

Pentecost 20B

October 18, 2009

Hymns: 382 - 390 - 317 - 321

Matthew 22:34-46
Christ redirects our focus
I. From our bondage in sin
II. To salvation in Him

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The text upon which we meditate this morning is found in the Holy Gospel of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 34 and following.”

Matthew 22:34-46

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 greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

He said to them, "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?"

No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer” (Ps 19:14).

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ - misdirected by nature, but redirected by the grace of God, Go to Amazon.com and look up self-help books. Your next page will show the first 12 of 177,236 results. You'll find books like *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, or *The Hair Loss Cure: A Self-Help Guide*, or *Children of Alcoholism: A Survivor's Manual*. You see, our world and society are obsessed with the notion that deep inside every one of us, we have the power to change our own lives. Oh sure, there are exceptions. Some organizations stress a need to appeal to a higher power. But in general our world teaches that any problem we might encounter, any addiction we might face, if we work hard enough, *we* can overcome it. With enough positive thoughts, self-will, mind over matter, the individual can do anything he or she wants. This is what the Pharisees of Jesus' time thought, too. They felt they had the power to obey every one of God's laws and if they could just do this, they would earn for themselves a place in the banquet hall of heaven. But Jesus had a message for them and it's the same for us today. Stop looking within yourselves for the answers. Look to me and to the cross I've borne for you. Because only here do the troubles of this world and life pass away. He redirects our focus from our bondage in sin to salvation in Him.

The encounter between Jesus and the teachers of the law, in today's text, takes place during the last week of our Lord's life on this earth before his crucifixion. The Pharisees, along with their rival group of teachers of the law, the Sadducees, had been just bombarding Jesus with questions in an attempt to trick him into misspeaking and giving cause for a revolt against Him. Why did they want this so badly? Because the Pharisees' pride and joy was their obedience to the law. They had counted 613 laws, at least mostly from the Old Testament (so good laws) that they prided themselves on holding to, and which they condemned others on account of. And then Jesus comes along and tells people that keeping the law is not the way to heaven, because they can't do it – He's the way to heaven. And so the Pharisees come to Him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” The trick is that no matter which law Christ chooses, he trivializes the importance of others and, in doing so, gives the Jewish people reason to turn on Him. Do we ask the same question? “Which laws are most important for us to keep?”

Let's look at our Lord's response. He says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is 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.” Every commandment can be placed in one of these two categories: loving God with all our heart, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Let's look at the first one: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

This would cover the first three commandments. But let's just look at the first one, you shall have no other gods, because that one is basically a paraphrase of what Jesus means when he says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” You see, anytime we DON'T love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, it's because we're making idols, making our own gods. Whatever is pulling our trust away from God is becoming more important than God. So what is it for us? Is it worry? Do we spend our time overconcerned about what he might not provide for us, rather than remembering that He promises He will and, He's always kept His promises, and He has a much better plan for our lives than we could ever have? Is it priorities? “God, I want to dig into your Word, have personal and family devotions, but there's just a lot going on right now. When I'm caught up, then I'll study the Bible!” I think we'd all have to confess that we have not loved God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

What about the other part of the law, “Love your neighbor as yourself?” This'll cover the last seven commandments: Honor your father and mother, you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony, or covet. Have we done this? Have we loved them as much as ourselves? The Pharisees certainly hadn't. They thought they were much better than other Jews because they, the Pharisees, were very moral and led very righteous lives. To think more of yourself, less of others is certainly a violation of this commandment. But are we any different? Have you ever stopped in a gas station and seen the guy in front of you just waste his money and thought, “Wow, what a loser. Glad I don't have that problem.” The implication is *because I'm better and have always been a better steward of the money with which the Lord has blessed me*. We might not say it, but that's the logical implication, isn't it? Have we ever hung out with friends, tearing down other people... to make us look better...? So people think we're funnier? I think we'd all have to confess that we have not loved our

neighbor as ourself, either.

And so we've broken both parts of Christ's law, though even if we had only broken one, we'd have broken the whole thing. In fact, if we've broken what may seem to be the slightest of the commandments, in even the slightest way, we've broken the totality of God's law. Moses wrote this down in numerous places for God's people: "Be holy, because I, the Lord, am holy." And holiness doesn't leave any room for little mistakes. The Hebrew word for "holy" that is used here is *vdq*, which is literally translated as "to be completely separate from sin." If we're apart from sin, we can't be touching it in even the slightest way. If even the deepest corner of our mind thinks even the slightest sinful thought, we have broken the totality of God's law. If we cast even the quickest lustful glance, that no one else could possibly see, we've broken the totality of the Law. Because at that point, we are no longer "separate and apart from sin."

And how can we ever hope to earn our salvation if the only way is to live a perfect life, apart from sin, in a world so riddled and littered with it? In a world where it's at the tip of our fingers and on the tip of our tongues? We're at a loss, we're damned eternally. There is no hope... in ourselves.

But after Jesus has finished telling them, and us, that the totality of the Law is what's important, He redirects our focus from our hopeless bondage in sin to salvation in Him. "There, I've told you what's the most important law. The whole thing, and you can't keep it by yourself. Now let me ask you a question. 'What do you think about the Christ?' For there is the answer, where you should look to when asking this question. Stop looking at the law and how you can pull this off by yourself, because you can't. What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they reply. The Christ was to be a man, and a direct descendant of King David. They had no problem saying this, they had no problem saying this psalm was authored by David, and they had no problem saying that Jesus was from the line of David. TODAY people have no problem saying this. I taught a World History course at a public high school in Madison a few years ago, and my cooperating teacher was very upset because I would not say that "evolution is scientific fact." But he had no problem with me teaching that Jesus was a man who lived on earth in Israel 2000 years ago.

And this is great news! Because it's necessary for our salvation that Christ came to earth as a man, that He lived here as our brother, and that He can relate to us in our troubles and hardships. And when He came to earth, He submitted Himself to the law of God, and the need to fulfill the law perfectly. And it's only because Jesus did this that we ARE saved. But if he's just a perfect man, then he's just a perfect man, and there's no implication for us. Just because one man on earth lived a perfect life, that doesn't mean God forgives the rest of us.

We need more and Christ gives us more. He continues, "Why does David call him Lord then, in Psalm 110, where David writes, "The LORD God said to the Messiah, my descendant, my Lord..."

I can't imagine referring to any of my descendants as my lord. Yes, I want to make this world a better place for my children and descendants, and I care about what happens to them, but I don't know of anyone who would call their descendant "lord." And David, he's the king of Israel, the *greatest* king of Israel. He doesn't call *anyone* "Lord" except God. And that's the answer Jesus is trying to teach. But the Pharisees can't answer. Or they don't want to answer. You see, the only reason that makes sense why King David might call his descendant "Lord" is that his descendant is also God. And that's what Christ wants them, and us, to understand. And yet they know that if this Jesus guy IS true God, then He IS the Messiah about which David speaks. And they know that they're His enemies. And they heard Christ when He quotes David in saying that God has promised to make his enemies a footstool, to put them under His feet. And so, if there are too many scary implications to answering the question.

And yet those scary implications are such beautiful implications for those of us who DO know Christ as the Savior. Because not only was Christ the Son of David, who lived as our brother and kept the law perfectly for us, but as true God, His death on the cross had sufficient value to atone for our sins. And His perfect life is now what God sees when he looks at our lives. Luther puts it this way:

[Christ] satisfied the Law; He fulfilled the Law perfectly, for He loved God with all His heart, and with all His soul, and with all His strength, and with all His mind, and He loved His neighbor as Himself. Therefore, when the Law comes and accuses you of not having kept it, bid it go to Christ. Say: There is the Man who has kept it; to Him I cling; He fulfilled it for me and gave His fulfillment to me. Thus the Law is silenced.

This righteousness becomes ours only because Christ was more than a man, He was God. He is the Son of David, and so our brother, but He is also God, and so our Savior.

And according to the words of Psalm 110, God the Father has now said to his son, "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." Now the Pharisees probably thought they were the enemies talked about here. The enemies here are actually generally considered to be the Devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. And these won't be completely put away and made Christ's footstools until the Last Day. For now they're still permitted to roam the earth and haunt and tempt us. But the comfort for us is that they *have no power over us!* Christ has defeated these enemies and we no longer have to fear them. We no longer have to fall victim to the sinful world around us because we've been given Christ's garment of righteousness to cover our lives of sin. And our flesh is no longer slave to that sin that surrounds us, but as a new man, we can live a life that's pleasing in God's sight. We can choose to build our brothers and sisters up, rather than tear them down. And we can choose to make God our top priority.

And our brother Jesus *has* ascended into heaven in order that we might also one day leave this life and body of sin and ascend to eternal paradise. And so we too will rise to be with him eternally, whether it's on the Last Day, or when we pass away. This is the beautiful message that nullifies the Pharisee's foolish, self-seeking question. What's the most important commandment? It's the whole thing, God demands perfection, and we have not and cannot keep it. But there was someone who did. Look to him because only here can salvation be found.

For most of us, our focus was first redirected towards this salvation in baptism when our sins were forgiven and the Holy Spirit worked faith in our hearts. And our focus is again redirected and we are comforted every time we remember our baptism, and every time we read, study and hear God's Word; and every time we join together in the Lord's Supper and partake of Christ's flesh and blood, both human and divine, which were given for us. It is at this time that we receive our Savior in both his human and divine nature, and all of the blessings which that entail – forgiveness of sins, a new life here, and eternal life in heaven. What a joy we have! We have a Savior who lived for us, loves us, and who still rules over and in us.

I mentioned that Amazon.com will give you the option of 177,000 self-help books to ease your various life struggles. Sometimes these books can be very helpful. But unless the book is rooted in the Word our Lord has given us, the only advice we'll find IS for struggles in our short life on this earth. Let us not forget that we were made for so much more and that the answers to life's most important questions relating to our existence, our purpose, our despair, and, most of all, our salvation can be found only in the beautiful message of a God who sent His Son to earth to redeem us that we might appear innocent before the throne and have a share in the heavenly inheritance. Thanks be to our Lord and Savior!

Amen.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, SHALL keep your hearts and minds, through faith, in Christ Jesus.