

# **The Double Love Commandment**

Matthew 22:34-40

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Rev. Bob Hirni

First Presbyterian Church

San Rafael, CA

Our scripture today is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22 verses 34 to 40.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Well, who would have thought a few months ago that loving your neighbor would mean wearing a mask and not going near them? That said, let’s move to the Bible passage itself.

Our passage begins with the Pharisees celebrating the fact that Jesus had “silenced the Sadducees”. Two rival factions in Judaism and particularly in Jerusalem.

The Sadducees were part of what we would call “the establishment”. According to ancient historians, the leaders of the temple worship and the high priest himself were all Sadducees.

The Sadducees were also more harsh and narrow in their interpretation of the law.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or in any form of the afterlife. So, in the passage of scripture just before our reading for today, they asked Jesus a question which they thought would confuse or discredit him.

In Jewish law, if a man dies childless, his widow should marry his brother and the children born of the second marriage would be considered the true children of the brother who had died. This is simple on the face of it, but the Sadducees added to the question by saying that the widow ended up marrying seven brothers before she died childless. The question they asked Jesus was, “If

there is a resurrection of the dead, which brother would she end up being married to?”

Jesus tells them that they are being ridiculous as the resurrection is not about who is married to whom, but it is about the continuing love honor and praising of God.

The Sadducees disappear from history after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD made them irrelevant and totally out of touch with the wider Jewish world.

Now the Pharisees come into the picture. They generally related well with the common people, and they believed that mercy and love are a necessary part of understanding and enforcing God's law.

In later years, after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees became the teachers and leaders of the widely dispersed Jews.

Now we come to the Pharisees' question and Jesus teaching, what we call the double love commandment.

In our Bible passage a teacher of the law, asked Jesus a seemingly straight forward question. Most English translations of the passage say, "which is the greatest commandment of the law?" Most scholars agree that it should read, "which kind of commandment is the greatest of the law?"

A fair question since all 613 laws given to Moses by God were considered equally sacred, but it would be OK to talk about the various kinds of law.

In response Jesus quotes a passage in Deuteronomy, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

He chose well as the love of God is the basis of all else in the law.

Actually the full quotation in Deuteronomy begins, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” It then continues with the commandment to love God.

This law was and is still considered so important that all observant Jews in Jesus’ day and today are required to repeat it twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.

Then Jesus did something that the teacher did not ask him to do. He said, “This is the first and greatest kind of commandment, and the second is like it, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

This is another commandment of God’s found in the book of Leviticus. Jesus concludes with, “All the law and the prophets hang from (or are dependent on) these two laws.”

In all the Gospel accounts of this encounter the Pharisees accept this answer as true, and in reality many of the Pharisees respected Jesus' teachings.

However, in the Gospel of Luke, after this exchange, Jesus is asked another question. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

In Leviticus where the commandment to love your neighbor is found, it is clear that Moses is talking about how Israelites should treat each other. Your neighbor is the Israelite living next door.

Jesus changes all that. The good Samaritan who acts as the loving neighbor to the Jewish man who had been beaten and left by the side of the road was in reality from a group of people Jews hated and disrespected, and were in turn despised by the Samaritans. Jesus is saying that the neighbor you are to love could be anyone who crosses your path and needs help.

Now Jesus was not the first to say this, it is imbedded in the Hebrew Scriptures. However Jesus is clearly making this a central point in all of his teachings.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the prophets struggled to make this same point. One of my favorite books in the Hebrew Scriptures is the book of Jonah. It is not intended to be a history book, but a divinely inspired story that tells an important truth. That is why it is in that part of the Bible called the prophetic books, although it sure looks different than all of the other prophetic books.

I am not going to repeat the whole story of Jonah and the big fish (not a whale, a fish). Briefly, God tells Jonah to go Nineveh, the great capitol of the Assyrian Empire, and to preach to them to repent of their sins which are great in the eyes of God. If they do not repent, God will destroy them. There was just one problem, the Jews, and Jonah among them, hated this great conquering empire. Rather than going to Nineveh to preach, Jonah ran away. Well, you cannot run away from God, so the



human rights,” and also, “no child is illegal,” and I would add, “gay pride.”

In the recent history of our country there have been times when massive numbers of people would not have considered black people their neighbors, and while much has been accomplished, the issue of racism is very much with us today.

Women who wanted equal rights were actively hated, and while again much has been accomplished, double standards abound.

Not very long ago it was flat out illegal to be Gay, but many will still refuse to accept them as their neighbors in the way that Jesus’ teachings require.

To follow Jesus’ path means to look around us and recognize that there are some of God’s people who we are reluctant to see as our neighbors. In fact it might be

the bigot, rather than his or her victim who is our neighbor. That is honestly the hardest one for me.

I was reminded recently that love is not just a feeling but also a decision. The Good Samaritan did not feel loving toward the injured Jew, but he decided that it was the right thing to do to help him.

I think of prison reformers and prison ministries. Some prisoners repent and want to change their lives, but I am told that many do not, and remain brutal and angry. And yet, all humans deserve justice and a humane place to live even if it is in a prison.

No matter how difficult it is, we have a standard which we must try to live up to: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and you neighbor as yourself. Jesus did not say that this would be easy, but he said that this was the way to be.