

Matthew 22:34-46

Trinity 18, September 29, 2024
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." ⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, ⁴² saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴ "'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? ⁴⁵ If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?" ⁴⁶ And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

I remember my first day of Driver's Ed, our instructor told the class that there is no such thing as a dumb question. If we had any question at all, we should ask and not feel bad if we thought it was dumb, because it was important that we know the answers before getting behind the wheel. And one of the kids in the class raised his hand and asked, "What type of wrench does Mickey Mouse use to wind his watch?" And the instructor said, "Ok, maybe there are some dumb questions." There are dumb questions, and there are *good* questions. Dumb questions are ones in which the asker has no desire to learn anything, and *good* questions are ones in which something is meant to be learned.

We have an example of both in our text. We have a dumb question from the Pharisees, "***Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?***" Now, that sounds like a *good* question on the surface, but it was a *dumb* question because the Pharisees weren't actually interested in learning anything from Jesus at all, rather they were just taking their turn at trying to trip Jesus up.

And then we have a good question from Jesus: "***What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?***" That was a good question, not because Jesus needed to learn anything for *Himself*, but because He was trying to use that question to drive an important point home for the Pharisees and, likewise, for us. Today, we'll take those two questions, and even more so, Jesus' answers, so that we can learn the answers to two good questions. Those questions are:

"Who Am I?"

"Who Is Jesus?"

Now, the *big* question of the day was the latter: "***Who Is Jesus?***" That was the big question of the day because this was Tuesday of Holy Week, and just two days before, Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem, greeted with palms strewn on the road and cries of, "***Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!***" (Matthew 21:9) And if you read on, you see that the whole city was asking the same question: "***Who is this?***" (Matthew 21:10) "***Who Is Jesus?***"

And the Pharisees had that question on their minds too. You see, before our text, Jesus had told a series of three parables that were directed against them. The main idea behind these parables was that the Pharisees were about to reject the Chief Cornerstone and kill the Master's Son, and therefore they were to be destroyed while Jesus would be exalted over them.

And they understood the meaning of these parables. They understood that the crowds believed Him to be the Christ, and that they themselves had rejected this same Jesus. But they would have none of it. So, they went on the attack. First, the Pharisees asked Jesus a question about taxation, thinking that however He answered, they would have Him cornered. Then, the Sadducees asked a question about the resurrection. Both parties were silenced by His answers. Finally, the Pharisees came back with their question in our text, ***“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”***

The one who actually asked that question is identified as ***“a lawyer.”*** And you shouldn’t think of “lawyer” as we use that word today. A lawyer in those days was merely an expert in the Law of Moses. It was a person who studied the first five books of the Old Testament meticulously, categorizing God’s Law in ways that they could teach it to the people. These lawyers had actually numbered out how many unique laws were to be found in the Law of Moses; they said that there were 613 total. They had numbered out 248 *positive* laws, that is where God says, *“Do this...”* and 365 *negative* laws, where God says, *“Don’t do this...”*

So, when the lawyer asks Jesus what the great commandment in the law was, it was sort of like if someone were to ask you what your favorite Bible passage is, or perhaps your favorite Bible story. There were 613 laws to choose from, so what, in Jesus’ mind, was the best of the best? But Jesus isn’t going to answer in a way that they expect, because Jesus knows that they’ve missed the entire point of God’s Law. God gives us His Law, tells us *“Do this...”* or *“Don’t do this...”*, so that we can answer the question, ***“Who Am I?”***

To the Pharisees, the answer to that question was, *“I am someone deserving of eternal life.”* They had that list of 613 laws, and they used it as a sort of daily checklist. At least in an extremely *superficial* way, they followed that list to the letter. Of course, in their hearts they had not *begun* to fulfill it, but in a superficial way that others could observe, they felt that they had passed every test. They weren’t like those *“tax-collectors and sinners,”* they were *“not like other men.”* They *deserved* heaven.

So, Jesus gives them an answer. ***“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.”*** Clearly, He is referring to the very first of the Ten Commandments, ***“You shall have no other gods before me.”*** (Exodus 20:3) A logical choice, and I imagine that at this point, His pharisaic listeners are probably nodding in quiet agreement! *But*, Jesus isn’t done! ***“And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

And we know what Jesus is saying here. Having studied the Ten Commandments, you likely know that all ten fold into these two great commandments. How do we love the Lord God with all we’ve got? It’s by not having any other gods nor misusing His name and by honoring His Word and gladly hearing and learning it. And if you wonder what it is to love your neighbor as yourself, it’s honoring your mom and dad and other God-given authorities, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing or bearing false witness or coveting. In all of these we love God and love our neighbor. And so, the Apostle Paul could sum it all up by saying, ***“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”*** (Romans 13:10)

But this was more than the lawyer had asked for. He asked for the *greatest* commandment, not the top two! But, you see, these two commandments cannot be separated from one another. That’s why John writes in his first epistle, ***“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he***

who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:20-21)

Yes, if you really love God, then you will also love those whom God loves—all of your neighbors. If you really love God, then you will do what He wants from you, which is love for your neighbor.

So, look at it. Look *closely* at it—these two great, inseparable commandments. And ask yourself the question, **“Who Am I?”** I know what these say about me. Because I can ask myself, “Do I love the Lord with all my heart, soul, and mind?” And the answer is unequivocally, “No.” Martin Luther describes the First Commandment as God saying, *“Whatever you lack of good things, expect it from Me. Look to Me for it. And whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, crawl and cling to Me. I, yes, I will give you enough and help you out of every need. Only do not let your heart cleave to or rest on any other.”* (Luther’s Large Catechism)

That’s really what it means to love God with your everything and trust God with your everything. To look to Him alone for your good. And I don’t do that! There are lots of things I look to for good—for happiness when I’m down, for comfort when I’m sad, for security when I’m afraid. And if I ever even think of looking to God and praying to Him for those things, it is often with much doubt.

Tied to that love for God is, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** And I don’t even have to ask, because I know the answer: if I really loved my neighbor as myself, would I rejoice when others fail? Would I withhold love or forgiveness from them? Would I lose patience or respond with hurtful words? Would I not have enough time to stop and offer help to someone in need? Of course not. And so, if we really look at what God expects and ask ourselves that good question, **“Who Am I?”**—the answer becomes so clear. I am a sinner. And I’m not deserving of anything, much less eternal life.

And if you came to the same conclusion, then it’s important that you also know the answer to the next question: **“Who Is Jesus?”** Again, that was the big question of the day, one that the Pharisees were trying their hardest to ignore, but Jesus would not be deterred. He brings that question to the forefront. **“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, ‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’”**

Now, Jesus doesn’t accept that answer as correct, but that was correct, wasn’t it? That was what the crowds had heralded Him as just two days prior, **“Hosanna to the Son of David.”** Jesus didn’t correct them *then*! And that is what God had even *told* David, **“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”** (2 Samuel 7:12-13) That was a prophecy about the Christ—the Son of David.

So, why does Jesus *correct* them, if what they said was true? Well, it was a correct assertion, but their answer wasn’t *enough*. It’s like if you asked people today who Jesus is, some might say He was a great teacher, some might say He was a great man, some might say He was a prophet, some might say He was an innocent victim. And all of those things are true as far as they go, but they don’t go far enough. So, **“Who Is Jesus?”** What’s the right answer? Jesus tells us. **“He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?’”**

Jesus isn't denying that He, the Christ, is the Son of David, but rather He's bringing their attention to the fact that He's not *just* the Son of David. He's also the Son of God. True man and true God. And that's what *David* was confessing in that Psalm Jesus just quoted. It was a Psalm about the Messiah, whom David *knew* would be his descendant, and yet he calls Him Lord. Which would be an exceptionally unusual way to refer to your offspring—since honor goes to father and mother, not the other way around—unless you knew that descendant would be God in the flesh. Which David knew.

And if David knew it, then these Pharisees also should have known it. For they saw Jesus with their own eyes, the One whom the crowds hailed as the Christ—they saw Him doing things that only God could do. The proof was right there before their eyes, and yet they rejected all of it.

Thanks be to God that even though *we* haven't seen Jesus with our own eyes, God has worked in us the faith to be able to answer this question: **"Who Is Jesus?"** We can answer that He is *"the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven."*

And it is so very important that Jesus is God, because in Him we finally then have One among us who has perfected love. In Him we can see so clearly the massive unity between the great commandment and the second that is like it—love God with your all and love your neighbor as yourself. Because, what has God done? In Jesus, God came among us *as* our neighbor. He came to love His neighbor as Himself and to love us into eternal life. He loved God with His all and loved us all, His neighbors, as Himself, loving us all the way to the cross.

And since He is God, we can observe closely as He would hang there on that cross just a few days later, and we can listen intently to the words that He says. When He says, **"Father, forgive them,"** (Luke 23:34) He speaks not as a man expressing a mere wish, but as God Himself with the authority to forgive. When He says, **"It is finished,"** (John 19:30) He speaks not as a man just guessing, He speaks as God Himself the declaration that these two great commandments had finally been fulfilled, and in Him, you finally have all that you need to be declared not guilty before God. Though you have not even *begun* to fulfill loving God with your all and loving your neighbor as yourself, through Jesus you've done it perfectly. **"For [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."** (2 Corinthians 5:21)

So, two good questions: **"Who Am I?"** and **"Who Is Jesus?"** Thanks be to God that He's used these two questions to teach us two good answers. **"Who Is Jesus?"** Yes, He's a great teacher; yes, He's a great prophet; yes, He's the Son of David. But that answer doesn't go far enough. He's also true God, *"who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven."*

And **"Who Am I?"** I am a sinner, and I do not deserve eternal life. But that answer also does not go far enough. Because of Jesus, I am also a saint, I am also a Child of God, and I am a neighbor to Jesus—and Jesus loves His neighbors. And that's all true for you too. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.