

Scripture:

Matthew 22:34-46

“Love the Lord your God.”

“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?””

So begins our gospel passage today.

Jesus has silenced the Sadducees ---- so the Pharisees decide to take a run at Him too ----- attempting to trip him up --- and get Him to say something incriminating --- testing Him as verse 35 says.

Unfortunately --- the Pharisees are far more interested in testing and trying to trip Jesus up than they are in learning from Him.

Their question is actually a fairly good one ----- it’s their intention that is problematic.

“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees the Pharisees got together --- - and an expert of the law tested him” ----- sounds kind of antagonistic ---- instead of trying to learn from Jesus they want to test Him.

They do refer to Him as “Teacher” in verse 36 ---- but it’s doubtful that they were ever actually open to learning from Him.

Their question is understandable ---- it’s their attitude that fails them.

And their question is understandable because Jewish tradition said ---- and still does ----- that there are 613 Mitzvot ---- or commandments.

10 pertaining to God.

6 pertaining to the Torah.

5 regarding Signs and Symbols.

4 for Prayers and Blessings.

14 for Love and Brotherhood.

For the Poor and Unfortunate there are 13 commandments.

6 for the Treatment of Gentiles.

23 for Marriage, Divorce and Family.
 25 regarding Forbidden Sexual Relations.
 36 for Times and Seasons.
 27 regarding Dietary Laws.
 14 for Business Practices.
 For Employees, Servants and Slaves there were 19.
 7 for Vows, Oaths and Swearing.
 17 for the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years.
 36 for Court and Judicial Procedures.
 4 for Injury and Damages.
 11 for Property and Property Rights.
 7 regarding Criminal Laws.
 24 for Punishment and Restoration.
 3 regarding Prophecy.
 46 pertaining to Idolatry, Idolaters, and Idolatrous Practices.
 7 for Agriculture and Animal Husbandry.
 3 regarding Clothing.
 4 for relating to the laws of the Firstborn.
 30 for Kohanim (or descendants of Aaron brother of Moses) and Levites.
 24 for T'rumah (or gifts), Tithes, and Taxes.
 33 for the Temple, the Sanctuary and Sacred Objects.
 102 regarding Sacrifices and Offerings.
 16 for Ritual Purity and Impurity.
 4 for Lepers and Leprosy.
 7 regarding the King.
 10 regarding Nazarites.
 And finally 16 pertaining to Wars.

All for a total of 613 Commandments.

So really it's not all that out of line to ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment ---- when there are these 613 to consider.

And of course Jesus --- as always ---- nails it on the head ----- quoting verse 5 from Deuteronomy 6 ---- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

And then Jesus goes on to add a second commandment --- originally from Leviticus 19:18 ----- "Love your neighbour as yourself."

And of course the 2 commandments are virtually inseparable.

And we know this chiefly because when asked what is the greatest commandment Jesus answers with these 2 --- not 1 but 2.

And we know they're inseparable because in truth the second --- "love your neighbour as yourself" ----- gives focus and expression to the first ----- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

You can't love God truly and faithfully --- in the way God intends in Christ - ----- without also loving your neighbour as much as you love yourself.

The reason Jesus says loving God is the first and greatest commandment is because why we love others is crucial.

We help others growing out of --- as an expression of our love for God --- and for no other reason ----- some people only or primarily help others for the pleasure it gives to them ---- because they get their emotional cookies from helping and loving others.

As Christians we don't help others --- we don't love them as much as we love ourselves because it makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside --- although --- it's true we do get a warm --- good feeling when we help and love others.

We love others born out of our love for God.

We love others knowing that to love God ----- ultimately and always ----- ushers forth and finds expression in the love of others.

There is no such thing as an isolated --- me and God only ---- or me and Christ only --- or me and the Holy Spirit only ----- kind of Christian.

Being a Christian ----- necessarily and always ----- involves community.

As Christians we are called to love others as much as we love ourselves in practical ---- lived out ways --- and not just as some kind of theoretical or intellectual exercise.

And we know this because Jesus said it clearly in Matthew's gospel today.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ----- means that God must remain the ultimate reference point for human life.

Or put another way ---- God must be the fulcrum in our lives.

God must be the point around which everything else lives and moves and has its being.

And once God is firmly established as this reference point around which everything else revolves ---- there eventually also comes the natural expression of --- “love our neighbour as our self.”

In other words we truly have to focus less on loving our neighbour as our self ---- and more on loving God with all our heart ----- with all our soul --- and with all our mind ----- with all we've got --- because when we do this we will naturally also have and display a love for our neighbour in equal measure as we do for our selves.

It's as if Jesus says ---- “Friends ----- all those 613 laws and commandments ---- about Love and Brotherhood ---- The Poor and Unfortunate ----- Business Practices ---- Courts and Judicial Procedure --- Injury and Damages ----- Criminal Laws ---- Punishment and Restoration ---- and so on ---- all 613 of them ---- hang on these first 2 commandments.”

The commandments of ----- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ----- and ----- “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

So ----- how do we go about ensuring that we are indeed loving God with all our heart --- with all our soul ---- and with all our mind?

How do we make sure that God is the centre of our lives around which everything else revolves?

And as is so often the case ----- thankfully the answer is simple and clear.

Prayer ---- public and private worship ----- an aggressive search for the truth of God ----- and a serious --- disciplined wrestling with issues of faith.

Prayer --- public and private worship ---- an aggressive search for the truth of God in Christ --- and a serious --- disciplined wrestling with issues of faith.

When we engage in these things we can rest assured that God will remain the very centre of our lives.

Pray ---- worship ---- in private and in community ---- search for the truth about God --- and wrestle with faith issues --- doing these simple and powerful things ----- assures us that we are ----- “Loving the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind.”

And by the way there is no short cut --- or short list ---- or annotated version of this.

You have to do them all --- pray --- worship ----- search for the truth about God in Jesus Christ and in the scriptures and with other believers ----- and you have to wrestle with matters of faith both in the quietness of your heart and in community.

And it's worth remembering that although the precise matters of faith that we each wrestle with may differ at any given moment --- we all ought to be wrestling with something ----- that's how we grow --- that's how we participate in the sanctifying work of Christ.

And sometimes ---- often even ----- we have to make the time ---- we have to take time to be there for others as they wrestle with things even if we may not feel all that motivated to.

Yes we may be on different pages --- have different issues and concerns that we struggle with --- but it's not just about us --- it's about all of us --- growing and flourishing together ----- as a community of faith.

For some its relationship issues --- for others its spiritual warfare ----- budget concerns ----- church budget --- household budget ----- parenting ---- forgiveness ---- others of us are still in the grip of past events that continue to have a hold on us crippling us from moving forward and growing ----- and

on and on ---- goes the list of all the things we struggle with ---- individually and together.

The matters of faith that we wrestle with may differ --- but we all have them.

And we all need to be there for each other as we struggle and grow --- and rise and fall.

Because when we do we emerge --- more faithful --- and more forgiving --- and more sensitive ----- and more loving ---- and more compassionate.

The great Martin Luther --- said that sin is all about becoming “curved in on ourselves.”

“Curved in on ourselves.”

That’s a pretty good definition of sin ----- to become --- “curved in on ourselves.”

“Loving the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind.” ----- and ----- “Loving our neighbour as yourself.” ---- by its very nature turns us away from just ourselves --- it relieves us from the very real threat of only ever thinking just of ourselves --- or --- “curving in on ourselves.” --- such that we become the focus and the fulcrum instead of God.

“Forget about all the other wise sayings ----- helpful counsel ----- and good advice that you hear.

Forget about the ----- century over century carefully crafted 613 directives for good and faithful ----- God inspired living ---- and focus on these two commandments --- for all the law and all the prophets hang on these two things.”

That’s essentially what Jesus says to the Pharisees when they ask Him what the most important thing in life is --- what the greatest commandment is.

Forget about the laws --- forget about all the Torah --- the wise teachings ---- - forget about all the proverbs and laws that you know ---- put them aside for just a minute and focus on this ----- “Love the Lord your God with all your

heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” ----- and ----- “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Because when you focus on this --- all the rest will fall into place --- and become clear.

All the rest depend ----- find their meaning and expression ----- all the rest hang on these 2 commandments ---- Jesus says in verse 40 from Matthew’s gospel today.

All the rest ---- hang on these ---- Jesus says.

You can’t stress their importance much more than this --- to say --- all the law and all the prophets hang on these 2 commandments.

In other words without these all the rest fall away ----- without these commandments all the rest you’ve heard and learned have nothing hang on - --- and therefore fall away.

It’s pretty powerful stuff ----- people coming to Jesus and asking ----- “What is the greatest commandment” ----- and Him giving the very clear and precise answer that He does.

“Love God with all your heart --- and soul and mind --- and then ----- love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.” ----- and of course the order is crucial --- Jesus makes it crystal clear --- God first.

Many other people and groups --- and movements ----- religious and otherwise ----- may do very well at the loving others as much as we love ourselves part ----- but Jesus reminds us that love of God must come first and in fact is greater --- and more important.

“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.” ----- Jesus says ----- verse 38.

When we get the order of the commandments right --- the second becomes a natural --- by extension --- expression ---- when we love God we can’t but help coming to the place where we love others as much as we love ourselves.

I've often said to people ----- don't worry if you're have great difficulty finding it in your heart to always love others ----- because it can be hard at times to love others ---- others who hurt you --- others who hurt those you love and so on.

Love God first and foremost ----- and when you succeed at this ---- if that's even the right word --- "succeed" ----- once you've become pretty good at loving God ---- it will be far easier to love others ---- indeed you'll find ways to love others you never thought possible ----- forgiveness ----- mercy ---- grace ---- the same forgiveness --- mercy and grace that we see in God's love through Christ.

It's as if Jesus says to the Pharisees ----- if you want to truly be good at all of the 613 laws ----- or commandments ----- go back to the first --- the one I'm telling you is the first and the greatest ---- because all 612 of the others grow out of ---- and ultimately find expression in the first.

The simple powerful --- life changing --- saving truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for today is ----- "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ----- and the rest will begin to come clear.

Good stuff ----- but how do I keep it up ----- how do I make sure not to slip away from loving God with all I've got.

By praying.

By worshipping in private and in community.

And by engaging in an aggressive search for the truth of God in Christ ---- as well as a serious --- disciplined wrestling with issues of faith.

That is it.

Pray --- worship --- wrestle with faith ----- search for God's truth in the scriptures ---- and in Christ.

May we do as Jesus leads us.

Loving the Lord our God with all we've got --- our heart --- soul --- and mind.

And then ---- and only then --- after we've got the first part --- loving God --
----- may we love our neighbour as our self.

As Christ Himself said ----- everything else hangs on these two commandments

Amen.