

Pastor T.C. Arnold
18th Sunday after Trinity
Matthew 22:34-36
September 30th, 2018

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test Him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

Jesus is up against His detractors. First, the Sadducees just before the appointed text for the 18th Sunday after Trinity. With them, He had a "resurrection" issue to deal with. Now with the Pharisees, He has a "law" issue. They want to see what this great teacher everyone is talking about says about what *they* so strongly believe in.

Here it might be good to review what these Jewish "sects" believed. It's important because when we gain an understanding of what they believed, we see, in a clear way, why Jesus taught the way He did. He always taught to His audience. What I mean by that is He always spoke by addressing the specific needs of the people who were listening to Him... or the particular false teaching of those who questioned Him. In chapter 22 of Matthew, this is no exception. So, let's take a look at who Jesus was addressing... His audience.

First, in the Gospel of Matthew right before the text for today, Jesus had a run in with the Sadducees and is asked to address an "issue" they have that differs from what Jesus has been teaching. You see, Jesus had been teaching that there is such a thing as the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. And, what might blow you away is that this sect called the Sadducees were also priests. That's right, the priests who function in the Temple, making sure all the rights and ceremonies were done in perfect order, did not believe in the resurrection.

These Sadducees, rather, had an agenda. And, this agenda was purely selfish. They wanted to stop Jesus from telling everyone the opposite of what they were teaching because this was upsetting the applecart. In other words, it was putting the people into a frenzy. And the Sadducees didn't like this. Not necessarily because it contradicted their own teachings, but more because the Roman government didn't like all the noise and rabbleroising that came along with it. The Sadducees were aristocratic. They had a lot to lose if the Roman government got agitated. The Sadducees were all about keeping the peace for the sake of their own self-interests.... for the sake of their own status... for the sake of their own wealth. "Jesus, stop teaching about the resurrection because, for one thing, it isn't true. Secondly, you are making a mess for us, and we are going to lose everything," is what they were saying. Jesus sets them straight!

Now, in the text for today, Jesus is up against the Pharisees, another Jewish sect, who heard how He just manhandled the Sadducees. They have their own agenda, their own belief system, and their own self-interests to protect as well. The Pharisees were lovers of the strict law. That's how you find favor with God. That's how you get into heaven. Do the law perfectly and you gain eternal favor from God. This sect was much more in favor of the afterlife... for the very reason that the law was important... for this life and the next. They wanted to protect it... especially from a guy who taught in the text we had last week... "*Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?*" With that we might imagine a reaction like, "Jesus is messing with how we have understood work on the sacred day of the Sabbath. Something has to be done," says the Pharisee. They gathered together to put together a plan... against this Jesus of Nazareth.

And so this question emerged: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”* Simple question and Jesus gives a brilliant answer. Instead of stating one law... or two... He mentions all of them all at once. Every moral law is wrapped up in these words from Jesus: *“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. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* We have heard this answer before... we hear it again. If you remember the time before, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan and he explained to the lawyer who His neighbor was. We have also heard this same answer given to the rich ruler who wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. He wanted to know which commandments he needed to keep. Jesus says... *“All of them... and give away all that you have and follow me,”* which made him very sad. Just when you think you’ve got the law all figured out, there is more. There is more to do, there is more to keep. The term “perfectly” is not open to interpretation. If you want to get to heaven, you are going to have to be perfect.

Show of hands (that’s right, pastor is going to make you do something during the sermon), how many perfect people do we have here with us today? Now, how many people in this room are going to heaven? Why? How? You know why and how.

But know this, Jesus takes the law very seriously. That’s why He is serious about answering the questions posed to Him time and time again. So, if He is serious about the law, then we should be too. The commands are binding on Christians. They hold us to a certain standard. We are expected, by God, to keep them. They hold us accountable. They are not options for the Christian life.

Now, all of you know the law’s place. It’s for you and your neighbor. God puts the law in place so that you are held in check... and don’t run amuck. Also, it’s there to show you how to live for the sake of your neighbor. It’s there so that we know that our own self-interests are not the main thing. Service to our neighbor is of utmost importance. The Sadducees and the Pharisees saw their self-interests as the number one priority. But that is not what you are to do. Sure take care of yourself... be a good steward of yourself and those you love. But love your neighbor as yourself. And, even before that... love God above all things.

He loved you above all things. You are the jewel of His creation. Isn’t that something, the jewel of His creation? The Father loves nothing more than you... not even His only begotten Son, Jesus, the son of David. And that is good news for you the chief of all sinners. We labor against our own conscience about what we have done or said. How we have hurt others and even ourselves in ways that if other people knew about it, they would never think of us in the same way ever again. We fear that, but we all have that same story. We fear what others will say and what God really thinks. We wonder... if God sees everything that I have done how could He love me that much? But it’s still true. You are His jewel... His prized possession... warts and all.

And so you, oh crowned jewel, love your neighbors, your family, and your church, the way He loves you. Live the Christian life, not because it saves you but because you are saved by what Jesus has done to live... and die... for you. Love your Lord above all... the first commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself...the second commandment. And never forget, Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly for you so you can raise your hand, by grace through faith, when I ask questions during the sermon like, “are you going to heaven?” The answer is yes, by God’s Holy Grace only. It’s always YES! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.