with my life.

"Which commandment in the law is the greatest? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, 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."

What a difference it makes when we, again, and again, choose to live our one whole life — NOW — loving the Lord, our God, and loving one another. Thanks be to God.

Amen