

Sermon for Trinity 18 – Matthew 22:34-46

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

It was the last debate, if you could call it that, between the Pharisees and our Lord. The Pharisees try their hand at testing the Christ yet again. The moderator, a lawyer, asks Him the question: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” They thought this was a real zinger – what would He say? But you can almost see His eyes roll to the back of His head. Another question about salvation by the law. The last time He addressed this with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Today, He takes a different approach.

The Pharisees were legalists. They believed that God’s Law could be reduced to rules. And rules they had aplenty. In fact, according to Moises Ben Maimon (a medieval Jewish philosopher), they had 613 rules to keep; 613 to which they were devoted. Everything was covered – from what not to eat, to how to run the court system. We could say many things about the Pharisees, but it’s hard to deny their devotion to their rules. Their culture formed them for it. Just as the culture of consumerism forms people today. People have their rules. They are devoted to the latest product on the market. Some will research for hours trying to find the latest and best truck or TV. Others stay up into the early morning hours to get the best deals. People will remodel their homes not because they need remodeling, but because they want the latest trend in design. Their lives are consumed with consuming. One could hardly question their commitment and devotion, but devotion to what? To things that will be dust and ashes on the last day? Without God’s Word, our devotion will be focused on the wrong things. And the Pharisees had 613 of them. Still they ask, which of the 613, O Rabbi of Nazareth, is more important than the rest?

Christ’s answer is both simple and radical. He ignored their rules and went back to the Scriptures, specifically to the Law of Moses: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

You can’t reduce God’s Law to rules. The love that God requires of us all is far greater than the boundaries that rules set for us. God’s Law isn’t simply a matter of doing and refraining from doing, it’s a matter of loving with our whole heart, with our whole life, and with our whole mind. It takes our complete devotion. What do you desire more than anything else? What matters to you most today? What occupies your thoughts? This is your god. The God who made us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us demands from us all that we are and have, for all that we are and have are His. Giving it back to Him is not an option, it’s a necessity.

But we can’t find the strength to do it, so we devise ways of pretending we have done the things we can’t. This is why Pharisees old and new make rules that ignore the demand to love God above all things and to love your neighbor as yourself. The rules are designed to provide the façade of obedience while underneath the religious veneer, in actuality, there’s nothing but deceit and hypocrisy.

God’s Law makes sinners of us all. You can obey all the rules you’ve ever made up and you haven’t begun to obey God if you don’t desire Him above the things you own (or hope to own), if you don’t live for Him before living for yourself, and if you don’t think of what He has to say to you before thinking of what you have to say to Him. Of course, rules are necessary. But love is the requirement of God’s Law and no amount of rules can turn a stone-cold heart into a heart that loves God above all things.

Only Christ can do that. And He does. When our Lord asked His questioners who the Christ is, it's obvious that they had no idea. Of course, they knew that the Christ was David's Son. But He was also more than that. David's Son would also be David's Lord. How could that be possible? They didn't know. Frankly, they didn't care. They had their rules and their devotion toward other things and there was no time or space for something else. Their religion was a matter of does and don'ts, of haves and have nots, with nothing to do with David's Son and Lord.

Yet we rightly ask this question for it is the path of salvation: How indeed can David's Son be David's Lord? There is only one way. The Lord Himself must become a baby, born of the seed of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Jesse, David, and then finally a young virgin girl by the name of Mary. God had to become man. Only in God becoming man could man now do what God required of man. Only God in the flesh could fulfill what God demanded of all flesh. Sinful flesh neither loved God above all things, nor neighbor as self, but when the eternal Son of the Father became flesh and blood, it was not sinful flesh and blood. God became one of us in order to love us. It was as a man: Christ Jesus loved God with His whole heart, soul, and mind. He fulfilled the Law. He loved with a perfect love.

In Christ, David's son and David's Lord, we see God and man united in one person. And we see love like we can see it nowhere else. Christ fulfills the Ten Commandments by loving God above all things and His neighbor as Himself.

We Christians have no right to replace God's radical requirement of love with the doable rules religious people have invented and substituted in its place. No, we must continue to seek out instruction from God on how to love in the Ten Commandments. Also, we must confess that Christ is the only one to fulfill that perfect love required for us. When the perfect law of love doesn't describe our lives then we must agree with its judgment that we are poor miserable sinners who rightly deserve God's present and eternal punishment.

Yet then we must look to Jesus Christ, David's Son and David's Lord, to find the love that we can't find within ourselves. Pharisees old and new are too infatuated with their own rules to care about needing a Savior. But we who have found the pure and holy Law of love which rightly condemns us, do care about the One who takes our condemnation away. How can David's Son be David's Lord? We know how: "He was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end." His love is the pure obedience from the heart that God now accounts to us as righteousness. His love faced the hatred of all humanity on the cross and triumphed over it. The Law can't condemn us because Christ has borne our condemnation. In Christ we have the love God requires of us. In Christ we have God's forgiveness in our failure to love. In Christ we are blameless. In Christ, we have the love of God that passes all understanding.

No amount of rules could redeem our hearts and teach us how to love God, but God in Christ has. And so we love Him who first love us. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠