

All of Holy Scripture, the Old as well as the New Testament, every book of the Bible, contains two great teachings: the Law and the Gospel. Without the one you cannot have the other. Without a right understanding of both, it is impossible to understand the Scriptures, to understand the Christian faith, rightly. Everything we know and believe and hope in rests on these two teachings. That there are different Churches, different teachings, stems from a confusion of these teachings.

Some, such as the Roman Catholic Church, make a Law out of the Gospel. To be sure they speak of Jesus as Savior, but part of that salvation Jesus brings is a new law, better instruction. When this is emphasized, the preaching of the Gospel is made into a set of morals, as though when our Lord says “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation,” what He meant was “Go and announce what morals should be kept and what good works should be done.” And invariably added to this, whether by Pharisees in ancient times or the medieval church down to today, is the institution of morals, laws, and works by men, teaching that to keep these is to please God and to break them is to sin. This flies in the face of the basic meaning of the word “Gospel.” This is not “good news,” but a burden, driving men either to pride, trusting in their obedience, or utter despair.

Still others, and there are many of these today, make a Gospel out of the Law, as though salvation, deliverance, and hope, is achieved through social action and humanitarian efforts. It sees the kingdom of God as something that we bring about by our activity here on earth. It’s why, especially in this nation’s history, great social movements of reform and justice take upon themselves religious language. The patriotic song, the Battle Hymn of the Republic, describes the Union armies that fought against the South in the Civil War, using the language of Bible passages that speak about God’s vengeance upon unbelief on the Day of Judgment. The preservation of the union and the abolition of slaves through the work of the Northern armies was confused with God’s ultimate judgment and salvation.

Today’s Gospel clears up any confusion about what we are to seek and understand in these two teachings. A lawyer seeks to test Jesus, wants to know His opinion of which commandment is the greatest. This was not an unusual discussion among the rabbis, which of the 613 commandments from the Law of Moses has pride of place? What, of all other things God commands and desires of us, is the most pleasing thing to Him that we are to do? Jesus gives the twofold commandment: **“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”**

In the Law God instructs and demands what we are to do. We are to render total and complete love toward God, and also love our neighbor. Here, where so many think of religion, even of Christianity, as a set of rules, forbidding all the fun things we’d like to do, we see that the essence of the Law is not forbidding, but the call to love. The Law is chiefly directed not at the hands or the head, but the heart, the heart’s affection and openness toward God and our neighbor.

This teaching is given in the Old Testament. We see it affirmed here by Jesus using passages from the Old Testament. It is taught by St. Paul. We are to know what God desires of us, and it is simplified in the twofold command to love. You don’t have to be a Christian to have some knowledge of this. Our world can operate as it does because most people recognize that it is not good to murder, cheat, or steal. It is not

right, is not just when people do these things. Every religion contains portions of the Law. Even unbelievers can recognize how they ought to conduct themselves. That Jesus summarizes the Law as He does here, is not unique. An earlier post-Old Testament Jewish writing says, "I loved the Lord and every man with whole heart." Still another says, "Love the Lord through all your life, and one another with a true heart." And yet a third, "The world stands upon three things: the Torah, the worship of God, and merciful benevolence."

But then Jesus asks a question of His own. Not about the commandments, not about what we are to do, but about the Christ, the Messiah. Who is He? Because the Law instructs and demands, what it instructs and demands is good, but it cannot save. It is not a means to salvation or hope, because any honest reflection upon any aspect of the Law will reveal that we have not loved God with our whole heart, that we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

So what is the answer? It is only right knowledge of the pure Gospel. It is only through the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. This is what makes a Christian a Christian. A number of years ago, there was a great scholar, Jacob Neusner, one of the most prolific authors of modern times, the list of his published books numbers more than 900. Neusner was also a devout Jew, a rabbi in fact, and he wrote a book, it's not too lengthy, called *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*. In it, Neusner imagines himself a first century listener to Jesus as He preaches the Sermon on the Mount.

So what does a Jewish rabbi have to say about what he hears from Jesus? There is deep admiration, many of the things Jesus says, as we have already heard today, are echoed by other teachers, a part of the Jewish tradition even to this day. Neusner says that Jesus is "in many ways a great Jewish teacher and any attentive, intelligent first century Jew would have seen that." However, Jesus adds something new, something you don't find in the patriarchs, the prophets, not in early or late rabbis. Jesus adds Himself.

"Unless you love Me more than your mother and father, more than your very life, you are not worthy of Me." Not Abraham, not Moses, not any of the prophets, arrogate to themselves that kind of authority. We can well imagine one of the prophets saying, "Unless you love the Lord, YHWH, more than your very life, you are not worthy of Him." But we cannot picture Isaiah or Moses saying, "Unless you love me, you are not worthy of me." Jesus gives Himself an importance that no other biblical figure does. This bothers Neusner.

Jesus also claims an authority that no one else does. He says, "You've heard it said...but I say..." Jesus says that commenting on the commandments, the very words God spoke to all Israel and gave to Moses on tablets of stone. Moses before his death directed Israel back to the Words given at Sinai. Thereafter, the judges and the prophets directed the people of Israel back to those words. No one said, "You've heard or read in the Torah...but I say..." Neusner recognizes what Jesus claims for Himself in speaking this way. He claims authority over the Word of God. As a Jew, Neusner says, I can't accept that.

Finally, closely tied to what we heard last Sunday, Jesus says that rest is to be found in Him. For Jews, Neusner says, rest is found on the Day of Rest, the Sabbath, when it is God who gives rest and provides all things to His people. This calls up all the controversies Jesus has with the Pharisees about what He and the disciples do on the Sabbath. Jesus claims to give, to be, the rest of His people.

There's much that not only Neusner, not only Jewish people, but all people, of any and even of no faith, can find attractive in Jesus, echoes of what they know about how we ought to live, because God has

written the Law on our hearts. But there is the dividing line, thin, a simple question, but one that makes all the difference: who is Jesus? Who is the Christ? Jesus does not leave us at questions about the true and fullest meaning of the Law, of what God would have us do and how He would have us live. Jesus takes us to another question, the question that makes all the difference. Whose Son is He?

He is plainly the Son of David, a man, a human being. But Jesus directs the Pharisees to the answer that Peter had already given. It was Peter's answer when Jesus asked the disciples essentially the same question as He asked the Pharisees today. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gives that foundational answer, the confession which all Christianity is built upon: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus is David's Son, He is true man, born of the virgin Mary. But He is also David's Lord, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, believed in and confessed by David, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, His ancestors according to the flesh. Here we see the clear and pure Gospel: what God does and gives freely as a gift in His Son. A twenty-first century American Jewish rabbi clearly sees what so many in the last 200 years have not, what so many Christians today, are unwilling to say: Jesus sets Himself up not just as the authority, but the divine authority come to give and provide for us. Not just one option among many, not a mere teacher or example, but the exclusive way of salvation. It is only through Him, His work for us, that we are saved.

This is what the Scriptures of ancient Israel promised, again and again, as they waited. This is what the Law, the commandments and precepts, showed was needed, because generation after generation showed what God already recognized in the days of Noah, that every inclination of man's heart is only evil continually.

We need to know what God desires of us. We need the Law. First, because it brings to our realization our need for the Christ, the Son of God come as a man, to do for us all that we could not, and to suffer in our place for all our sins, for every violation of God's decree and will that we commit. We also need it, because as those who believe in Jesus, who stand reconciled to God through Him, members of His family, His own dear children, knowing all that we now are and have through Jesus, we actually desire to live as His people, we want to please Him. The heart that recognizes Jesus as our Savior, eternal God come in the lowliness of our flesh to do all that was required to save us from sin and eternal death, the heart that knows this, does love Him.

Our Hymn of the Day is not an impossible prayer for a Christian to pray, is not empty words, but the godly desire and confession of true faith, a true faith that recognizes who Jesus is, both His person as the God Man, and His work, the One who accomplishes the work of saving us. That, above all things, is what our Lord Jesus would have you know.