

## **INTRODUCTION**

To set the stage, it's Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is in Jerusalem, in the courtyard of the temple. He's being questioned, tested, challenged by Pharisees, Sadducees, lawyers (think theologians), elders, scribes and their disciples.

In the twenty-second chapter of Matthew's gospel we see the first two of these groups (the Pharisees and the Sadducees) tag-teaming to try to prove him unworthy of the following he has amassed and the reputation he has acquired. In every case their challenges fall short. Last week's text saw him crushing the Pharisee's trap about paying taxes.

Our lectionary skips the next section where he deftly side-steps the Sadducees' resurrection trap by proving that (contrary to their teachings) the resurrection actually exists.

In our text this morning he summarizes the law, ducking a challenge by a lawyer from the Pharisees party.

And the chapter closes with what theologian Lance Pape describes as "dropping the mic at the end of a scintillating piece of rhetorical and exegetical gamesmanship." He challenges them to tell him who the Messiah actually is and proves, in the best rabbinical form, that they have no idea what they are talking about. Having silenced the opposition, he proceeds to – well, I don't want to steal Marianne's thunder for next week. You'll have to join us then to find out what happens next. I can tell you, though, that by the time Jesus is done talking that evening, the religious leaders are plotting to quietly arrest him and see him put to death.

And I have to ask; "Why now?"

What is it about this encounter that drove them to plot such drastic action?

This isn't the first time he has called out religious leaders for their twisting of God's law. He has made a career (short though it was) of being a thorn in the side of those leaders – challenging them at every opportunity. But up to this point they tended to invite him to dinner, not plot to kill him.

We may never know what it is about this encounter that finally drove them to consider drastic action.

What we do know is that, in Matthew's thought at least, the teachings in these chapters – the holy week teachings – are the most important, both in terms of their challenge to the existing norms of Jewish religion at the time, and in their message for us today.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Witness to the resurrection. Love the Lord your God with all your Heart, Soul, Mind, and your neighbor as yourself. That's powerful, heady stuff; and I am indeed fortunate to be able to deal with the third of these today.

## **BIBLICAL THEMES**

As I study the Bible, I try to identify patterns and common themes. In a world where too many people pick and choose scripture references to support their own particular agendas, I have tried to find a way to avoid this tendency in my own use of scripture.

My method for doing this is to evaluate every conclusion I draw from individual passages based on what I have found to be true of the whole of scripture. To put it another way...If we truly believe that Holy Scripture is a unified whole, then each part of it must support that whole. Therefore, when one section seems to contradict another section it must be we, as frail humans, who are imperfect in our understanding; rather than scripture that is at fault.

So for me, it is extremely important to understand the overarching global messages in the Bible - and I have identified several. Today you're lucky, I will only deal with one - perhaps the most important one.

It starts with a question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

Jesus' answer is pretty straightforward. For once he gives a direct answer to a trick question. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' And 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Taken by itself, Jesus' answer is pretty significant. Actually, in this "summary", Jesus is referring first to Deuteronomy 6:5 and then Leviticus 19:18. And in their Old Testament context, these really are the basis for Jewish law and custom.

In the Deuteronomy section, after instructing: "Hear, O Israel...Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might..." Moses continues with instructions to: "...Recite (these words) to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

You get the idea God wants this commandment committed to memory. If you have any doubts about that he goes on:

"Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

If you visit the Jewish synagogue sometime, look at the doorposts as you enter. You will see a small brass box attached there. This commandment is in that box. This commandment is not just important, it is of supreme importance.

The command in Leviticus 19 to "...Love your neighbor as yourself..." is at the center of what scholars refer to as the "Holiness Code." Leviticus 17-24 give a series of ethical and ritual imperatives that deal with "holy living" - *imitatio Dei* - imitating God. In the Old testament there are 9 instances where we are instructed to "Love God" but this is the only case where we are instructed to love our neighbor. Incidentally, there are two other commands in the Torah to "love" someone - both times we are commanded to love the stranger, the foreigner. And both include a reminder that we are all foreigners. We all trace our roots to somewhere else. But in God's eye there is no stranger, no foreigner. Political voices frequently encourage us to forget that.

## **ANALYSIS**

So, here we have a seemingly important section of scripture. Jesus' self-described two-part summary of "the Law" presents a dual focus (toward God and toward our Community). And we

have the basis from the Law of Moses for each of the parts. This is good, but not yet what I'd call an "overarching theme". In order to be truly useful as a measure against which to evaluate other scripture passages, we need to see other instances of the use of this theme in the Bible. This morning I'd like to offer two times where first God and then Jesus used this same dual focus theme.

The first discovery I owe (as far as I can remember) to Forrest Church. A son of the late Senator Frank Church, Rev. Church, was a Unitarian Universalist minister in New York City. In his book: "God and Other Famous Liberals" Church told the story of the founder of Rhode Island, the Rev. Roger Williams.

Here's a trick question:

<u>Trick Question</u>
True or False.
The pilgrims came to the new world to secure the benefits of freedom of religion for themselves and their descendants.

That's what they told us in school, right? The problem is that that statement doesn't explain Roger Williams.

Williams came to the new world in 1631 at the age of 27, a very promising young minister. He was a dynamic and popular preacher in Boston, Plymouth and Salem. He eventually ran afoul of the members of the church hierarchy because of some of his beliefs. Finally, in 1635 he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He settled in what is now Providence, Rhode Island, purchased land from the local natives and established the first colony in the new world where freedom of religion was practiced as fact. It turns out that the Pilgrims were less concerned with religious freedom than they were intent on making their religion the state religion.

So why is Williams significant here? Well, it seems that one of his most controversial teachings had to do with the Ten Commandments. I won't ask you to name them, but I will display them over there.

<u>The Ten Commandments</u>	
1. No Other Gods Before Me	6. No Murder
2. No Idols	7. No Adultery
3. Don't take Lord's Name in Vain.	8. No Stealing
4. Keep the Sabbath Holy.	9. No False Witness
5. Honor Father and Mother.	10. No Coveting

There, now we have two neat columns of rules that those of you in the back probably can't read.

They're significant for us today because Roger Williams drew a line

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and divided the ten commandments in half. Remember the picture of Moses and the commandments from your Sunday School days?



They were on two tablets. Who'd have thought that was significant?

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Roger Williams maintained that the five commandments on the left (the first tablet) dealt with our individual relationships with God, and were therefore outside the purview of the state. The five commandments on the second tablet, on the other hand, dealt with the life of the community, and therefore it was appropriate that the state enact laws based on them. While I

won't discuss the merits of Williams beliefs this morning, I do want to thank him for pointing out the division of focus in the ten commandments. Indeed, the first five:

No other gods before Me  
No idols  
Don't take the Lord's name in vain  
Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy  
Honor thy Father and thy Mother

do deal with our relationship with God (except maybe for the fifth one. Williams put it on the God side and I'm not uncomfortable leaving it there). And the second five do indeed deal with community issues:

No Murder  
No Adultery  
No Stealing  
No False Witness  
No Coveting

Very interesting...Love the Lord your God with All your Heart, with all your Soul and with all your Might. Keep the first five commandments.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Keep the last five commandments.

My second discovery involves a bit of our community life that is very familiar to us.

<u>The Lord's Prayer</u>	
Holy is your name	Give us Bread
May Your Kingdom Come	Forgive Us Because we forgive Others
May Your Will be Done	Don't Lead us to Temptation
	Deliver us from Evil

Here's what the Lord's prayer looks like when you list the individual petitions:

Our Father:  
Hallowed be thy name  
Thy kingdom come  
Thy will be done

that's the God part. The community part includes:

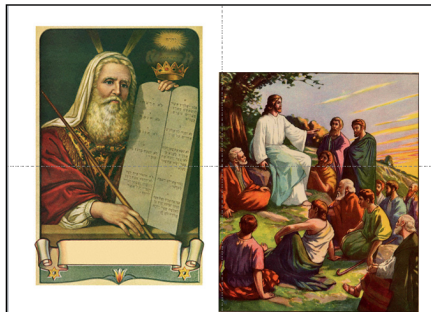
Give us our daily bread  
Forgive us, (because we forgive others)  
Don't lead us into temptation  
Deliver us from evil.

There it is again, The Lord's prayer, when you break it down has two parts a God focused part and a community focused part.

<b><u>The Lord's Prayer</u></b>	
Holy is your Name	Give us bread
May your kingdom come	Forgive us (because we forgive others)
May your will be done	Don't lead us to temptation Deliver us from evil

The general orientation of this prayer is different. It is, after all a prayer and not a set of rules or commandments. So it addresses God, first with praises and hope for the fulfillment of God's holy will, then with requests for the welfare of the community.

Note that the community requests are generalized (as opposed to personal). We ask for blessings on "Us" as opposed to "Me". We'll deal more with that later.



### **CONCLUSION**

So there it is. Stretching from the earliest gift of God "the law giver" to the treasured gifts of Christ our savior, there is a common, dual focus - toward God, and toward the community. Now, while I confess that, for me, Bible study of this kind is primarily an exercise in analysis, I also acknowledge that Bible study is of little value unless it answers a very fundamental question: "How does this help me live into God's kingdom?" Every time I open the Bible; every time I read about the Bible (or about those for whom it has been significantly important); every time I get out a pencil and note pad and start to take notes about some passage, some interesting word, some character, or some concept; I remind myself to look for the life-message waiting, patiently, to be found. These are the times the Bible speaks to me. These are the times I learn about life, and what's important, and how to be a more fully devoted follower.

In my work on the "God/Community dual focus" I have learned a great deal about what is really important. I'll share three thoughts with you:

First, "Ya' Gotta have Both." In the final analysis, it does us no better to spend our life doing "good works" without worshipping God than it does to profess a faith in God without that faith spilling forth into action. Both are necessary, for a variety of reasons.

For instance, both are important because the Bible says so. Yes, this great theme has two parts, but both are equally important; "...and the second is like unto (the first)...".

Also, both are important because we are frail humans. We truly cannot maintain one without the other.

Worship - both public and private worship - gives us a renewed sense of God's presence and direction in our lives. Worship also opens us up to the Holy Spirit, who will move in us and through us, directing our attention and giving us strength and perseverance for the task at hand.

On the other hand, love of, and service to our fellow humans gives us a means to channel the love we receive from God. I really hope we've all experienced this joy. There is truly no better way for me to understand the love that God has for me than to share my love with someone else. In a hundred different ways; both big and little; day by day; with a kind word, a kind action, a gift of my time or my talent or my treasure; each time I pour from the pitcher of myself I feel God filling me up again. It's an amazing and wonderful feeling.

Second, Love is affirmative. The great rabbi Hillel was nearing the end of his short life about the time a twelve-year-old Jesus was found in the temple among the elders and the teachers. Hillel is credited with the quote that some point to as the kernel at the heart of the Golden Rule. His famous quote:

"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Mirrors strangely another quote attributed to Confucius:

"What you do not like when done to yourself, do not do unto others."

I see one important difference between these worthy sayings and our admonition to love God and others. What Hillel and Confucius would have us do is "don't wrong our neighbor." Within their directives there is certainly room to ignore a neighbor, to not pay attention to a neighbor's plight, to effectively remain a stranger from our neighbors - insulating ourselves in thick blankets of work, and worry, and activities (certainly all worthy ventures). We rush to and fro, generally late, too often upset with the driver poking along ahead of us, without thinking that it might be helpful to BACK OFF a little bit and let the other make their own way through the world at their own pace. (I'm preaching to myself here.)

This life of hustle and bustle is certainly not what Jesus had in mind. "Love your neighbor as yourself" goes far, far beyond "Don't wrong your neighbor". We are called to an affirmative relationship with others in our community. We are called to be ever watchful for opportunities to show God's love through our thoughts, our words and our actions.

When someone is wandering through a store looking lost it really is O.K. to ask them if you can help them find something (from a social distance, of course).

When a driver is having difficulty merging into traffic it really is O.K. to slow down and let them in ahead of you - regardless of what the bozo behind you thinks.

When a co-worker needs a friendly ear, or a kind word, a special thank you or a cheerful hello it really is O.K., perhaps more so now than ever before, to let them know that you care.

When a young person needs encouragement, needs to know that he is a person of value or that you appreciate what she has to contribute it really is O.K. to say so.

When an older person needs to know that you have always had a great deal of respect for her or that you really enjoy hearing what he has to tell you it really is O.K. to tell them.

Finally, Love isn't Merited. This talks to us, each, individually. There is nothing anywhere here about worth or worthiness. As a matter of fact, in Luke's telling of today's scripture story the lawyer follows Jesus' answer with another question: "Who is my neighbor". This, of course, gives Jesus the opportunity to make my point far better than I could. With the parable of "the Good Samaritan" Jesus points out clearly that my neighbor is the stranger; the foreigner; the lowest or the low; the person I would be least likely to call "my neighbor". There's no pulling of punches here. My instructions are clear. There is nobody I can hate. There is nobody I can despise. There is nobody I can look down on. There are only those I must love; unconditionally; completely.

Which brings me back to my first point. This kind of unconditional, universal, accepting, gathering in, love cannot hope to stand on its own. It is only from within a firm and constant relationship with God that I can hope to show this kind of love to my neighbor; to this community.

In this way these two expressions of love – love of God, love of our neighbor – go hand in hand. In truth one leads to the other and each, ultimately, is made complete in the other. Taken individually each is incomplete, hollow, a clashing gong or a crashing symbol. But if we can maintain our focus in two directions at once we will find a sense of completeness and a joy that will flow back to us – from both directions.

### **TODAY, TOMORROW, and BEYOND**

We are standing, as it were, on the doorstep of a particularly tense time in our country. You could even say that things are approaching a fever pitch of anxiety and fear. So I want to leave you with some words of encouragement. Don't be afraid. Those bands of people roaming the streets will eventually go to bed, even if they are too hyped up on Halloween candy to sleep. And the rest of us get an extra hour of sleep next Saturday night.

Seriously, if there is a lesson to be learned this year it is that just about everything is subject to change. Everything we thought of as permanent, fixed, "the way life is" is none of that. In times like this it's good to realize that God's love is one thing that never changes. And even in times like this, especially in times like this, our calling as Christians is clear and immediate. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. But our focus isn't on tomorrow.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" – today. "Love your neighbor as yourself" – today. Do this and let tomorrow, next week, next year take care of itself.

Amen.