

Trinity 18

The events of today's Gospel reading are in the midst of a series of attempts by the religious leaders of Jesus' day to entrap Him in His words.

First it was the Herodians who tried to catch Him in a dilemma by asking whether to pay taxes to Caesar or not.

Then came the Sadducees who concocted a far-fetched situation to get Him to join them in denying the resurrection of the dead.

Now come the Pharisees with their "brilliant" question: "*Master, which [is] the great commandment in the law?*"

You see, the Pharisees were all about the law.

They formed as a religious party because they were upset at how the dictates of the Torah were being disregarded by Jewish politicians who were trying to survive the challenges first of Hellenization under Alexander and Antiochus and now Roman domination.

There were so many laws to keep and so many temptations to compromise them.

Arguments were ongoing about all the various combinations of conditions.

What is a Jew to do? How do you prioritize the Law? What is most important?

Is it the dietary laws? Or the laws of sabbath rest? Or the laws of temple purity?

The real burr under the saddle of the Pharisees was that the High Priest was holding his position contrary to the law.

But, on the other hand, he was an ancestor of Judas Maccabeus and if it weren't for the Maccabees, there wouldn't be a temple for him to minister in at all.

So that is the conundrum. When there's conflict between two laws, which gives way?

So the Pharisees are not so different as we today.

For we also have to prioritize our lives.

You are to serve your employer not with eye-service but as serving Christ Himself.

You are also to love your family with your time, thoughts and energies.

You are also to give to your neighbor in need.

What do you do when your family's needs for money prevent you from giving to the needy?

How about when there is more than one needy neighbor but you only have enough for one?

How about when dutiful service to your employer intrudes into the time you have for family?

You see, life is a balancing act where you are constantly prioritizing the law.

So also in the Church. So much in our practice that falls short of what is to be desired.

People who used to come and no longer do. People needing to be visited to be admonished but also people needing to be visited to be encouraged and given the Gospel.

How does a pastor decide what to do? So much work. So little time.

All of these conflicts and difficult choices are real and heart-rending.

In a sin-sick world looked at by a sin-sick mind, one cannot always see the clear answer.

And, to put the best construction on it, these were on the minds of the Pharisees.

And so, Jesus cuts to the chase and re-focuses on the essence of the Law.

"You shall love [Yahweh] your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor [Jesus] as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The law is not about how far you are allowed to walk on the sabbath day--nor what work or recreation should be forbidden on a Sunday.

It is about hearing the word of God and keeping it.

The law is not about what you wear or how you cut your hair--it is about how you adorn your life with humility.

The law is not about whether you play cards or bingo or go dancing--it is about how you use your time and money and energy to serve your neighbor.

That is the essence of Jesus' answer, But in addition to this, Jesus goes further still.

For you see, no matter how you interpret the law, it will always keep your focus on your behavior, your words, your thoughts, your heart.

And while this is indeed the essence of the law, it is far from being the essence of the Bible.

And so, Jesus continues by asking another and different question: "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?*" They said to Him, "*The Son of David.*" He said to them, "*How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying: 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool' ' ? If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?*"

Why does Jesus ask this question? Is it simply because He wants to demonstrate His superior understanding to the gathered crowd?

By no means! Rather, with this question, He refocuses us on the essence of the Scripture.

While the law is all about love--loving God and loving neighbor.

That is not what the Bible is all about! The Bible is all about the Messiah.

And this is a point that is still missed by most Christians even today.

Conservative or liberal; Evangelical or Catholic; Liturgical or revivalistic.

It doesn't seem to matter where they fall in the spectrum, most people think that Christianity is about doing good, loving your neighbor, loving God, having faith and generally behaving yourself.

I hear this understanding of Christianity being articulated as much by church-going Christians as I do by unchurched pagans.

Just as Jesus heard it as much from the Herodians and Sadducees as from the Pharisees.

All of their challenges, all of their questions were about what I should do, think and say.

But Jesus turns our focus completely to inquire rather, who is the Christ?

It is belief in the Messiah that makes you a Christian and a saint.

Salvation does not come by love--Neither the love of the neighbor nor the love of God!

Acknowledging God to be the supreme being—whether he is called God, or Yahweh, or Jehovah or Allah or Zeus or even Jesus does not save you.

Nor does salvation come to all those who have the Ten Commandments as their guide.

For absolutely everyone fail miserably to love your neighbor keep the commandments.

No. What avails for your salvation is to know the God who Himself is your neighbor.

Or, better said, to be known by God—to be helped by God—to be served and saved.

That is your salvation. For this God who became a man did not do so primarily that you might love Him in your neighbor.

Rather, David's Lord became David's Son in order to be David's rescuing neighbor.

Only David's Lord has the power to save; Only David's Son has the humanity to save.

Because He is David's Son He could die for you.

Because He is David's Lord, that one Death covers the sins of all people.

Because He is David's Son, He has flesh and blood that is pierced and shed for you.

Because He is David's Lord, this flesh and blood is life-giving for you.

Because He is David's Son, He can be touched and handled and tasted.

Because He is David's Lord, this can happen all over the world every day.

You can hear Him talk in the sermon — and in that speech be drawn into His love.

You can feel His touch in Holy Baptism — and with that washing be given this faith.

And you can consume Him in the bread and drink His holy Blood—so that the God who has become flesh might also dwell in your flesh.

So that in all of this, *Jesus is your life and your salvation.* AMEN