

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
31 October 2021

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

I have spoken before about the 613 commands of the Law of Moses and how righteous Jews were mandated to obey all these rules. Let me highlight a few of these rules for you today: 1. To know there is a God. (Exodus 20:22.) To have no other gods. (Exodus 20:3) 3. To know that He is one. (Deuteronomy 6:4) 4. To love Him. (Deuteronomy 6:5) 5. To fear Him. (Deuteronomy 10:20) 6. To sanctify His Name. (Leviticus 22:32) 7. Not to profane His Name. (Leviticus 22:32) 12. To be with those who only worship Him. (Deuteronomy 10:20) 13. To love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

These commands are easy to understand, and we see wisdom in obeying them. Loving God above all things is the primary requirement of all Jews and Christians alike. This is primary and most people will not argue about the importance of these commands. But there are others that give me pause. Let me just give you a few:

17. Not to embarrass others. (Leviticus 19:17) 21. Not to bear a grudge. (Leviticus 19:18) 26. Not to blaspheme or curse a judge. (Exodus 22:27) 33. To destroy a city that has turned to idol worship. (Deuteronomy 13:17) 45. Not to fear killing a false prophet. (Deuteronomy 18:22) 49. Not to burn your children in a sacrificial fire to Molech. (Leviticus 18:21) 68. To not cut your hair at the temples. (Leviticus 19:27) 69. To not shave your beard. (Leviticus 19:27) 72. Not to tattoo your skin. (Leviticus 19:28) 128. To marry a childless brother's widow. (Deuteronomy 25:5) 184. Small swarming insects and unclean creatures that crawl on land are forbidden as food. (Leviticus 11:41) 200. Not to eat the fruit of a tree for the first three years. (Leviticus 19:23) 239. No to reap your

harvest to the edge of the field but leave a corner uncut for the poor. (Leviticus 19:10)  
322. A priest must not enter the temple with unkempt hair.  
(Leviticus 10:6) 329. Unclean priests cannot do temple service. (Leviticus 22:2)

And there are many others that cover every single permutation of sexual contact that is forbidden, foods and animals that are deemed uncleaned and are therefore forbidden, etc. So, in a way, it is understandable why the Pharisee came to Jesus to ask him about what the greatest command was. Of course, we know that this is most likely a test. If Jesus fails this test, he could be arrested and accused with blasphemy.

Why he came to Jesus: One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

The Question: “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus’ answer: ““The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

His Response: “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Jesus: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The Scribe’s response leads us to believe that perhaps there were some who had a misguided understanding of the sacrificial services at the temple, perhaps thinking that the rhythm and structure of those services were the most important commands of the law. We to become so rigid in our liturgy that we forget the real reason why we come to church. We do not come here to practice a well-choreographed set of functions that show the world how we have the best liturgy in the Diocese. I have a friend who contends that liturgy must appeal to all our senses and lead us into an “otherworldly experience.” I agree with him that there is nothing better than good liturgy, but the real purpose here is not to have a rite that pleases all our senses. The real purpose is to worship God with all our heart, soul, and mind. We come here not to elevate our artistic sensibilities and have a subjective emotional experience. We come here to express our gratitude for what God has done for us in the person of his son. If we accomplish this will the bells and whistles, then good. We can also accomplish this in a quiet spoken service in Rite One language. We often confused the “How” for the “Why.”

The reason we are here today is to acknowledge that our Lord is God and there is no other. He deserves our love, gratitude, and devotion. He is the very center of our lives and the very reason for this church. He is central. We are also here to remember that we must love our neighbors as ourselves. We acknowledge that we fail often in the fulfilling

of this command. We come here seeking forgiveness for the times we have treated others as steps in a ladder, rather than as beloved children of God. We are here to acknowledge that we have miles to go before we rest, and to ask God for the strength and desire to honor God by loving the people we encounter every day in our busy lives.

Love, as Leviticus presents it, is now an emotion, a warm feeling towards others. Love here is an active verb, it is an imperative of the highest order, it is an action. To love is to care for, to protect, to provide for, to defend, to welcome with open arms, to respect...

Jesus does not say today, "Love God and have good feelings towards others." That would be easy enough. What he is saying is a lot more radical than this: Love God and be ready to die for him. Love others and be ready to die for them. Be committed 100% of your time to care for your neighbor.

Today, we ask God to give us what we need to do what he commands. To make us more patient and loving. To help us see his face in the face of every stranger we meet. To help us love as he loves. Amen!