

Love is the Greatest Law

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to Matthew 22, verses 33 to 40, where Jesus is confronted with the question, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?

Imagine this scene. It is the last week of Jesus' earthly life. In just a few days, he's going to be betrayed, tortured, and crucified.

He's in the capital city of Jerusalem. He's never going to return to his homeland in Galilee until after the resurrection. To this Jesus, who knows he is soon to die, the Pharisees ask, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?

Our Lord, with great love and wisdom, replies, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

These are the golden rules of God. The royal law summed up in that one glorious word, love. Now, I want today to dig into this passage, shedding light on what Jesus is really saying, and not just what we think he might be saying.

[1 : 20] As we dig deeper, our eyes are going to be opened to the grace of a Christ whose love for God and love for neighbor led him to the cross, where he loved us till the end.

I want us to consider three issues from this passage. First, Christ and the controversy. Then, Christ and the commandments. Then, Christ and the cross.

First of all, Christ and the controversy. Christ and the controversy. Our passage begins with the Pharisees, who, having heard about how Jesus had successfully argued against the Sadducees and their unbelief in the resurrection, as we saw last week, gather together.

Remember, the Sadducees and the Pharisees are enemies. Anyways, the Sadducees were generally taken from the upper classes, were pro-Roman, socially liberal, and believed only in the authenticity of the first five books of the Bible, the Jewish Torah.

The Pharisees were generally taken from the lower classes. They were Jewish nationalists. They were socially conservative, and they believed not only in what we consider to be the whole of the Old Testament, but also in the traditions of the rabbis.

[2 : 45] The Pharisees, having heard that Jesus had defeated the Sadducees, thought that perhaps they had found an ally in this young rabbi called Jesus.

An ally with a huge following among the people, and who could perhaps influence Judea in its fight against Roman occupation.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, not every question we receive as Christians is as innocent as we might like it to be. And in this question, in this case, the question they asked Jesus is not being asked from a genuine search for truth, nor merely to trip him up.

Rather, the Pharisees' motive is almost entirely political. They want Jesus to affirm their position, to be on their side against the Sadducees.

Remember, we noted, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And if Jesus is an enemy to the Sadducees, then the Pharisees can have him as their friend. You see, to them, Jesus had become a pawn in a political game between them and the Sadducees.

[4 : 01] Remember, one of the central differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was on the issue of religious authority. For the Sadducees, only the material found in the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, was authentic and reliable.

Everything else was suspect, could not be trusted. For the Pharisees, the whole Old Testament from Genesis through Malachi, as we would recognize it today, was authentic and reliable.

Not just the law, but also the writings and the prophets, the poetry, and the prose. Furthermore, the traditions of the rabbis, their historical interpretation of the Old Testament, was considered by the Pharisees to be authoritative, authentic, and reliable.

And it was to be obeyed with the same vigor and exactness as Scripture itself. And so it's in this context, a lawyer from the Pharisees, no doubt put up to it by the other Pharisees, asked Jesus a question about what is the greatest of all the laws.

Will Jesus choose an answer from the Jewish Torah, in which case he'll be suspect in their eyes, and more prosaducee than they thought?

[5 : 29] Or will he answer from the rabbinic traditions, or from the rest of the Old Testament, in which case we found ourselves an ally, boys? So the question you see is not being motivated by theological, but by political motives.

Nearly 50 years ago, the Anglican theologian and pastor, John Stott, wrote a marvelous book called *Christ the Controversialist*.

He suggested, and rightly so, that Jesus was a deeply controversial figure in the Israel of his day, because he both saw through the politics of Israel, and he spoke above and beyond the politics of Israel.

His message of the priority of the kingdom of God cut through the petty kingdoms of men like a knife, and drew enemies from every side. What's happening in this passage is not a cozy presentation of a fuzzy thing called love.

What's happening is that Christ the Controversialist is being called to take a political side, and to declare himself for the religious conservatism of the Pharisees, against the religious liberalism of the Sadducees.

[6 : 47] To put the question another way, with whose party political agenda does the kingdom of heaven ally itself? The Pharisees or the Sadducees?

Or to put it in even plainer way, on whose side is God? When you put it like that, you realize nothing much changes from generation to generation. Party politics, until recently, were trained toward convincing people that God was on their side.

That God's on the side of the unions. God's on the side of the hard workers. That God's on the side of nationalism. That God's on the side of those who have been touched by the nobility of grace.

During the First World War, the belt buckles of German soldiers contained the inscription, God with us. But we thought that God was on the side of the British Empire, and its allies, not on their side.

So, upon whose side was God? Christ has no interest in the trap the Pharisees are setting for him.

His first response to them is taken from the Torah, Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 5, and Leviticus 19, verse 18, which indicates to them that he may well be on the side of the Sadducees.

[8 : 06] But then in his conclusion, Jesus says, all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. In his conclusion, Jesus is reaffirming, not just the authority of the Torah, but of the whole Old Testament, which indicates to the Pharisees, well, perhaps he's more on our side after all.

The point is that Jesus refuses to be in anybody's pocket. The only side he's taking is that of the kingdom of heaven. You know, if Jesus had sided with the Pharisees, they'd never have crucified him.

If he'd sided with the Sadducees, they'd have made him rich like one of them. But because Christ the controversialist was in no one's pocket, they both hated him.

I'm not saying that Christ was not political in any way. The problem they had with him was that he was too political, but that he held both groups accountable to a higher authority, the kingdom of God.

Now, there are many ways in which we could apply this to ourselves, but let me suggest that rather than becoming political to the extent of becoming slavish to any party's political agenda, we adopt Jesus' controversial stance of being willing to critique any party and any policy, even if that party happens to be the one with whom we have the most common cause.

[9 : 46] For the follower of Christ, the kingdom of God is our ultimate priority and Christ is our pattern. And so the church must never be in anyone's political pocket lest it betrays the Christ who is its Lord.

Rather, as well as praying for and respecting those in authority over us, we must be willing on the basis of the word of God and the kingdom of God to offer them critique.

Christ and the controversy. That's just something I really wanted to say because it comes from this passage. Second, Christ and the commandments. Christ and the commandments. Well, the Pharisees knew all about law.

It's not surprising they asked Jesus a question about the law. They had 639 different laws. Laws for every area of life.

Moral, civil, religious. The Pharisees had interpreted the laws of the Bible for themselves and they had interpreted them and applied them in every area of life. They had laws concerning what one could eat and what one could not eat.

[10:52] And how to eat that which one could eat and how not to eat that which one could not eat and so on. They had laws about how to dress and what to wear.

There were occasions about how to tie knots on their phylacteries. They had laws about what one could and could not do on the Jewish Sabbath. And the particular hours of the day when one could and could not do these things.

And so on and so forth. They could have written the book on the laws of Israel if they hadn't already written the book on the laws of Israel. I think we get the idea.

It's from this stable the lawyer asks Jesus the question what is the greatest commandment in the law? Now if we're to translate the Greek of this passage literally we would read teacher of what kind is the greatest commandment in the law?

Of what kind is the greatest commandment in the law? Because the Pharisees aren't asking Jesus to point to a specific command like wash your hands before you eat or something like that but rather to an organizing principle by which the law is to be understood.

[12:04] After all the Pharisees subdivided their 639 different laws according to various principles. They wanted to speak about moral civil and ceremonial laws.

That's the way in which they prioritized some laws over others. They wanted to speak about the severity of the penalty of breaking some laws over others.

For some the penalty would be capital punishment for others a monetary fine. Clearly those laws which demanded a capital sentence were more important in their eyes than those which demanded only a fine.

So the Pharisees had many ways of organizing and subdividing their laws. And the point is they're not asking what specific law they're asking what organizing principle should be used to prioritize one law over against another so that when controversies arose among them they knew which particular law could take priority and therefore make a judgment call.

Let's draw this into today's Scottish legal system. So a wayward kid steals a car and in the course of his joy riding misses a corner runs someone over and breaks their leg.

[13:18] Which is the most serious crime? The theft the driving without a license the careless driving or the grievous bodily harm or whatever other crimes have been perpetrated.

What organizing principle do we use to prioritize one crime over another? I'm not a lawyer but this is what the Pharisees are asking Jesus of what kind is the greatest commandment in the law?

What is the organizing principle which should be used in prioritizing the laws of God? Should it be the severity of the punishment attached to the crime? Should it be the harm it causes to others?

What? So you see the question that asking Jesus is not theological as much as it's political and judicial because these Pharisees were politicians and lawyers and they want to know where Jesus stands on the issue of judicial priority and again they're playing games with the Sadducees the power base of the Sadducees because they were upper class was based in Jerusalem and many of them were highly influential in the temple for them the laws governing the ceremonies of their religion were the most important what sacrifices were to be offered by whom in what manner what special religious festivals were to be observed the power base of the Pharisees because they were more common people was more delocalized around the countryside and so their primary interest was not in the ceremonies of the temple but in the moral law those laws which made them distinctively Jewish what side will

Jesus come down on the Pharisees or the Sadducees will Jesus say to the Pharisees it is more important to keep the ceremonial laws of sacrifice and ceremony in which case he's siding with the Sadducees or will he say to them it is more important that you live as a righteous and obedient Jew by obeying the moral law of Moses in which case he is aligning himself with them so you see again they're trying to put Jesus in this judicial box whose pocket are you in Jesus but he sees through the trap and he answers with the most beautiful wise and gracious logic love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself these are the organizing principles of the law of God not the severity of the punishment not the priority of ceremonial over civil but the priority of loving God loving others and loving ourselves the commandments are not to be used as a pawn in a judicial struggle

between the

[16:18] Pharisees and the Sadducees rather they are to be viewed as the gracious expression of God's covenant character as loving gracious and compassionate they are not to be considered so much as restrictive as responsive with this mastery summary of the law in these two phrases Jesus works above and beyond the petty politics of his day the law can be organized summarized and prioritized by this one word love the word love here is one with which we are very familiar it's the Greek word agape or agape self-sacrificial self-giving the first place in one's mind and heart and yes we can talk here about Jesus summarizes the two tables of the Mosaic law the first four commandments being comprehended by the love for God the second six by the love of neighbor but in the last analysis

Jesus is telling us that the whole law is to be organized summarized and prioritized by this one word love and to this I'm sure the whole of our society would happily concur yes we are to love one another that is Christ's basic message of course we want to insist that the love God demands of us is not ours to define it's his it's not for us to tell God what love looks like it is for us to learn from his book the Bible what love looks like and in his book it certainly does not mean anything goes you must accept anything I say love must be righteous or it is not love it must be holy or it is not love to love one's neighbor you must first love your God it is not love to condone an unrighteous lifestyle or patterns or behavior love is not a fuzzy feeling of anything goes it is a self-sacrificial self-giving attitude of mind and heart and love is the organizing principle and chief priority of the law and again there are many ways in which we could apply this truth let me suggest that the second command love your neighbor as yourself is derived from the first love the Lord your God in other words they belong together the man who says that he loves

God with all his heart soul and mind is genuinely telling the truth about himself only if he loves his neighbor as himself I'm sure that over the years we have known many people who claimed to be zealous for God but who left behind them a trail of broken and embittered relationships they claimed to love God and they said the reason I'm being so mean to you is because I love God so much no make no mistake love means love we're to love across the board loving God and loving others Christ and the commandments well then thirdly and briefly Christ and the cross to many Pharisees the question Jesus is being asked is political and judicial to many of us the answer

Jesus gives is merely moral that this is the way in which we are to live as human beings and especially as Christians I have no doubt given what Jesus says to his disciples in other parts of the gospels we are to understand Jesus summary organization and prioritization of the law of God under the headings love God love your neighbor especially in Jesus upper room discourse between John 13 and 17 Jesus says love one another this is the law of Christ we are to love God with all our heart soul and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves this is without a doubt the truth about this passage this is the way in which we are to live as followers and disciples of Christ we are to be lovers of God and lovers of others but I want to argue that this is not the whole truth about this passage at all I want to argue that the answer Jesus gave was not primarily political judicial or moral but redemptive

Jesus is telling us something here about himself and about God's way of salvation through him consider with me the timing of this event this is perhaps what we miss when we read this passage out of context in a couple of days in 48 hours time Jesus is going to be betrayed dragged before the authorities and then crucified and the question we want to ask Jesus is this what are you doing on that cross have you fallen foul of the Pharisees and the Sadducees are you now paying the price of your political foolishness are you the victim of political and judicial division in Judea no he says I am self-consciously obeying the laws set forth here on the cross

[22:17] I am loving God with all my heart soul and mind and I'm loving you as I love myself as Jesus cries out on that cross father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing what is that but love for his neighbor do you want to know what it means to love God with all your heart soul and mind and to love your neighbor look at the cross and you see Jesus dying there as the example of perfect obedience he has not just told us to love God and love our neighbor he has shown us what this means in real life so here Jesus is telling us what's going to happen in just 48 hours time that he is going to love his God and love his neighbor to the very end this passage is establishing the reason why Jesus died on the cross and it's all about love but in what sense is Jesus loving

God and loving us after all throughout history many thousands of people have been crucified and the reason for their execution was not to be found in their love for God or for their neighbor well the

