

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

First German Evangelical Lutheran Church

God's Only Commandment: Love

Matthew 22:34-46

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,⁴² "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied.⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,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 can he be his son?"⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Do you ever find that life gets less and less enjoyable the more and more complicated it becomes? When you have one thing on your mind, you are able to cope. When you have twenty things on your mind, you become overwhelmed. You don't know which problem or issue to tackle first. If you find that this happens to you on a daily basis, it may be time to simplify your life. Discover what things are truly important to you and focus your attention only on those items. This kind of advice can also apply well to your spiritual life. Sometimes when it comes to our relationship with God and living our faith, we make things too complicated. Jesus helps us this morning by simplifying the whole of God's Word for us. He shows us that, ultimately, we only need to focus our spiritual life on one simple word: love.

Our reading begins with the Pharisees once again trying to trip Jesus up with (what they considered) a difficult question. Jesus had just finished silencing the Sadducees who denied the possibility of a resurrection. He did this by pointing them to the Scriptures and, after he was done, they had nothing to say. Now it was the Pharisees turn to take another crack at testing Jesus. After a

huddle, they sent one of their experts in the law to ask Jesus the question: “Which is the greatest commandment in the law?” For the Pharisees this was a question that could bring about endless debate. After all, they spent most of their time focusing on all of God’s laws and even making up their own laws to add to those laws. When all was said and done, the Pharisees believed that there were 613 commandments (one for every letter of the Hebrew text of the Ten Commandments). With all of these laws, they believed it would be impossible for Jesus to pick which one was truly the greatest. No matter what he said, they would be ready to dispute and argue his point.

But for Jesus, the question was not a hard one. He had an answer for them right away. Jesus responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you want to simplify Jesus’ word even further, you could sum them up with the single command: love. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul does in Romans 13, when he writes: “Love is the fulfillment of the law.” In their desire to categorize and enumerate all of God’s commands, the Pharisees had missed the central point: love. As Jesus said: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Everything that God asked his people to do then and everything he asks his people to do now is rooted in love—love for God and love for others. With these words, Jesus shows how all of the Scriptures make a unified whole, with one central message.

I think sometimes we forget this simple, yet important truth. Like the Pharisees, we try to make things more complicated than they need to be. We miss the simple message of all of God’s law: love. We can even become like the Pharisees in going beyond God’s Word and making up laws that we expect us and others to live by and not realizing that these are simply man-made traditions. We need to constantly do like Jesus did and go back to the Scriptures. We need to constantly evaluate what God’s Word really says and doesn’t say about how we are to live and then apply this Word to our lives.

If we want to know what the right thing to do in a certain situation is, we need only to ask ourselves one question: what is the loving thing to do? If the action that you are contemplating does not show your love for God, then it is sinful. If the words you are planning to say do not show love to your neighbor, they are sinful. Not only is this a simple way to evaluate our words and actions, it is also a very powerful way to drive home the truth that we are sinful human

beings. So often we do things and say things that do not come from love for God and others. We show that we love ourselves above all else when we put our wants ahead of what God wants and what others need from us. As we go home today, maybe it would be good for us to ask ourselves some serious questions about how we can be more loving in our lives. Remember that love is not just a feeling. Love is action. Think to yourself: how can my words and actions truly show love for God and others today?

After Jesus quieted the Pharisees with his answer, he was not done speaking with them. He now had a question for them. He took the focus off of God's Law and shined the spotlight on the Savior. Jesus asked the Pharisees, "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*" This question would expose a major misunderstanding among the Pharisees. Not only did they not understand God's law properly, they did not also understand the Gospel promises about the coming Messiah. They answered Jesus' question by saying that the Christ would be the Son of David. There is truth in their answer. The Christ would be called the Son of David. But he would be more than that. The Pharisees were only looking for an earthly king like the Israelites had experienced when David ruled with great power and prestige. The Pharisees did not see that the Christ had come for a much higher purpose. He came not to rule an earthly kingdom, but rather to establish a heavenly kingdom of God's grace. For this purpose, someone more than a Son of David was necessary. The Christ needed also to be the Son of God.

Jesus drove home this point by once again pointing the Pharisees to the Scriptures. He pointed them to a psalm of David and he asked the question: "*How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, '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 can he be his son?*" In Psalm 110, David speaks of the coming Messiah. He calls him "My Lord." David would not do this if the coming Messiah was only a human descendent of his. What the Pharisees failed to see was the fact that the coming Messiah would also be the Son of God. Of course, they also failed to see the fact that the Son of God was standing right before them and speaking with them. In Jesus, the word of David would find their fulfillment, just as all of the Scriptures point to Jesus Christ.

Thank God that God has revealed this truth to us. We do not live in ignorance. We know who Jesus is and what his work means for us. We have come to see

how all of Scripture ties together so perfectly and points us clearly to Jesus. Not only is God's greatest *commandment* love; but also God's greatest *gift* is love. In love, he sent his Son Jesus into this world to do perfectly what we could never do. When Jesus told that Pharisee the sum of all God's commands, he was telling him the words that he lived by. Jesus did love perfectly. He loved his Father in heaven and carried out his will perfectly. He loved his fellowman. He showed this love in the thousand acts of compassion he performed while he walked this earth. But he showed this love in an even greater way when he willingly gave his life for his fellow human beings and suffered for all their sins on the cross. In Jesus, we find perfect love on display. His love brings us the forgiveness we need for all the times we have been unloving.

If we want to think about simplifying our spiritual life, we need to focus on only one thing: love. We need to focus on our Savior and the great love he has shown us. We need to realize how imperfect we are and how much we need his love and forgiveness every day. And then we also need to focus on showing that same kind of love to others. This means much more than giving lip service to the fact that we are Christians and follow Christ. Rather, we need to find concrete ways to bring Christ to others with truly loving words and actions, remember that when we love perfectly, we follow Christ perfectly. May this be our focus and our goal our entire lives. **Amen.**

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